

## RESPONSE TO *UNDERSTANDING DISPENSATIONALISTS*, BY VERN S. POYTHRESS

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WE would like to begin by expressing our appreciation for the spirit evident throughout Dr. Poythress' work. While he definitely seeks to call in question the crucial tenets of dispensationalism, he does so with a gentle irenic spirit inviting dialogue rather than defensive rebuff. It is no doubt this spirit which gives one the impression that the work is a genuine attempt to understand dispensationalism and to present it fairly. We recognize the problems inherent in seeking to present a portrait of dispensationalism today in light of the considerable diversity which has developed over the past years. If there is any weakness in the portrayal of dispensationalism in the work, it is a tendency at times to deal with some issues that in our mind do not seem to be prevalent among most contemporary dispensationalists including those more traditionally oriented. For example, if I am not mistaken, both Ryrie and Pentecost, although affirming an eternal distinction between Israel and the church do not include a final earthly and heavenly destiny in that distinction. It is questionable therefore that they should be included in the category of D-theologians whose primary commonality is stated to be "parallel-but-separate roles and destinies of Israel and the church" (p. 9).

One might also wonder about some of the dimensions described as social forces at work among dispensationalists. For example, we would have appreciated more evidence that it is in response to the exactness of science that dispensationalists seek a greater precision in biblical language (pp. 57-58). At least as good a case can be made that the more literal approach was in reaction to the spiritualizing of much of prophecy in connection with a prevalent post-millennialism in the early part of the 19th century (cf. G. E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* [Eerdmans, 1956], p. 43). But these are relatively minor questions of an overall fair presentation.

## I. POINTS OF AGREEMENT

Before dealing specifically with the points of contention, we would like to give some indication of where we are coming from by noting some of the major areas included in the work with which we are in substantial agreement.

First, we agree that there is finally one people of God. Believing Jews and Gentiles are permanently united as "one new Man" in Christ (Eph 2:15). This is in accord with the OT prophecies that pictured the salvation of God going to the Gentiles as well as to Israel in the messianic era. In saying that there is one people of God, we are talking about a spiritual unity. This oneness, according to our understanding, does not rule out the historical functional distinction between the church and Israel. Even as there can be functional distinctions between men and women, or church elders and others in the church, without destroying spiritual equality and oneness, so there is a distinction in the historical plan of God between Israel and the church. This allows for a future for Israel as a nation among nations in accordance to the basic picture of the messianic times according to the Old Testament.

Secondly, we agree that the messianic era has been inaugurated in some sense by the first coming of Christ. Consequently, we would affirm in distinction to much of earlier dispensationalism, that this present age is the beginning of the fulfillment of promises related to the messianic kingdom foretold in the OT. This present fulfillment is primarily limited to the promise of spiritual salvation found in the new covenant (i.e., the forgiveness of sins and spiritual renewal through the indwelling Spirit). According to OT prophecies the salvation of God was to go to the Gentiles as well as to Israel. This is taking place today, albeit in a way not clearly seen in the OT.

We agree with the position presented by Hoekema in his work, *The Bible and the Future*, which Dr. Poythress quotes favorably, that the OT presented the messianic kingdom in connection with an undifferentiated coming of the Messiah. The NT separates the fulfillment of the kingdom prophecies into stages. In distinction to Hoekema and the position of this work which presents only two stages, this age and the eternal state, we would simply argue for an additional millennial stage which in our opinion better encompasses all of the prophecies.

In the third place, we agree that it is difficult to define what is meant by "literal" interpretation and to determine when something is to be interpreted with more than a "flat" meaning. I do not believe that this problem is unique to dispensationalism, however. I would also doubt that dispensationalists can be charged generally with determining this issue by their system anymore than non-dispensationalists,

especially in light of the vastness of OT prophetic material which is viewed through the lens of a non-dispensational interpretation of the NT.

Without denying the significance and difficulty of fully grasping the proper hermeneutics of Scripture, especially the prophetic material, we would suggest that our differences do not finally lie in any distinct hermeneutical *apriori*. Both dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists transcend the immediate "flat" meaning of a given passage on the ground that their exegesis of other portions of Scripture (generally using the "flat" meaning) demands something additional be seen in the passage under question. The difference finally stems from the fact that the non-dispensationalist, with the use of essentially the same hermeneutical principles as the dispensationalist, understands the NT as teaching the fulfillment of messianic kingdom promises of the OT in a way different from the dispensationalist. This difference then calls for a different interpretation or reinterpretation of the OT prophecies.

## II. POINTS AT ISSUE

### A. The question of the typological and symbolic in the relation of prophecy to fulfillment.

Turning to some points at issue with Dr. Poythress' work, we would like to begin with what seems to be the crucial issue, namely, the whole question of the typological and symbolic in relation to prophecy and its fulfillment. In our reading of the work, what seemed to be suggested in many areas was a basic principle that the whole of OT prophecy that has to do with material historical earthly realities (e.g., animal sacrifices, priesthood, the temple, the nation of Israel, Jerusalem, and the land of Palestine) is to be seen as symbolic and typical and therefore superseded with the appearance of the promised eschatological reality in Christ. The prophecies related to spiritual realities associated with the salvation of the new covenant, on the other hand, come over into the era of fulfillment essentially without change. It is acknowledged that some material fulfillment will occur, but this primarily awaits the new earth and then it will be quite different from the historical picture of the prophecies.

We would like to respond to this general perspective of the symbolic and typical nature of OT prophecies with two thoughts.

1. First, we would suggest that all material realities are not necessarily types. In this same connection we would also feel that some distinction needs to be made between type and symbol. If by type we mean that which is done away with or superseded by the appearance of the antitype, then type must be distinguished from

symbol, for a symbol does not necessarily stand in this same relation to the reality which it symbolizes. In other words, a symbol can and in fact does exist alongside the corresponding reality. Today we have both the eschatological reality of new covenant salvation and its symbols in the bread and cup of the Lord's Table. It is difficult to say that these symbols lose their significance when the reality appears. One might also refer to the symbol of the rainbow. Is it not possible that even in the final state of the new earth that some material objects will stand as symbols, or we might even say as sacraments, in relation to spiritual realities?

While much of OT revelation may be "preliminary and shadowy in character" (p. 114), it seems impossible to apply these words to its entirety. Since we would all agree that the predictions of spiritual salvation as well as the new heavens and earth are not really transcended by NT reality, the question then becomes one of distinguishing what is typical and therefore superseded and what is not. We would suggest one distinction in that the realities which partake of redemption or regeneration are not typical or symbolic in the sense of being shadows which are eliminated with the coming of reality. For example, the present earth is not typical of the new earth in the same sense as the sacrificial system of the Old Covenant. Our present bodies are not typical of our new bodies which we will someday receive. In the same vein, we would argue that earthly Jerusalem is not typical of the final new Jerusalem in the sense of having lost its present historical significance. These historical realities would seem to retain their significance, perhaps one could say forever. At least they remain meaningful during their existence within history before they are transformed by the eschatological reality in accordance with God's timetable.

We would therefore argue that Israel is not a type in the sense of being superseded by something else. Without question there were elements within Israel's history which were typical, but to suggest that Israel's priestly ministry was in the category of Aaron's priesthood seems contrary to Scripture. The Old Covenant ministry was predicted to give way to a new covenant even in the OT. But these same prophecies applied this new covenant to a future repentant Israel which was understood as a nation among Gentile nations and not the supranational entity of today's church.

We would concur that the ultimate priestly ministry has been accomplished in Christ. But this no more eliminates a priestly ministry for Israel in the future, as is suggested (cf. pp. 101-3), than the reality of Christ's priestly ministry eliminates the present priestly ministry of the church (cf. 1 Pet 2:5, 9). In other words, the fulfillment of the OT

typical priestly ministry under the Aaronic priesthood with the work of Christ and the final reality of that priesthood does not rule out the existence of what might be termed an instrumental priestly ministry until the full promised eschatological salvation is complete in the eternal state.

If the church today can have a legitimate priestly function, there is no reason based upon the coming of the reality of the priesthood of Christ to deny such a ministry to the nation of Israel in the future. In fact, the apostle Paul suggests as much in Romans 11 when he speaks of the vastly greater blessing yet in store for the world in relation to Israel's fulfillment or acceptance with God (vv 12, 15).

2. The second thing to be noted in response to this fundamental issue of typology and the fulfillment of prophecy is that the fact of our present coming to the reality of eschatological fulfillment in Christ does not mean that we have yet reached the consummation of those prophecies. The present existence of the heavenly Jerusalem and our relation to it described in Hebrews 12 is said to be analogous to the situation concerning sacrifices. Dr. Poythress writes, "Can we draw an analogy between the situation concerning sacrifices and the situation concerning Jerusalem? The heavenly Jerusalem in Hebrews 12 exists by virtue of the presence of Christ as high priest with his sprinkled blood (Heb 12:24). Hence it would appear to be the antitype to which the OT historical Holy City, Jerusalem, pointed as a type. Therefore we may also expect that it is simultaneously the fulfillment of prophecies about a perfect, restored Jerusalem (Isa 60:14; Mic 4:1-2)" (pp. 119-20).

But the truth of the matter is that the heavenly Jerusalem has not yet finally come. According to Revelation 21 it is yet to come to earth. While we might debate the time, all would acknowledge this fact. Thus the teaching of Hebrews that we have in the present age come to the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb 12:22-23), cannot be understood as saying that we have reached the complete fulfillment of the prophecies. Saying this makes it evident that, although we have come to the final reality to which the OT prophecies looked forward, this reality is actually fulfilled in stages. Clearly we are not actually in the heavenly Jerusalem which will one day become the new Jerusalem on the new earth.

Thus there is today a period when the eschatological reality is present on earth, not yet in its fullness, but nevertheless in reality. During this time the earthly realities of the church, made up of yet imperfect saints, and its priesthood still have meaning and significance. Their significance is not swallowed up by the reality and perfection of the heavenly city. If such is the case, there can be no

reason in principle why Israel could not also exist as a historical reality with a real historical function, even as the church, during a period of time before the ultimate perfection.

B. The question of the number of stages in the eschatological salvation.

The recognition by dispensationalist and non-dispensationalist alike that the eschatological salvation is actually accomplished in stages, brings us to a second point of issue with Dr. Poythress' work, that is, the question of how many stages are involved. Agreement on a present initial stage fulfillment of the eschatological promises and a unified spiritual people of God does eliminate many differences between dispensationalism and non-dispensationalism. But in our opinion, the question of the millennium still looms rather large, perhaps larger than is suggested by Dr. Poythress. To us the suggestion that seeing a real connection between the present time and the eternal state and viewing the latter time (if we can say time) as the fulfillment of the remainder of the messianic prophecies is inadequate for at least two reasons.

1. First, the OT picture of the messianic period seems to include a situation in which the Messiah is reigning in a yet imperfect world. One such example may be noted in Isa 2:2-4 and its parallel in Mic 4:1-3. Although Dr. Poythress includes the latter passage in relation to prophecies about "a perfect, restored Jerusalem" (p. 120), the immediate context portrays conditions which are not yet perfect. For example, God is said to "judge between the nations and . . . render decisions for many peoples" (Isa 2:4). Interpreting this as God's action through the Messiah, non-dispensationalist E. J. Young explains the meaning of these statements by saying, "God is now represented as one who in a peaceful manner intervenes in the disputes of nations, and settles them so that the nations change the implements of war into utensils of peace. . . ." Concerning the Messiah's rendering decisions for many peoples, Young notes further that this ". . . pictures the LORD in the position of Judge and Arbiter who pronounces decisions concerning the nations and their disagreements" (*The Book of Isaiah*, NICOT [Eerdmans, 1965], p. 107). To say the least, this prophecy is difficult to apply to the present work of Christ in the world, and it would seem impossible to see Christ performing these tasks in a perfect sinless state. These and many other Scriptures which picture Christ judging and disciplining those who refuse to obey his kingship (e.g., Psalm 72; Isa 11:1-9; Zechariah 14) are difficult to fit into a two stage fulfillment. But they are perfectly in harmony with the viewpoint that the eschatological promises involve three stages, i.e., this present age, the millennium, and the final state of perfection. Many other aspects of the prophecies which almost all

OT theologies describe as the OT prophetic hope, including the restoration and preeminence of the nation of Israel as a means of blessing for all nations, fit the picture of a future millennial stage as well. In our opinion, there does not seem to be any compelling teaching either in the OT or the NT which necessitates a rather radical reinterpretation of this prophetic picture. These earthly realities involving Israel and the nations seem just as possible within the stages of eschatological salvation as the present earthly realities of the church and its ministry.

2. The concept of the realities involved in the OT picture raises our second objection to a two stage eschatology, and that is the nature of salvation brought about under the messianic reign of Christ. A two stage amillennial theology as represented in this work and others seeks to save the prophecies concerning societal peace and prosperity for the eternal state rather than force their application to this age through a spiritualizing hermeneutic. My problem with this approach is that if the second coming of Christ inaugurates the final consummative stage of perfection or eternity, then according to the apostle Paul this stage occurs after the Messiah hands over the kingdom to the Father (1 Cor 15:24). If it is only the eternal state that brings open peace and righteousness among the peoples of the world, then this societal salvation would not seem to be a part of the work of the Messiah in his messianic office, for the delivering up of the kingdom to the Father represents the completion of the mediatorial work of Christ. As Fee says, it signifies "... the Messiah's bringing to completion his work of redemption" (Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT [Eerdmans, 1987], p. 756). We would argue that the redemptive work of the Messiah involves not only a personal inner spiritual salvation, but a socio-political salvation as well. If such is the case, this latter salvation must be accomplished before the end when the kingdom is transferred to the Father and Christ's kingdom is merged into the eternal kingdom of God. The fullness of the Messiah's salvation, therefore, seems to cry out for another stage following the present divine activity of this period, namely a millennial time, which falls clearly under the reign of Christ before his work is complete and the kingdom is handed over to the Father.

Dr. Poythress addresses many other topics related to the discussion that we cannot get into in this response. We have simply chosen to address some of the broad issues which seem central to the dialogue. In conclusion, we would like to thank Dr. Poythress for his work. It is just such a desire to understand the other's position and the gentle spirit of rapprochement that one finds in this work which will help us all to understand the truth of Scripture more fully.