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RESPONSE TO PAUL S. KARLEEN'S PAPER "UNDERSTANDING COVENANT THEOLOGIAN'S"

VERN S. POYTHRESS

The Dispensational Study Group meeting November 16, 1989, in San Diego has chosen as a topic for discussion the book of Vern S. Poythress, Understanding Dispensationalists (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987). Paul S. Karleen and Robert Saucy were invited to prepare written responses to the book. Paul Karleen's written response is found in his paper, "Understanding Covenant Theologians: A Study in Presuppositions." On the basis of the written paper, sent to me beforehand, I was invited to give a brief response during the meeting, November 16, 1989. The following written material constitutes the substance of my response.

It is understood that my response to this and to an analogous paper by Robert Saucy is to be followed by open discussion. Due to the circumstances, my response is tentative in nature, and open to correction in the light of the discussion.

* * *

I am delighted to be able to be at this meeting of the Study Group. Thank you to Drs. Craig Blasing and Gerry Breshears for inviting me to speak. I will be happy if my book may be of some use in furthering your discussions.

Now let me turn to Dr. Karleen's paper. There is much in his paper with which I can agree. In particular, as Karleen affirms, consciousness of our presuppositions and larger systematic convictions can help in refining our interpretation of Scripture (pp. 2-5). We must be aware of the possibility of unjustified circular reasoning.

I might go on dealing with areas of agreement, but it will probably be most useful for me to concentrate on two areas of Karleen's paper where there may be some remaining difficulty: what is the nature of "a physical kingdom on earth for Israel" (p. 6); and

whether "salvatory unity of the elect" implies "economic/historic/prophetic unity" (p. 9). On these points I now realize that my book was not as clear as it could be, and not nearly as fully developed as it could be. I think that Karleen has advanced the discussion, and has advanced my own understanding, by drawing attention to these points.

There is also a third issue, namely, whether covenant theology and dispensational theology represent a polarity or a continuum (p. 5). We can discuss this issue if there is time. For the moment, I want to concentrate on the primary questions.

A PHYSICAL KINGDOM ON EARTH FOR ISRAEL

First, Karleen argues that "the issue is a physical kingdom on earth for Israel" (p. 6). I agree. Unfortunately, Karleen misunderstands my own position, because I discussed it all too briefly in my book (pp. 123-25, 49-50). I myself believe in "a physical kingdom on earth for Israel." In a passage of unconditional prophecy Isaiah says, "Your people shall all be righteous; they shall possess the land for ever" (Isa 60:21). Since the promise is unconditional, it must be fulfilled. Any denial of this fulfillment is highly abhorrent. Many covenant theologians do appear to deny it, and in this they are grievously wrong.

But the theology of the new earth by an amillennialist like Anthony Hoekema changes the scene completely. The new earth constitutes the consummate earthly fulfillment of great swaths of OT prophecy. Moreover, this new earth is seen as a transformation and renovation of the present heaven and earth, rather than starting completely over. Thus it is very much like the millennial earth as envisioned by most premillennialists. I see it to be a comparatively minor dispute as to whether this renovation of earth, following the Second Coming, comes in one stage or two, that is, in a 1000 year millennium followed by a fuller renewal or by total renewal all at once.

Karleen is correct: many covenant theologians deserve to be criticized on this subject. But some dispensationalists also deserve criticism. For one thing, some appear to deny that Jewish Christians will possess the land. But the promise says, "And I will give to you, and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God" (Gen 17:8). Surely this promise includes Jewish Christians, because they are Abraham's descendants and God is their God. Consider also the fact that Abraham never inherited the land during his lifetime on earth. So he must inherit it when he receives his resurrection body. Hence having a resurrection body is no barrier to inheritance either to him or to his Jewish Christian descendants.

Some dispensational theologians have also apparently denied the eternality of the kingdom promises. They have talked as if the kingdom and the inheritance are for 1000 years *only*. But the OT repeatedly speaks of an everlasting possession. Moreover, in Isa 9:7 Isaiah says, "Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from this time forth and for evermore" (Isa 9:7). This passage clearly teaches that the Davidic throne and kingdom has no end. It must therefore include the renewed earth. The everlastingness of the possession is also reasserted in Isa 60:21, 25:7-8, and other Isaianic passages building on Isaiah 9.

There is still perhaps an interesting difference of perception between covenantal and dispensational theologians. Many covenantal theologians might consider that the question of the church's participation in prophetic fulfillment—which they see as integrally bound up with the idea of one vs. two peoples of God—is the primary issue. To put it in Karleen's terms, they are likely to say that the issue is whether the physical kingdom for Israel is for Israel to the exclusion of Gentiles. Karleen, on the other hand, along with many dispensational theologians, thinks that the main issue is premillennialism. I think that this difference may arise largely from differences in priorities of our concerns, and where we feel the most serious damage might be done. Amillennial covenantal theologians fear that damage might be done when Christians do not take to heart the hortatory implications of OT prophecy. Dispensational theologians fear that damage might be done when Christians do not take to heart the future, physical realization of prophecy after the Second Coming. Hence each draws the battle-lines to express his concern.

I think that such a difference is likely to remain a source of potential misunderstanding for a good while to come. However, I would argue that certain possible changes can help to protect against the dangers. On the one hand, more dispensationalists are affirming that Christians participate in the fulfillment of OT prophecy. On the other, more amillennial covenantal theologians may come to adopt Anthony Hoekema's position.

THE NATURE OF UNITY OF PEOPLES

The second issue concerns the nature of unity of different peoples in salvation. Karleen maintains that there is "salvatory unity of the elect" (p. 9). He denies that such unity implies "economic/historic/prophetic unity" (p. 9). His formulation is helpful, and I wish that my book had been clearer on the issue. Unfortunately, he too quickly assumes that I take a position opposite to his.

Let us focus then on the question of economic, historic, and prophetic unity. I am not sure of the exact sense that he desires for these terms, so I will have to use them in a fairly prosaic way.

First of all, there is indeed economic diversity among the peoples of the world. They own different pieces of land and different cultural objects. I believe that this diversity of ownership extends into the renewed earth (Rev 21:24–26). The OT prophesies that there will be such diversity (Isa 60:5–7, 11–12; Ps 72:10–11). In the church there is also economic diversity. Some are rich, some poor. No one is required to put his possessions into a common pot.

Second, there is historic diversity. The different peoples of the earth have different origins and histories behind them. They inhabit different lands and have different cultures. These diversities, I believe, extend into the renewed earth, since the nations in their plurality and their kings are mentioned as separate groups (Rev 21:24–26). Their historic destiny in the future is also diverse, since that destiny includes use of their historic diversity arising from the past. OT prophecy also affirms this diversity (e.g., Isa 19:23–25). The church also is composed of a multitude of peoples. Jews are not required to abandon their customs and become Gentiles nor are Gentiles required to become Jews. Barbarians are not required to become Greeks. Each retains all that is genuinely good in their cultural, historic, and linguistic diversity.

Third, there is prophetic diversity. In OT prophecy Israel is repeatedly distinguished from the nations and the nations are repeatedly distinguished from one another. These diversities, I believe, last as long as the Davidic kingdom.

This prophetic diversity also touches on the church. The diversity of nations in OT prophecy is a necessary assumption by Paul in order to validate the fact that he takes the gospel to all nations and that all nations are to be blessed through the gospel (Acts 13:47; Gal 3:8).

... we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth" (Acts 13:47).

The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you" (Gal 3:8).

The meaning of these passages is destroyed if the word for "nations" does not have its ordinary meaning both in the NT context and in the OT passages that are behind the quotes.

I was unclear in my own thinking on this issue until Karleen and Saucy challenged me on it. I tended to follow the discussions of some covenant theologians, who simply equated Israel with the church not in all respects but when eschatological prophecy mentioned Israel.

But such an equation is over-simple, in the light of the prophecies just cited. I now think that—possibly with some exceptions—eschatological prophecies mentioning Israel apply first of all to Christ the Israelite, then to Jewish Christians. Gentiles have come in to be fellow citizens with these Jews (Eph 2:19). The prophecies do not lose their connection with Jews, but gain by the inclusion of Gentiles among the children of Abraham. I would still say that the church is the people of God during the present age, but not in an undifferentiated sense. First Christ inherits the promises, then believing Jews, that is, believing Israel also. While this age lasts, more Jews continue to return to the Messiah and so inherit the promises. This inheritance of the promises is the heart of what it means for the church to be church.

The status of Gentiles is the problem. Paul indicates the solution. Believing Gentiles are so grafted into Christ that they become fellow heirs, while still remaining Gentiles. They do not have to adopt Jewish cultural and ethnic practices or OT ceremonial codes.

In sum, I believe that the church, the millennial kingdom, and the people of the renewed earth share in all the diversities of which Karleen speaks.

Then what was I after when I talked about “one people of God” (*UD*, p. 129)? In the light of the confusion, I wish that I had first talked about the many peoples of God—Jews, Greeks, Romans, Englishmen, Chinese, Bantu, and so on. Let me reformulate my view so that its alignment with NT teaching is clearer.

Concerning the saved peoples now on earth, the NT teaches that there is a fundamental religious and social unity. They all have God as Father, they are all united to Christ through the Holy Spirit, and they are all part of one spiritual family. They all have access to the Father through the one Spirit (Eph 2:18). They are “fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus” (Eph 3:6). And so on.

Some of the NT passages appear to me to have the character of an argument. You trust in Christ for salvation. Therefore, you have such-and-such religious privileges in common with fellow believers. I believe that these arguments are valid. Hence the arguments hold for believers in the millennium as well. Gal 3:6–29 is particularly important. Gal 3:8 indicates that those who are justified are justified through faith. Here are salvific blessings. Gal 3:28–29 indicates that these same people are one in Christ. The whole argument of Galatians 3 says that we know that they are one because the very nature of their justification and their salvation implies that it is so.

Some classical dispensational theologians appear to me to deny that the above elements of unity are an integral part of salvation, to be expected to hold true in the millennium. “Salvific” unity for them

would be very narrow. But then I have trouble. Are they doing justice to the arguments in Galatians 3 and Ephesians 2? In view of the diversities and even tensions between Jews and Gentiles, Paul had to argue his points, not merely assume them. And he seems to me to argue from the nature of salvation in Christ to unity. Isn't his argument valid? I want also to ask how people are justified if not in Christ (Gal 2:17). How are they sanctified if not by union with Christ's death and resurrection (Romans 6)? If they are united to Christ, are they not also united to one another? Talk about the unity of the way of salvation appears to me to become flimsy if it does not include what Paul actually says about the way of salvation.

Other dispensational theologians might affirm that all the above remain true in the millennium. Then in fundamental religious respects believing Jews and Gentiles remain equal in the millennium. It might still be true that Jews would live mostly in Palestine, and Gentiles would live mostly elsewhere. It might be true from a literal economic point of view that Jews would "possess" Palestinian land (but note Ezek 47:21-23 where Gentiles inherit land too). This situation would be more or less like the present situation, in which Gentile Christians own land here and there throughout the world, and Jewish Christians own land here and there; except that more Jews would be gathered in Palestine. All would have equal access to God the Father and to Christ. Hence the Jews' descent from Abraham would not provide them with distinct priestly privileges, not belonging to Gentile believers. Nor would their residence in Palestine mean that they thereby possess a uniquely holy land uniquely connected with access to God, in such a way as to exclude Gentile possession of holy land. Or so it seems to me. If this picture of the millennium is what dispensational theologians have in mind, I have little quarrel with it.

Up till now, many classical dispensational theologians have seemed to me to believe that in the millennium believing Jews have a unique status as a priestly people, a unique *religious* status, a status definitively distinguishing them from Gentile believers who do not have this same status and who are not a kingdom of priests. It is not merely the case that they possess distinctive lands and a distinctive past. The statements in Paul's letters are then seen as describing the unique constitution of the church, as a heavenly people, and as not relevant to the millennium. Thus they might complain about the lack of data supporting equality of religious status in the millennium. My difficulty is that I do not see how one can neatly divide up Paul between statements about our salvation and statements about our religious unity of privilege and our fellowship with others who are saved. Galatians 3 does not allow it. Go look again at everything that Paul says about union with Christ and being in Christ, and every-

thing John says about indwelling and love, and see whether you can do it.

Moreover, I do not see what is the warrant when some people disinherit the 12 Apostles and other Jewish Christians from the earthly Abrahamic promises. If the Jewish Christians *do* share those promises, it seems that either the Gentile Christians do too, or that Paul was ill advised not to encourage the Gentile Christians to become Jews so that they too might share in these extra blessings in the future.

The dilemma remains the same as I posed it in my book, quoting from Daniel P. Fuller:

While they [dispensationalists] wish to think of salvation as always administered in the same way [through faith in God's Word, and by the blood], yet they do not wish to carry this idea out to the logical conclusion that all saved persons will have the same status [Israel and the church alike] (Fuller, *Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism*, p. 178).

In the light of Karleen's remarks I would, however, wish to refine this statement by defining the "same status" as sameness religiously, the sameness of fundamental religious privileges, including equality of reception of the Spirit, being co-heirs of all religious blessings, priestly access to God and his dwelling, possession of qualifications of holiness, and possession of holy objects promoting access to God. In the present age, in the millennium, and in the new earth such sameness is quite compatible with the diversities that Karleen rightly wants to maintain.

I suspect that this issue is going to be a tangled one because it is connected with the relation of different spheres in OT revelation: religious, salvific, economic, historic, political, prophetic. All those are bound together in complex ways, and then how do they play out when we relate them across the discontinuities to the NT? And what do we understand to be the nature of the unity of the church? Are there corporate dimensions to salvation?

The phrase "unity of the covenant of grace" is slippery. I am sure that Karleen knows what he means, but we have to be careful because it could have at least three senses: (1) It could mean simply that there is one way of salvation through Christ, and that this one way can be summed up in covenantal terms. Thus the Westminster Confession of Faith says:

the Lord was pleased to make a second [covenant], commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein He freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in Him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained

unto eternal life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe (7.3).

(2) It could mean in addition to (1) that unity of salvation extends to unity in economic/historic/prophetic terms for one saved people. (3) It could connote in addition to (2) that God's covenant with man is the basic overarching structuration of Scripture into which all of history is to be integrated, after the manner of Cocceius.

Karleen obviously affirms the unity in the sense (1) (see p. 12, 16n23). He disagrees with the unity in sense (2). In this connection Karleen objects to the circularity in my reasoning. "Instead of actually looking at the data, P simply brings back the covenant" (p. 9). think that Karleen is saying that I make a transition from (1) to (2) with no evidence. In fact, I do not support (2), so there is no circularity.

POLARITY VS. CONTINUUM

Karleen thinks that I place covenantal and dispensational theologians along a continuum, while he characterizes the difference as a polarity (p. 5). Maybe it depends on how broadly one defines covenantal or dispensational theology, and on what counts as a polarity.

In fact, both of these characterizations may be too simple. To be sure, the classical covenantal and dispensational theologies present themselves as rival global solutions. Each stands or falls as a whole. Moreover, at the present time most people informed on the issue find themselves most comfortable identifying primarily with one side. They think of themselves either as covenantal or as dispensational. To that extent, there is still a polarity. I wrote as I did, not to deny the extent of polarity, but to make people aware of the fact that modified options were opening up. Areas have been staked out between the classical positions.

To be sure, a good many people—perhaps Karleen among them—may believe that classic covenantal and dispensational positions each have some core presuppositions that are indispensable and that constitute the real genius of the positions. Modifications may still be made on the periphery, but such modifications must preserve the core under penalty of collapsing the whole system. Hence one must simply decide between the positions or construct a third option from scratch.

My response is, "Maybe." But at present I see things differently. I tend to think that classic covenantal and dispensational theology constitute a cluster of intertwined presuppositions or core beliefs—not just one such belief that is all-important. Surrounding this core are less important "auxiliary hypotheses." Modifiers of the classic positions are finding it possible to hold some but not all of the classic defining cluster, as well as to modify the auxiliary hypotheses. For

example, some modified dispensationalists believe in a physical millennial kingdom for Israel but see this result as consistent with basic affirmation of one people of God through history, and a participation of the church in the fulfillment of OT prophetic promise. Some covenant theologians like Anthony Hoekema believe in the physical realization of prophetic promises in a physical kingdom for Israel on a renewed earth. Moreover, some of these modifiers, from their new position, question whether some of the things that they hold in common with the classic position are as important to fight over as the classicists thought. With the change in position comes also a change in the perception of what is at the core and what is indispensable.

Maybe it is wisest not to characterize the present state of affairs as either a polarity or continuum. It is in some ways both. It depends to a certain extent on whether one focuses on the classic covenantal and dispensational positions or on the twentieth century modifiers.