

Lewis Sperry Chafer on Covenant Theology

Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer understood that Covenant Theology constitutes a danger to the Church, and he warned accordingly. The following are extracts from his comprehensive eight volume Systematic Theology.

SANS PAUL

“A clear recognition of that which, through divine grace, the Church is, of the supreme position she occupies as the Body of Christ, and of the glory and exaltation which awaits her as the Bride of the Lamb, is indispensable if a worthy perspective of God's plan and purpose is to be gained. The all but universal disregard on the part of theologians for the Pauline revelation respecting the Church has wrought confusion and damage to an immeasurable degree.” (*Systematic Theology IV:36*)

REFORMATION RESTRAINT

“Two factors serve as paramount causes of this deplorable neglect of Paul, namely: (a) the Reformation did not recover this truth as formerly it was held by the early Church; (b) that attitude of the theologians, being bound and confined within the limitations of Reformation truth, has been one of avoidance of what to them seems new.” (*IV:36,37*)

J.N. DARBY - UNLIMITED

“While there were occasional references to the Church universal in post-Reformation literature, it was not until the middle of the last century that this extensive and important body of teaching was wrought into a doctrinal declaration. It was given to J.N. Darby of England to achieve this distinctive ministry.

From the teachings of John Darby and his associates what is known as the Plymouth Brethren movement sprang. These highly trained men produced an expository literature covering the entire Sacred Text which is not only orthodox and free from misconceptions and disproportionate emphasis, but assays to interpret faithfully the entire field of Biblical doctrine - that which theology confined to the Reformation failed to do.” (*IV:37*)

REFORMATION REPLENISHMENT

“At this same time other men in America and foreign countries were awakening to the fact that the Bible presents a much larger range of doctrine than that released by the Reformers, and, as a result, a widespread Bible exposition movement developed which incorporated all that the Reformation restored, and very much more.” (*IV:37*)

HAVES, AND HAVE NOTS

“There is, then, a division at the present time in the ranks of orthodox men. On the one hand, there are those who, being trained to recognize no more than that which entered into Reformation theology, are restricted in their doctrinal viewpoint and who look upon added truth as a departure from standard ideas and therefore dangerous. On the other hand, there are those who, though as jealous to preserve the purity of the divine revelation, are constructing an unabridged system of theology, and finding the way into full-orbed harmony of truth and into the limitless field of Biblical doctrine.” (*IV:37*)

APOCRYPHAL COVENANTS

“The essential error of Covenant Theology is mentioned at this point only as it bears on human responsibility before God. The theological terms, *Covenant of Works* and *Covenant of Grace*, do not occur in Scripture. If they are to be sustained it must be wholly apart from Biblical authority.

What is known as Covenant Theology builds its structure on these two covenants and is, at least, a recognition - though inadequate - of the truth that the creature has responsibility toward his Creator. Covenant Theology has Cocceius (1603-1669) as its chief exponent. He taught that before the Fall, as much as after it, the relation between God and man was a covenant. The first was a *Covenant of Works*. For this was substituted, after the Fall, the *Covenant of Grace*.” (IV:156)

UNDISCERNMENT

“Upon this human invention of two covenants Reformed Theology has largely been constructed. It sees the empirical truth that God can forgive sinners only by that freedom which is secured by the sacrifice of His Son - anticipated in the old order and realized in the new - but that theology utterly fails to discern the purposes for the ages; the varying relationships to God of the Jews, the Gentiles, and the Church, with the distinctive, consistent human obligations which arise directly and unavoidably from the nature of each specific relationship to God.” (IV:156)

RETARDATION

“A theology which penetrates no further into Scripture than to discover that in all ages God is immutable in His grace toward penitent sinners, and constructs the idea of a universal Church continuing through the ages, on the one truth of immutable grace, is not only disregarding vast spheres of revelation but is reaping the unavoidable confusion and misdirection which part-truth engenders.

The outworking of divine grace is not standardized, though the Covenant idea of theology would make it so; and as certainly as God's dealings with man are not standardized, in the same manner the entire field of the corresponding human obligation in daily life is not run into a mold of human idealism.” (IV:156, 157)

ONE-TRACK LIMITATION

“Judaism has its field of theology with its soteriology and its eschatology. That these factors of a system which occupies three-fourths of the Sacred Text are unrecognized and ignored by theologians does not demonstrate their nonexistence, nor does it prove their unimportance. A Covenant Theology engenders the notion that there is but one soteriology and one eschatology, and that ecclesiology, such as it is conceived to be, extends from the Garden of Eden to the Great White Throne. The insuperable problems in exegesis which such fanciful suppositions create are easily disposed of by ignoring them.” (IV:248)

DUALITY DEMANDED

On the other hand, Scripture is harmonized and its message clarified when two divinely appointed systems - Judaism and Christianity - are recognized, and their complete and distinctive characters are observed. No matter how orthodox they may be in matters of inspiration, the Deity of Christ, His virgin birth, and the efficacy of His death, Covenant theologians have not been forward in Bible exposition." (IV:248)

ROMAN RESIDUARY

"It is common practice with some theologians to brand chiliasm (millennialism) as a modern theory, not remembering that, in its restored form, even justification by faith is comparatively a modern truth. Both justification by faith and chiliasm were taught in the New Testament and were therefore the belief of the early Church. These doctrines, like all other essential truths, went into obscurity during the Dark Ages.

The Reformers did not restore all features of doctrine, and along with justification by faith retained the Romish notion that the Church is the Kingdom, fulfilling the Davidic covenant, and appointed to conquer the world by bringing it under the authority of the Church. This idea has prevailed in spite of the clear, uncomplicated testimony of the New Testament that this dispensation must end in unprecedented wickedness." (IV:257)

COVENANT AMALGAMATION

"Israel has never been the Church, is not the Church, nor will she ever be the Church. A form of Covenant Theology which would thread all of Jehovah's purposes and undertakings upon His one attribute of grace could hardly avoid confusion of mind in matters related to His varied objectives.

Covenant Theology, in consistency with its man-made premise, asserts its inventions respecting an Old Testament Church, which, it is claimed, is an integral part of the New Testament Church and on the ground that, since God's grace is one unchanging attribute, its accomplishments must be the realization of one standard ideal.

The Covenant theory does retain Israel as such to the time of Christ's death. The Church is thought to be a spiritual remnant within Israel to whom all Old Testament blessings are granted, and the nation as such is allowed to inherit the cursings." (IV:311)

"The fact that the Bible recognizes an Israel within the nation itself - sometimes termed *the remnant* - has been seized upon by Covenant theologians as a ground for their contention that the Church is the true Israel of the Old Testament." (IV:312)

RETARDED RESURRECTION

"As traced by the so-called Covenant theologians, the death of Christ is given a place of large significance but His resurrection is accounted as little more than something for His own personal convenience, His necessary return from the sphere of death back to the place which He occupied before. In other words, as viewed by Covenant theologians, there is practically no doctrinal significance to Christ's resurrection (and to me as identified with Him!).

That Christ by resurrection became what in Himself He had not been before - the federal Head of a wholly new order of beings and these the primary divine objective, as this is set forth in the New Testament - cannot be incorporated into a system of which the cherished and distinctive feature is one unchangeable divine purpose from Adam to the end of time." (V:231)

RESCINDED RESURRECTION

"If it has been said Covenant Theology ignores the doctrinal aspects of the resurrection of Christ, it is due to the fact that according to that idealism the Church is not a new creation with its headship in the ascended Christ, but has existed under a supposed uniform covenant from the beginning of human history. Thus for that system the great reality of a heavenly purpose peculiar to this dispensation is ruled out completely.

The doctrinal aspects of Christ's ascension and present ministry in heaven mean but little to those who are committed to the theory of an unchanging covenant. According to this assumption, the Church obtained without a headship in heaven, even before Christ came; therefore, the inauguration of that headship as something sprung out of His resurrection could not be of any great moment.

The Covenant theory cannot be broadened to allow for Christ's new priesthood in heaven, nor for His immeasurable ministry as Advocate, and for the same reason. Therefore, all this incalculable truth is not included in their system by Covenant theologians." (V:232-233)

SLIGHTED SPIRIT

"Wherever this theory (Covenantism) is stressed, there must go along with it a neglect of the most vital truths respecting the present age-characterizing ministries of the Spirit. The same reason may be assigned for this neglect, namely, that if the Church existed and progressed in Old Testament times apart from these ministries of the Spirit, they cannot be of vital import in the present dispensation.

The disannulling of all Jewish purposes and distinctive features for an age renders a continuous-covenant conception objectionable. The Old Testament history leads on to its consummation in a glorious earthly kingdom in which the elect nation, Israel, will realize her covenants as promises fulfilled. It is, therefore, disruptive to a one-covenant theory to the last degree that a situation should be set up as it has been in this age in which it is said respecting Jew and Gentile that *there is no difference* (Rom. 3:9; 10:12)." (V:233)

FORFEITED TRUTH

"The introduction of an age as an intercalation into the midst of the predicted ongoing Jewish and Gentile programs, and the new heavenly purpose which characterizes this age, cannot be made to conform to a supposed single covenant. Thus it is seen how, to maintain the basic idea of a Covenant theology, much that is vital in the whole divine purpose must be renounced and excluded in the interest of that which at best is only a

theory; and among the neglected truths is the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.”
(V:233,234)

INCALCULABLE LOSS

“However, in spite of an almost universal influence of the Covenant theory upon theological thought, the resurrection of Christ is, when seen in its true Biblical setting, properly recognized as the very ground of all the purpose of this age and the basis upon which the new positions and possessions of those in Christ are made to rest. There is a wide doctrinal difference between those who see no special consequence in Christ's resurrection and those who see its momentous significance.” (V:234)

TOTAL DEPRIVATION

“Due thought should be given to the need of divine wisdom in introducing to earnest men the successive steps in the greatest transition the world has ever experienced, namely, one from Judaism to Christianity. The stupendous change which demands the new birth of Nicodemus and the regeneration of Saul of Tarsus is not clarified or even approached by a Covenant theology which, while embracing a unifying idealism respecting a supposed single divine purpose, can ride unconsciously over these mighty changes as though they did not exist.” (V:239,240)

PSEUDO-SABBATH

“It was to be expected, when Covenant Theology has so neglected the fact and meaning of Christ's resurrection, that there would arise much misunderstanding about the reason for the celebration of the first day of the week rather than the seventh. A recent article in a reputable religious journal is entitled, "The Sabbath Permanent but Moveable."

By this caption the writer intends to draw attention by stating what after all is a contradiction. The impossible task to which he has appointed himself is to prove that the Jewish Sabbath idea remains intact even though the precise day of the week is changed.

His thesis, as for all Covenant theologians, is that the structure of the Jewish Sabbath remains in force - for they have but one covenant - whether it be observed on one day or another. Such blindness respecting the discriminating teaching of the Bible can be accounted for only on the ground that a man-made scheme of supposed continuity is embraced and followed without an unprejudiced examination of the Scriptures.” (V:253)

REFORMATION RESTRICTION

To many the only body of interpretation which is orthodox is that which was recovered by the Reformers, or that contained in an ancient doctrinal statement. There is, however, a great body of truth which the Reformers were unable to consider and which is lacking in ancient creeds. It is this which worthy expositors have brought to light in subsequent days. Since these expositors are as capable in the field of analysis of revealed truth as were the Reformers, the results of their labors should at least have some consideration.
(V:261)

SCHOOL OF PARANOIA

“Two schools have developed among orthodox men: one which restricts all doctrine to the findings of men from the very early days of Protestantism, and one which while accepting the sound teaching of the Reformers, recognizes that much added light has fallen (by reason of the Spirit and His continued ministry) upon the Word of God in later days and that this is as worthy of consideration as the findings of men of former times. Of these two schools (Covenant and Dispensational) the first-named has too often looked upon the essential truth presented by the other as speculative, precarious, or perilous.” (V:261,262).

ESCHATOLOGICAL ERROR

“A phenomenon exists, namely, that men who are conscientious and meticulous to observe the exact teaching of the Scripture in the fields of inspiration and the divine character of the Sacred Text, the ruin of the race through Adam's sin, the Deity and Saviourhood of Christ, are found introducing methods of spiritualizing and vamping the clear declarations of the Bible in the one field of Eschatology.

The cause is not difficult to identify. When one is bound to a man-made covenant theory there is no room within that assumption for a restoration of Israel, that nation with all her earthly covenants and glory having been merged into the Church. There is but one logical consummation - that advanced by Whitby with all its reckless disregard for the Biblical testimony, namely, that a hypothetical grace covenant will eventuate in a transformed social order, and not by the power of the returning Messiah but by the preaching of the gospel.” (V:282)

BUILD THE BODY

“In the present time there are those who, misapprehending the prediction that the gospel of the kingdom must be preached in all the world (Matt. 24:14), assert that Christ cannot return until the missionary enterprise has reached to all the inhabited earth, not recognizing that the passage in question is found in a context belonging to the future great tribulation, and that because of the unending cycle of birth and death there could not be a set time in this age when the missionary enterprise would be complete.” (V:282)

KINGDOM MISCONSTRUED

“Though the kingdom occupies so large a place in the Sacred Text, the theme of the kingdom has been more misunderstood and its terminology more misapplied than any other one subject in the Bible. This is directly due to the failure, so inherent and far-reaching in Covenant Theology, to recognize the dispensational aspect of divine revelation. Truth respecting the Messianic expectation as that is set forth in the Old Testament does not imply that the kingdom is the Church, nor does the New Testament, with its objectives centered in heaven, teach that the Church is the kingdom.

Similarly, the earthly kingdom that according to the Scriptures had its origin in the covenant made to David, which is mundane and literal in its original form, and equally as mundane and literal in uncounted references to it in all subsequent Scriptures which trace it on to its consummation, is by theological legerdemain metamorphosed into a spiritual

monstrosity in which an absent King seated on His Father's throne in heaven is accepted in lieu of the theocratic monarch of David's line seated on David's throne in Jerusalem.” (V:315)

DEADLY RULE OF LIFE

“Covenantism, which has molded the major theological concepts for many generations, recognizes no distinction as to ages, therefore can allow for no distinctions between law and grace. This dominating attitude of Covenantism must account for the utter neglect of life-truth in all their works of theology.

No more representative theological dictum from the Covenant viewpoint has been formed than the Westminster Confession of Faith, which valuable and important document recognizes life truth only to the point of imposing the Ten Commandments on Christians as their sole obligation, and in spite of the teachings of the New Testament which assert that the law was never given to Gentiles or Christians, and that the latter has been saved and delivered from it (actually dead to it).” (VI:167)

INFANTILE BAPTISM

“It is believed by a large percentage that there is some connection between the rite of circumcision as required for the Jewish child according to the Old Testament and the baptism of children according to the New Testament. In the attempt to establish and magnify its one-covenant idea, Covenant Theology has contended for the supposed relationship between the two dispensations.” (VII:42)

KINGDOM GOSPEL VS. GRACE GOSPEL

“Strong objection is offered by Covenant theologians to a distinction between the gospel of the kingdom as preached by John the Baptist, Jesus, and the Disciples, and the Pauline gospel of the grace of God. One of them states that to make such a distinction is *unfortunate*, and *dangerous*.

He with others contends that the kingdom gospel is identical with the gospel of divine Grace. Here nevertheless will arise an absurdity which does not deter this type of theologian, namely, that men could preach the grace gospel based as it is on the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ when they did not believe Christ would die or be raised again (Luke 18:31-34).” (VII:176)