

# Dispensationalism, the Westminster Standards and the Unity of the People of God

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## The Issue in the Old PCUS

The controversy over the compatibility of dispensationalism with the theology of the Westminster Standards is nothing new. Two of the key modern popularizers of dispensationalism in America were ordained Presbyterian ministers in the old PCUS, men who had affirmed under sacred oath their acceptance of the Westminster Standards as containing the fundamental system of doctrine taught in Scripture. C.I Scofield, the editor of the dispensational *Scofield Reference Bible*, was for many years and until his death a member of the Paris Presbytery, U.S., Texas. And Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer, founder and first president of Dallas Theological Seminary, was for many years and until his death a member of Dallas Presbytery, U.S., Texas [*Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 100, p. 344]. As this modern doctrine spread in Presbyterian circles, it is only natural that its compatibility with traditional Presbyterian doctrine would eventually be questioned. This was officially raised in the old PCUS when the Presbytery of North Alabama overtured the 1940 PCUS General Assembly to appoint an Ad Interim Committee to study “our theological seminaries and other institutions from which applicants come seeking ordination in our presbyteries.” This Committee was instructed to “give particular attention to the institutions advocating the type of Bible interpretation commonly known as ‘Dispensationalism’ to discover whether or not this doctrine is in accord with the Confession of Faith, especially with Chapter XIX” [Minutes, p. 33].

This Ad Interim Committee gave its initial report to the 1943 PCUS General Assembly. That report concluded “that Dispensationalism and the teaching of the Confession ... belong to two different systems of Bible interpretation” [Minutes, p. 129]. The 1943 PCUS General Assembly added two premillennialists to the previously five man Ad Interim Committee and recommitted the report to the enlarged Committee for further study. The enlarged Ad Interim Committee gave a new report to the 1944 PCUS General

Assembly. The 1944 report stated:

It is the unanimous opinion of your Committee that Dispensationalism as defined and set forth above is out of accord with the system of doctrine set forth in the Confession of Faith, not primarily or simply in the field of eschatology, but because it attacks the very heart of the Theology of our Church, which is unquestionably a Theology of one Covenant of Grace [Minutes, p. 126].

Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer, founder and then president of Dallas Theological Seminary, editor of the theological journal *Bibliotheca Sacra*, and an ordained PCUS minister, reported on the PCUS condemnation of dispensationalism in the 1944 volume of *Bibliotheca Sacra*. In an editorial entitled “Dispensational Distinctions Denounced”, Dr. Chafer said:

At the meeting of the Assembly in May, 1944, the Committee, which had been enlarged and its personnel somewhat changed, presented its unanimous report again, which report, though condemning dispensational teaching as effectively as before, was adopted by the Assembly without protest or discussion. [p. 257]

During this controversy, Dr. Chafer asked a question which implied that he himself recognized that his dispensational teachings were out of accord with the Westminster Standards. In an editorial in the 1943 volume of *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Dr. Chafer queried:

Would it not be a wiser course, in view of the present accepted liberty to revise the standards of the Church, so to reconstruct its text that a latitude may be accorded to the large number of men who can accept only a dispensational theology and thus allow them to remain in the fellowship of their brethren? [p. 345]

In the above mentioned 1944 editorial, Dr. Chafer lamented that the Ad Interim Committee had been assigned the restricted task of studying the harmony of dispensationalism with the dated Confession of Faith as opposed to its harmony with more up-to-date understandings of the teachings of Scripture:

... since the Confession of Faith is no more than an attempt to interpret the Scriptures, and written by men no more qualified to interpret the Bible than the scholars of our own day, it is certainly germane to this and all other questions to discover what the Bible actually teaches. The Confession of Faith, since it is three hundred years old, could not incorporate the great flood of light which by the Spirit has since been thrown upon the text of the Bible [p. 258].

In his 1943 editorial, Dr. Chafer issued the challenge:

It is time for any theological Rip Van Winkle to awaken to the recognition of that which has developed doctrinally since a company of good men drew up the Confession of Faith [p. 341].

In spite of the action of the 1944 PCUS General Assembly and Dr. Chafer's voiced concern about being allowed "to remain in the fellowship of the brethren", Dr. Chafer remained a minister in good standing in the PCUS until his death at age 81 on August 22, 1952. Dr. Chafer appears in the "Ministerial Necrology" found in the Minutes of the 1953 PCUS General Assembly.

## **The Issue Today**

The old PCUS no longer exists, having been absorbed together with the much larger and more liberal UPCUSA into the new PCUSA. Because of the PCUSA's commitment to theological pluralism, I doubt that body is much concerned about the compatibility of dispensationalism with the Westminster Standards. When I was a student at Dallas Theological Seminary and still a committed dispensationalist, a fellow student and acquaintance began planning to seek ordination in the old UPCUSA when he neared graduation. I was fearful that this meant that he was abandoning his commitment to dispensationalism, and I discussed my concern with him. He assured me that the UPCUSA was so pluralistic that he could be ordained in that body without any compromise to his dispensational convictions.

The question may be moot in those denominations with Reformed roots which have in recent years fallen prey to doctrinal relativism and pluralism. The issue, however, is still significant in those more conservative Reformed and Presbyterian denominations that have retained a real and practical commitment to the Westminster Standards. There still are presbyteries which thoroughly examine candidates for the ministry on their doctrinal knowledge and views and which require them to affirm as a part of their ordination vows that they receive and adopt the Westminster Standards as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures. As long as such presbyteries exist, the issue will continue to be more than a matter of historical interest.

Also, the members of Reformed churches still need to be shown specifically how and why dispensationalism contradicts their church's doctrine. We must not expect the laity to be content with an implicit faith which accepts the doctrine of the church without knowing its biblical basis. Each generation of the church needs to be grounded in the faith.

This matter also merits further study because dispensationalism continues to be in a state of flux. Today's dispensational authorities have abandoned much of the teaching of yesterday's dispensational authorities. As long as dispensationalism continues to change,

churches committed to the Reformed faith will need to continue evaluating it.

## **The Westminster Standards on the Unity of God's People in Christ**

I believe a study of this type needs to concentrate on the broader, more general points of doctrine. The broader area of doctrine where dispensationalism most obviously and significantly contradicts the Westminster Standards is the unity of the people of God in Christ. I will limit this study to this one area. I had rather cover this one area thoroughly than to cover several areas superficially.

When I refer here to the issue of the unity of the people of God, I am not making any reference to the controversy as to whether there is or is not a prophesied future for physical Israel. Many Reformed interpreters have held to a future national conversion to Christ for physical Israel based on Romans 11:26, and such an interpretation is, at the very least, consistent with the Westminster Larger Catechism's interpretation of the Lord's Prayer petition, "Thy kingdom come" (Q. 191). According to the Larger Catechism, the petition "Thy kingdom come" involves supplication

that the kingdom of sin and Satan may be destroyed, the gospel propagated throughout the world, the Jews called, the fulness of the Gentiles brought in.

One can hold to a prophetic future for physical Israel without being a dispensationalist. The issue I am raising is much more fundamental than that. The issue I am raising here is whether salvation under the Old Testament was based on covenant union with Christ. Or, to put it differently, the issue I am raising here is whether Old Testament saints are a part of the Body and Bride of Christ.

The Westminster Standards are very clear on this issue, stating that the invisible church consists of the elect from all ages:

The catholic or universal church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all. (WCOF 25.1)

There is *a* people of God, not an earthly people of God and a heavenly people of God:

It pleased God, in his eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus, his only begotten Son, to be the Mediator between God and man, the Prophet, Priest, and King, the Head and Savior of his church, the Heir of all things, and Judge of the world: unto whom he did from all eternity give a people, to be his seed, and to be by him in time redeemed, called, justified, sanctified, and glorified. (WCOF 8.1)

According to Larger Catechism Question 60, “neither is there salvation in any other, but in Christ alone, who is the Savior only of his body the church.”

The Westminster Standards teach a continuity throughout redemption history in that salvation has always been through covenant union with Jesus Christ. The Standards call this unifying principle of redemptive history “the covenant of grace”. Like the term *trinity*, *the covenant of grace* is a theological term summarizing Biblical doctrine, not a term taken directly from the Bible. The Larger Catechism states,

The covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed. (Q. 31)

The Standards also recognize the progressive nature of redemptive history and the discontinuity between the testaments:

This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel: under the law, it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come; which were, for that time, sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the Old Testament. (WCOF 7.5)

Under the gospel, when Christ, the substance, was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed are the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper: which, though fewer in number, and administered with more simplicity, and less outward glory, yet, in them, it is held forth in more fullness, evidence and spiritual efficacy, to all nations, both Jews and Gentiles; and is called the New Testament. There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations. (WCOF 7.6)

Q.33. Was the covenant of grace always administered after one and the same manner?

A. The covenant of grace was not always administered after the same manner, but the administrations of it under the Old Testament were different from those under the New. (WLC)

Q.34. How was the covenant of grace administered under the Old Testament?

A. The covenant of grace was administered under the Old Testament, by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the passover, and other types

and ordinances, which did all foreshadow Christ then to come, and were for that time sufficient to build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they then had full remission of sin, and eternal salvation. (WLC)

Q.35. How is the covenant of grace administered under the New Testament?

A. Under the New Testament, when Christ the substance was exhibited, the same covenant of grace was and still is to be administered in the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper; in which grace and salvation are held forth in more fulness, evidence, and efficacy, to all nations. (WLC)

The liberty which Christ hath purchased for believers under the gospel consists in their freedom from the guilt of sin, the condemning wrath of God, the curse of the moral law; and, in their being delivered from this present evil world, bondage to Satan, and dominion of sin; from the evil of afflictions, the sting of death, the victory of the grave, and everlasting damnation; as also, in their free access to God, and their yielding obedience unto him, not out of slavish fear, but a childlike love and willing mind. All which were common also to believers under the law. But, under the New Testament, the liberty of Christians is further enlarged, in their freedom from the yoke of the ceremonial law, to which the Jewish church was subjected; and in greater boldness of access to the throne of grace, and in fuller communications of the free Spirit of God, than believers under the law did ordinarily partake of. (WCOF 20.1)

The Westminster Standards teach a basic organic unity of the people of God throughout the ages in the midst of the progressive discontinuity of redemptive history. This unity is found in the covenant of grace. This organic unity in the midst of the discontinuity of redemptive history involves an organic progression analogous to the development of a child into an adult (Galatians 4:3-4). The Confession refers to Old Testament Israel as "a church under age" (19.3), "believers under the law", and "the Jewish church" (20.1). The organic development brought about during the time of the New Testament includes the unprecedentedly clear revelation through the Incarnate Word and His apostles, the historical accomplishment of the prophesied Messianic atonement, the outpouring of the Spirit in unprecedented fullness, the cessation of the burdensome Mosaic ceremonial laws, and the universalization of the kingdom previously limited to the Jewish nation. In the midst of these developmental changes, there was also a strong continuity with the Old Testament program. Although God often dealt with Old Testament Israel in terms of earthly institutions and promises, these were pictures of the same heavenly realities later spoken of in the New Testament and there was a genuine spiritual dimension in the lives of the Old Testament saints. And although the New Testament often speaks in terms of heavenly and spiritual realities, the Christian is still in the world and has been given the earthly task of being the light of the world, the salt of the earth and the discipler of the nations.

## Dispensationalism on the Unity of God's People in Christ

Dispensationalists have historically denied this doctrine of organic unity through the covenant of grace. Rather than seeing Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church in a relationship analogous to the childhood and adulthood of one person, they have seen Israel and the church as two distinct peoples, a relationship more analogous to that of two separate persons.

Dispensationalists have repeatedly taught that only the church saints (i.e., those who are saved on or after the Acts 2 Pentecost and before the resurrection and rapture of 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17) will be in the Body and Bride of Christ; the Old Testament saints are excluded:

Israel's distinction, glory and destiny will always be earthly. They will also be a spiritual people, Jehovah's possession. There is no division, however, between the saved Jew and the saved Gentile of this dispensation, both being in the Church. But after the Church is complete, at the end of this dispensation, there will of necessity be a division. The "holy Jerusalem" of Revelation 21 is the "bride, the Lamb's wife", for whom is the "new heaven", while the "new earth" will be for Israel, the tabernacle of God is to be with them, and "God himself shall be with them, and be their God." The distinctive New Testament spiritual and heavenly blessings are for the Church; those blessings of and on the earth, for Israel. [C.I. Scofield with Ella E. Pohle, compiler, *Dr. C.I. Scofield's Question Box* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1917), page 70.]

Much of divine blessing is determined for Israel all of which is anticipated in her covenants and prophecies; but no covenant or prophecy brings that nation into heavenly citizenship or into marriage union with Christ. [Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:142.]

That God is continuing His work of redemption in calling out a people for His name in the Church the Body of Christ we gladly affirm, but we also insist that this Body of Christ is distinct from any previous body of redeemed people in its nature, characteristics, time, and promises. [Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, page 144.]

... the Church in a technical sense is strictly limited to those who have accepted Christ in this age. Therefore, the Church is a distinct body of saints in this age. [Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, page 138.]

The marriage of the Lamb is an event which evidently involves only Christ and the church.... While it would be impossible to eliminate [Old Testament

saints and tribulation saints] from the place of observers, they can not be in the position of participants in the event itself. [J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 227.]

Dispensationalists have commonly taught that Old Testament salvation was accomplished apart from any covenant union with Christ. Dr. Chafer made his position on this point quite clear:

There is probably no word of Scripture which more clearly defines the essential fact concerning the Christian than the phrase in Christ; and as the Christian is the most important fact of all creation, there has never been a word uttered which was so far-reaching in all its implication, or which is fraught with greater meaning to humanity than the phrase in Christ.... Over against the emphasis which is given to this truth in the teachings of grace, is the corresponding fact that there is no hint of a possible position in Christ in any teaching of law or of the kingdom. [Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:98]

Subsequent dispensationalists have largely locked in to this position because they have found it a necessary part of their defense of the pre-tribulation rapture doctrine.

At first glance, the position that Old Testament saints are not “in Christ” seems to have nothing to do with the pre-tribulation rapture doctrine. The key to seeing the relationship between the two doctrines is to compare 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 with Daniel 12:1-2. “The dead in Christ” mentioned in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 are resurrected at the time of the rapture mentioned in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. Daniel 12:1-2 teaches that the resurrection of the saints will occur **after** the great tribulation. Now if the resurrected saints mentioned in Daniel 12:1-2 are among the “dead in Christ” mentioned in 1 Thessalonians 4:16, then the rapture mentioned in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 must also occur **after** the great tribulation (post-tribulation), not before it (pre-tribulation). In order to avoid this logical refutation of the pre-tribulation rapture doctrine, many dispensationalists now argue that the Old Testament saints are included among “those who are Christ's” (1 Cor. 15:23) but not among the “dead in Christ” of 1 Thessalonians 4:16. Note the following statements by Drs. Ryrie and Walvoord:

Concerning the completion of the Church when saints will be translated and resurrected, Paul uses the phrase “dead in Christ” (1 Thess. 4:16). This clearly distinguishes those who have died in this age from believers who died before Christ's first advent, thus marking the Church off as distinct to this age and a mystery hidden in Old Testament times but not revealed. [Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), page 136.]

The Old Testament saints are never described by the phrase “in Christ”.... The best answer ... is to concede the point that the resurrection of Old Testament

saints is after the tribulation, but to divorce it completely from the translation and resurrection of the church. [John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, page 154. Compare John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, page 280; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 407.]

## **The Bible on the Unity of God's People in Christ**

There are several Biblical arguments which support the position of the Westminster Standards on this issue of the unity of the people of God in Christ. Admittedly the issue of how the people of God were saved before Christ's historic accomplishment of the atonement is difficult. To fully understand this, we would have to fully understand the relationship between time and eternity, and we cannot. On the one hand, we know that Christ's historic accomplishment of the atonement is very important. The Holy Spirit was poured out in new covenant fullness only after Christ completed His work of atonement in history. The difference between the age of the new covenant and previous ages can be rightfully compared to the difference between day and night. Any theology that neglects the importance of the accomplishment of the work of Christ in history is suspect. But on the other hand, there is also a sense in which the atoning work of Christ is not totally limited by time in its application. He is, after all, "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8). "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). When the atoning work of Christ was accomplished in history, its ripples reached back in time as well as forward. The atonement was applied provisionally before its accomplishment, and applied in new covenant fullness after its accomplishment when the "fullness of the time had come" (Galatians 4:4).

The full doctrine of covenant union with Christ is not revealed until the New Testament. The term *in Christ* is first and primarily used to speak of this covenant union in Paul's epistles. Paul used the term *in Christ* in terms of his own chronological position in redemptive history, which is what one would expect. This does not mean, however, that Old Testament salvation was somehow accomplished totally apart from covenant union with Christ. What we should rather conclude is that covenant union before the Acts 2 Pentecost had not yet reached new covenant fullness in the progression of redemptive history.

To begin with, the atonement will not be completely applied to anyone, Old Testament saint or New Testament saint, until the second coming of Christ. Those advances in spiritual benefits that were historically realized at the inauguration of the New Testament era will be applied in glorification to those who died before the New Testament era began in fullness. This is implied by Hebrews 11:39-40:

And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us.

The subjects of these verses are the believing Old Testament saints, the great cloud of witnesses who now surround us. These Old Testament saints will not be “made perfect apart from us” so they can take full advantage of the better provisions of the new covenant era at the time of glorification.

Second, the New Testament speaks of new covenant salvation in Christ as a participation in the Old Testament covenants of promise (Ephesians 2:12-13). Those Gentiles who were once “far off” in that they were “strangers from the covenants of promise” are “now in Christ Jesus...made near by the blood of Christ”. The blessings of the Abrahamic covenant today come upon Gentiles who are in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:14). There are many New Testament verses which imply that the Christian church is the spiritual Israel of the new covenant. There is continuity in the new covenant blessings as well as newness. The kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure not only things new but also things old (Matthew 13:52).

Third, the New Testament teaches that all the people of God are saved in covenant union with Christ:

For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive (1 Corinthians 15:22).

Covenant union with Christ is the basis for justification and sanctification. Through covenant union with Christ, Christ's finished sacrifice becomes the Christian's payment for his sins (Romans 8:1). Through covenant union with Christ, Christ's record of perfect obedience is imputed to the believer's account before God (2 Corinthians 5:21; Philippians 3:9). Through covenant union with Christ, the Christian becomes a new creation (Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15). The very idea of any sort of salvation accomplished apart from this covenant union with Christ is unthinkable. The people of God will be made alive in Christ or not at all.

Fourth, the New Testament teaches the unity of the people of God in all ages. There is one flock (John 10:16), one good olive tree (Romans 11:24), one house (Hebrews 3:5-6), one bride (Ephesians 5:25-27 and Revelation 21:9-12), and one holy nation (1 Peter 2:9).

Fifth, the Bible teaches a close relationship between spiritual baptism and spiritual circumcision (Colossians 2:11-12). There definitely was spiritual circumcision in the Old Testament. This was an Old Testament ministry of the Spirit which most probably differed from New Testament spiritual baptism primarily in the degree of fullness.

## **Conclusion**

There are other issues besides the unity of the people of God in Christ which need to be discussed. Perhaps I will have the time and opportunity to address some of them in the future. For further study, I refer you to the book *Dispensationalism Today, Yesterday and*

*Tomorrow* by Crenshaw and Gunn.