Dr. Mike Stallard, Baptist Bible Seminary

A DISPENSATIONAL RESPONSE TO THE KNOX SEMINARY OPEN LETTER TO EVANGELICALS

In 2002, Knox Theological Seminary posted on its website a document entitled "An Open Letter to Evangelicals and Other Interested Parties: The People of God, the Land of Israel, and the Impartiality of the Gospel" written by Fowler White and Warren Gage, two faculty members of the school.[1] This document is a strongly worded and passionate criticism of dispensationalism along with a defense of replacement theology.[2] Taking a cue from the subtitle of the document, the message of its theology is that the people of God should only be defined soteriologically, the geographical land of biblical Israel is unimportant in the scheme of world history today, and the gospel of Christ is compromised when it is taught that any divine favor rests upon Israel (or any other nation) apart from Christ.

The document consists of three introductory paragraphs followed by ten propositions. The document closes with five paragraphs that affirm inaugurated eschatology, frame beliefs about the Jews, and appeal to other evangelical pastors and educators to sign the document as presented. At the end of the document is a list of signatories who agree with the document. They are divided into three lists: (1) educators, (2) pastors, and (3) public figures and lay leaders. Instructions are given for adding one's name to the document.[3] The presence of a name does not mean that Knox Seminary endorses the signatories, only that the signatories endorse the Open Letter. Among the signatories are the members of the faculty of Knox Seminary with the exception of the well known and respected D. James Kennedy, who is the Founder, Chancellor and President of the seminary and who also teaches evangelism. R. C. Sproul is also listed as a faculty member of the school and has added his name to the Open Letter. Other well-known signatories would be Richard Gaffin, Michael Horton, and Bruce Waltke. The men who have signed the statement hold to various interpretive positions ranging from classical amillennialism (e.g., G. I. Williamson) to postmillennial Christian Reconstructionism (e.g., Gary Demar). Preterism is also represented in the list of signatories (e.g., Sproul, Demar). They all have in common a belief in replacement theology.

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[1] Hereafter, the document will be referred to as the Open Letter (see http://www.knoxseminary.org/Prospective/Faculty/WittenbergDoor/index.html; Internet; accessed 5 April 2003 and 17 July 2003).

[2] In correspondence with Warren Gage, one of the authors of the Open Letter, he makes clear that the document does not use the term *replacement theology* (Warren Gage <wgage@knoxseminary.org>, "RE: Response to Open Letter," Private e-mail message to Michael Stallard, 30 July 2003. He goes further and suggests that the term is both inaccurate in describing the position of Knox Seminary (or at least his own position) and pejorative as used by dispensationalists. My intention in using the term is not pejorative by any means. It is a term I am using strictly in an academic sense of a theological system, which from the dispensational theological vantage point, does not seem to bring over into the present and future times the promises to Israel about its nation and land. Those promises are viewed some other way. In a later note, I discuss various ways that the Open Letter seems to "do away" with the promises to Israel. From within the theology of the Open Letter, it may be true that the adherents view themselves as having no such thing as "replacement" since they see unity in the soteriological outworking of the covenants from the very time the promises are made. If this is so, then a starting point for discussing differences would be exegesis of the Old Testament covenant texts themselves. I am open to using a term other than "replacement theology" to describe the position of the Open Letter as I continue to think through the differences. For now, I will use this common term from within the dispensational heritage, hoping that the readers will take note that I am not using it deliberately as a branding iron to erect straw men in order to criticize the position.

[3] From the time period from April 5, 2003 to July 17, 2003, the number of educators who signed the document remained constant. The number of pastors who signed increased by thirteen. The number increased by three for public figures and lay leaders.

The Open Letter contains 55 footnotes composed entirely of Scripture passages with most passages listed in their entirety. Right away the dispensationalist becomes suspicious because those footnotes reference 77 Bible passages, but out of those only ten are from the Old Testament and many of those are secondary listings. Consequently, the document demonstrates, even in this feature, the typical leanings of covenant theology with its focus on the church replacing Israel in the present age.

The Present Concerns Driving the Open Letter

When I first read the Open Letter, I must confess to a certain amount of bewilderment, not sure of whom the letter was actually criticizing, whether dispensationalism as a theology in general or a narrow strand of popularists and sensationalists associated with the dispensationalist position. It makes a big difference if one is targeting mainline dispensationalism or some theological quacks on the fringes. So I wrote to Fowler White, the Academic Dean of Knox Seminary and co-author of the Open Letter, to clarify the concerns the document raises. I have also researched some sources suggested in the correspondence to try to understand the concerns, which the Open Letter raises, in order to be fair in my representation of it in spite of my disagreements.

The Influence of Dispensationalism Among Evangelicals

First, the Open Letter appears to be reacting to the impression that dispensationalism is gaining favor in the evangelical world. This might come as a surprise to many dispensationalists who have heard their position (pre-tribulational premillennialism) maligned often at professional society meetings as well as in various writings and who are themselves disturbed about the re-emergence of anti-dispensational positions such as preterism.[4] However, the Knox Seminary website also contains a posting, linked from the Open Letter, called the John-Revelation Project, which is a discussion mostly of the book of Revelation which attempts to make a positive case for a Reformed approach to the book via a non-literal understanding. The opening statement of this article succinctly words the concern that is in view: "At the beginning of the 21st century virtually the entire American evangelical community has been captured by a dispensational, pretribulational, and premillennial eschatology. Best-selling book series and sensational movies, reinforced by endless radio talk programs, promote these fantastic interpretations of biblical prophecy as events coming to pass in our generation."[5]

Clearly, this reaction is due primarily, although not exclusively, to the success of the *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. This fictional series attempts to portray the end time scenario from a pretribulational, premillennial perspective. It honestly tries to follow the biblical text, especially the book of Revelation in a literal sense without setting dates for prophetic fulfillment There is no doubt that the books have captured the imagination of many evangelical Christians, have led many to trust in Christ for eternal life, and have influenced others to get involved in Bible study. This development coincides with the formation in the

[4] For a dispensational response to preterism, see Mike Stallard "A Review of R. C. Sproul's *The Last Days According to Jesus*: An Analysis of Moderate Preterism, Part I," *The Conservative Theological Journal* 6 (March 2002): 55-71; "A Review of R. C. Sproul's *The Last Days According to Jesus*: An Analysis of Moderate Preterism, Part II," *The Conservative Theological Journal* 6 (August 2002): 184-202.

[5] http://wwwknoxseminary.org/Prospective/Faculty/FacultyForum/JohnRevelationProject/index.html; Internet; accessed July 14, 2003.

1990s of the Pre-Trib Study Group (headed by LaHaye and Thomas Ice), which was specifically established to spur the advancement of the dispensational perspective.

Even within the broader evangelical tent of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS), there has been at times a showcasing of premillennialism. The topic for the national meeting of ETS for 2000 was "Israel: Past, Present, and Future." Such a subject matter would naturally lend itself, at least, to a setting forth of the positions of premillennialism and dispensationalism, which rejects replacement theology. Craig Blaising, a progressive dispensationalist, gave a strong critique of supersessionism (replacement theology) during one plenary session while I came away from the meetings in general with a sense that premillennialism had been given a forum to express itself clearly.[6] In light of such current developments within evangelicalism, whether popular or academic, there is reason to see, from the Open Letter's point of view, that a dispensational wind is blowing in the land. Apparently, both the Open Letter and the John-Revelation Project have been crafted with this concern in mind.

The Influence of Dispensationalism in World Politics

Second, the Open Letter also appears to be reacting to the impression that dispensationalism is unduly influencing (or perhaps attempting to influence) world affairs at the present time. The first paragraph of the Open Letter reads: "Recently a number of leaders in the Protestant community of the United States have urged the endorsement of far-reaching and unilateral political commitments to the people and land of Israel in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, citing Holy Scripture as the basis for those commitments. To strengthen their endorsement, several of these leaders have also insisted that they speak on behalf of the seventy million people who constitute the American evangelical community." In summary, it seems that the concern here is that dispensationalists are influencing American political developments in a direction that takes into account only the needs of Israel.[7] Beyond this, the Open Letter seems concerned that some dispensationalists have overstated the case and lumped all evangelicals together when they refer to evangelical support for today's national Israel.

When I asked for particular names of men that the Open Letter specifically had in mind, Fowler White responded specifically by listing Jerry Falwell, Paige Patterson, and John Hagee. Falwell, Pastor of Thomas Road Baptist Church and Founder/Chancellor of Liberty University, has been well known for his strong pro-Israel stance going back decades. Being pro-Israel was one of the four major planks in the platform of Moral Majority founded in the late 1970s.[8] In 1998, Donald Wagner summarized the relationship this way:

> When Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited Washington this past January, his initial meeting was not with President Clinton but with Jerry Falwell and more than 1,000 fundamentalist Christians. The crowd saluted the prime minister as "the Ronald Reagan of Israel," and Falwell pledged to contact more than 200,000 evangelical pastors, asking them to "tell President Clinton to refrain from putting pressure on Israel" to comply with the Oslo accords.

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[6] For a published copy of Craig Blaising's presentation, see "The Future of Israel as a Theological Question," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44 (September 2001): 435-50.

[7] The concern of the Open Letter is not so much that dispensationalists encourage a pro-Israel stance politically, but that they do it in such a way so as to influence public U.S. policy unilaterally toward Israel and away from the Palestinians.

[8] See Merrill Simon, *Jerry Falwell and the Jews*, Middle Village, NY: Jonathan David Publishers, 1984.

> The meeting between Netanyahu and Falwell illustrates a remarkable political and theological convergence. The link between Israelis Likud government and the U.S. Religious Right was established by Netanyahu's mentor, Menachem Begin, during the Carter and Reagan administrations. However, its roots of evangelical support for Israel lie in the long tradition of Christian thinking about the millennium.[9]

President George W. Bush also regularly receives letters from this conservative faction of evangelicalism to try to influence foreign policy relative to the Israeli-Arab conflict in the Middle East.[10] In fact, Falwell has been quoted as asserting that "It is my belief that the Bible Belt in America is Israel's only safety belt right now" and that "There are 70 million of us. And if there's one thing that brings us together quickly it's whenever we begin to detect our government becoming a little anti-Israel."[11]

The reasons for the Open Letter's dislike for this influence of dispensational thinking upon Middle Eastern geopolitics are two-fold. First, replacement theology, which has no special place for national Israel either in the present or in the future, views conflicts in that part of the world as no different than conflicts elsewhere. The Open Letter voices the concern that Palestinians are being marginalized (Proposition X) and that the suffering of both sides should be considered (Paragraph 8).[12] At issue here is the appropriate interpretation and application of Scripture and the theological correctness of replacement theology versus dispensationalism, a point to be taken up later. At this juncture, it must be said that in world affairs it is not obvious that dispensationalism is influencing policy in the direction of marginalizing the Palestinians. Certainly all Christians, of any theological persuasion, should seek through prayer and action the spiritual and physical welfare of Palestinians as well as Israelis. Furthermore, it is not at all self-evident that it is wrong for dispensationalists to try to influence world affairs based upon their understanding of the Bible. If their interpretation can be shown to be correct, then an active pro-Israel position in the present world seems to be a logical development.

Second, statements like those mentioned above by Falwell have given the impression that the evangelical world as a whole follows the pro-Israel position and that Falwell and other evangelical leaders of a dispensational persuasion speak for the entire evangelical community. One can see how this could be offensive to those evangelicals who do not view themselves as pro-Israel and who hold to replacement theology with no present significance for national Israel. Falwell or any other dispensational evangelical leader does not speak for them. Consequently, those of us who have been given leadership positions in various dispensationally oriented ministries must be careful not to overstate the case. The Golden Rule applies. We would not want to be treated in that way if the situation were reversed.

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[9] Donald Wagner, "Evangelicals and Israel: Theological Roots of a Political Alliance," *The Christian Century* (November 4, 1998): 1020. This article can be accessed on the Internet at http://www.religion-online.org/cgi-bin/relsearchd.dll/showarticle?item_id=216.

[10] Romesh Ratnesar, "The Right's New Crusade: Lobbying for Israel," *Inside Politics*; April 29, 2002; Internet; accessed 14 July 2003.

[11] "Zion's Christian Soldiers," *CBSNEWS.com*; June 8, 2003; http://www/cbsnews.com/stories/2002 /10/0360minutes/printable524268.shtml; Internet; accessed July 14, 2003.

[12] The numbering of the various propositions follows the scheme of the Open Letter. However, the Open Letter does not number the paragraphs, so I have provided the numbering scheme although I do not include the paragraph introducing the propositions in the numbering.

However, to be fair to Falwell, we must quickly point out that it is not overstatement by him or other pro-Israel evangelicals that is driving the public perception that the overwhelming majority of American evangelicals support Israel in the current political climate. The secular media, which almost always gives the impression that it is incapable of understanding the nuances of various movements within evangelicalism, consistently portrays evangelicals as overwhelmingly, if not entirely, pro-Israel. The Los Angeles Times a few years back explained the dispensational end time scenario with respect to Armageddon as *the* evangelical position.[13] Others equate the term *fundamentalist* with *evangelical* and flatly note "Fundamentalists believe that Israel is a covenant land promised to the Jews by God."[14]

Furthermore, it may also be true that Falwell's claim to represent other evangelicals in a pro-Israel position, while perhaps overstated, is not limited to theological position. In a recent poll of evangelical Christians, two-thirds sided with Israel in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but gave their main reasons as something other than dispensational theology. They cited issues like "military solidarity and democratic values rather than eschatological issues or Old Testament promises about Israel."[15] Consequently, statements by evangelical leaders like Falwell claiming to represent evangelicals in their posture toward Israel should not necessarily be taken as an attempt to represent the theology of various pro-Israel factions within evangelicalism, much less the theology of all evangelicals.

Harsh Statements Against Replacement Theology

Third, the Open Letter is reacting to harsh statements against replacement theology. The Open Letter views these statements as pejorative and hateful and not simply the studied response of fellow Christians. Fowler White commented to me:

> A speaker at a South Florida Calvary Chapel, a congregation of the well-known national non-denominational network of congregations that is explicitly committed to dispensational pretribulational premillennialism, called non-dispensationalist churches "synagogues of Satan." An educator colleague (also a DTS alum) in the Kansas City area has reported that non-dispensationalists there are being described as "speaking by the spirit of antichrist." It is now fairly common fodder for Christian talk radio to describe as heretics those who hold to non-dispensational eschatology, a.k.a. "replacement theology."[16]

Thus, the Open Letter is not merely concerned with a short doctrinal statement and refutation of dispensationalism. Its framers are upset with what they perceive to be a hateful tone coming from the dispensational camp. Usually, the two issues that emerge involve dispensationalists accusing replacement theology of heresy and/or anti-Semitism.

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[13] Los Angeles Times, June 8, 1996 cited in "Falwell, Baptists pledge to resist Israeli settlement pullout: Netanyahu meets with Christian religious leaders during D. C. visit," American Atheists, *AA News*, #379, 23 January 1998; http://www.harford-hwp.com/archives/51a/082.html; Internet; accessed 14 July 2003.

[14] Romesh Ratnesar, "The Right's New Crusade: Lobbying for Israel," *Inside Politics*; April 29, 2002; Internet; accessed 14 July 2003. See also, Joel Belz, "Why Pro-Israel?" *World* (December 7, 2002): 5.

[15] Belz, "Why Pro-Israel," 5. Belz cites the poll which is available at www.standforisrael.org.

[16] Fowler White <fwhite@knoxseminary.org>, "RE: Concerning the Posted 'Open Letter," Private e-mail message to Michael Stallard, 12 April 2003. Dr. White has given me permission to cite from his correspondence.

For example, Paige Patterson, the newly elected President of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, refers to replacement theology as a "false doctrine" and a "distorted interpretation of Scripture."[17] All dispensationalists would agree with this terse analysis. Beyond that Patterson affirms that replacement theology "undermines God's character."[18] Dispensationalists would also agree with this although one can see how those holding to replacement theology would increasingly bristle over the suggestion. However, from a dispensational, literal understanding of the Bible, the straightforward promises of God to David (for example) cannot be annulled. If so, God, in His own words, would be a liar (Ps. 89:19-37). Thus, the debate between dispensationalism and covenant theology does involve discussion of the issue of God's character.

Patterson goes on to add, however, that replacement theology has "fueled shameful historical events such as the Spanish Inquisition and the Nazi Holocaust."[19] Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission adds his endorsement of this view when he notes that replacement theology is a "great stumbling block to the Jews, and for centuries it has played a large part in the persecution of the Jewish people."[20] Land also claims "throughout history, 'replacement theology' has proven to be a destructive tool of Satan for alienating Israel from her Messiah" and that "anti-Jewish hatred often stems from the erroneous belief that God cast away his people."[21] This assertion is made in the context of a discussion of the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe via the large numbers of Muslim immigrants. Land also invokes Hitler and Goebbels of Nazi Germany. Those agreeing with the Open Letter would naturally be angered by a comparison of their beliefs to such evil examples and probably consider the attempt to be a guilt-by-association argument.

John Hagee is another prominent figure the framers of the Open Letter associate with the harsh dispensational critique of their position. Hagee refers to replacement theology as "idolatry" and says that it violates the Ten Commandments. In the same context, he compares it to Nazi Germany.[22] Furthermore, he calls replacement theology the "poisoned spring" out of which the "avalanche of hate" or anti-Semitism has come.[23] It is an "old heresy."[24]

What is the dispensationalist to make of the claim that he is being too harsh when he accuses replacement theology of being heresy and anti-Semitic? First, as to the accusation of heresy, there is the unfortunate problem that the word *heresy* means, in modern times, so many different things to different folks. For some, a *heretic* is someone who "disagrees with me!" The biblical roots of the idea refer to someone from within the Church causing division over some issue or doctrine (Titus 3:10). Over time in the history of the Church the word or concept

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[17] Cited in Jim Brown, "Baptist Leader: Jews Remain 'God's Chosen People,'" Agape Press, 2 August 2002; http://headlines.agapepress.org/archive/8/22002e.asp; Internet; accessed July 14, 2003.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Cited in Jim Brown, "God's Covenant with Israel Still Stands, Baptist Leader Says," Agape Press, 14 May 2002; http://headlines.agapepress.org/archive/5/142002d.asp; Internet, accessed 14 July 2003.

[21] Cited in Jim Brown, "Baptist Leader Wary of Anti-Semitic Wave Engulfing Europe," Agape Press, 7 August 2002; http://headlines.agapepress.org/archive/8/72002e.asp; Internet; accessed 14 July 2003.

[22] John Hagee, *Final Dawn Over Jerusalem* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 121-22.

[23] Ibid., 95.

[24] Ibid., 97.

has taken on the idea of someone who is outside the boundaries of orthodoxy as defined by some particular group. If dispensationalists define orthodoxy as including a future for national Israel, a kind of "dispensational" orthodoxy, then the label *heresy* would fit replacement theology. Of course, replacement theologians might readily return the favor by calling dispensationalism heresy since, according to the Open Letter, dispensationalists compromise the Gospel (Proposition II). Arguing in such language from either side helps no one. It is my own judgment, in light of the biblical teaching of the unity of the global body of Christ, that it is best to reserve the word *heresy*, as it has come to be used in modern times, for those movements that are outside the Faith, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Roman Catholics.[25] This points out the challenging nature of critiquing the views of others. Roman Catholics held to replacement theology long before the Reformation began the road to modern covenant theology. Dispensationalists generally look with favor upon the Reformers in areas of doctrine not related directly to questions about national Israel. Thus, I urge all dispensationalists to refrain from using the charge of heresy when debating replacement theology with present-day covenant theologians. However, this is not to say that dispensationalists should not voice their strong disagreement (as my critique of the Open Letter shows), only that they should use different language in doing so.

The charge of anti-Semitism is also problematic, but on different grounds. The charge is largely a historical one and not personal. That is to say, when a dispensationalist claims that replacement theology has been used to promote anti-Semitism in the world, he is not saying that every Christian who currently holds to replacement theology is himself personally anti-Semitic. I am not sure that replacement theologians have fully captured this important distinction. The fact of the matter is that anti-Semitism did play a role in the diminishing of chiliasm during the early church and the rise of allegorical interpretation and the associated replacement theology. Even popularists like Hagee have attempted to show some of the historical evidence.[26] Anti-Semitism does not stand alone in this transition since much is owed to a revival of Platonic thought and to gnosticism as well. However, the dispensationalist should not overplay the argument in applying it to replacement theologians in the Reformed camp today. It would be the commitment of the historical genetic fallacy to charge modern covenant theologians with anti-Semitism. Covenant theologians must from their side take seriously in what ways the absence of any role for Israel and the Jews in their theology might be taken to lead to anti-Jewish sentiment. They must also do justice to the historical record of anti-Semitism throughout church history, a history that has also been dominated by replacement theology.[27]

The Third Paragraph

The second paragraph of the Open Letter simply affirms the need for evangelical leaders, including dispensationalists, to speak out on moral issues of the day as long as they follow the Scriptures. No dispensationalist would disagree with this sentiment. Of course in doing so, the Open Letter suggests that dispensationalists misread the Scriptures and must be called to task.

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[25] This is not to say that there are no Roman Catholics or Jehovah's Witnesses that are saved individuals. It only means that the teachings of the movements do not represent the true Gospel of eternal life, the truth of salvation by grace through faith, and the true authority of the Scriptures.

[26] Hagee, *Final Dawn Over Jerusalem*, 43-75. See also David Larsen, *Jews, Gentiles and the Church: A New Perspective on History and Prophecy*, (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1995), 77-93.

[27] H. Wayne House, "The Church's Appropriation of Israel's Blessings," in *Israel, the Land, and the People*, gen. ed. H. Wayne House, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 77-110.

This leads to the third paragraph, which summarizes two major problems that the authors see as the heart of the issue. Below is the third paragraph of the Open Letter in its entirety:

> At the heart of the political commitments in question are two fatally flawed propositions. First, some are teaching that God's alleged favor toward Israel today is based upon ethnic descent rather than upon the grace of Christ alone, as proclaimed in the Gospel. Second, others are teaching that the Bible's promises concerning the land are fulfilled in a special political region or "Holy Land," perpetually set apart by God for one ethnic group alone. As a result of these false claims, large segments of the evangelical community, our fellow citizens, and our government are being misled with regard to the Bible's teachings regarding the people of God, the land of Israel, and the impartiality of the Gospel.

Right away the dispensationalist is somewhat puzzled. This was one of the statements I alluded to earlier which made me wonder what the Open Letter was targeting. The two points above seem to criticize two separate positions. The first opposes, on the surface, the idea that Jews do not get saved merely by being Jews, that is, by ethnic descent. The second opposes the notion that the real estate known as the Holy Land belongs to the Jewish people by biblical mandate. While the second point can be leveled at dispensationalists generally (there is a need for qualification), the first cannot. What dispensationalist teaches that Jews are saved eternally merely by being descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Certainly no mainstream dispensationalist can take credit for such teaching. While dispensationalists have often been wrongfully accused of teaching two ways of salvation, one for Old Testament Israel (the Law), and one for the New Testament Church (grace through faith),[28] it is not normally suggested that dispensationalism teaches two ways of salvation within the present dispensation of the Church Age.

However, the phrase "God's alleged favor" in the first point seriously needs to be qualified. If such favor refers to personal salvation, then the Open Letter leaves itself open to some serious charges. The Open Letter would be correctly criticizing any form of "two-covenant theology" or "dual covenant theology." However, it would do so by closely aligning this criticism with its second point about the Holy Land, which is aimed at dispensationalists in general. Any reader untrained in detailed theological nuances in this debate would easily get the impression from paragraph three that dispensationalism teaches that Jews are saved a different way than Gentiles. To be sure, the statement is technically correct when it says "some" (dual-covenant theologians) teach God's favor due to ethnic descent while "others" (mainstream dispensationalists) teach the special ownership of the Holy Land by Jews. However, bringing these two points together without serious qualification is an implicit guilt-by-association argument and a misrepresentation of dispensationalism.

The overwhelming majority of dispensationalists would join the replacement theologians in rejecting any two-covenant theology. In fact, the first three propositions of the Open Letter can be interpreted as primarily a refutation of forms of two-covenant theology. Two-covenant theology in general terms is the idea that the Jews are saved apart from Christ through the Mosaic Law and that Gentiles are saved through Christ. However, who holds to such teaching? Two-covenant theology usually comes from the Roman Catholic or liberal Protestant side of the theological spectrum and is being driven by the ecumenical movement, where letting the Jews

[28] John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, Publishers, 1991), 150.

have their own way of salvation quite apart from Christ allows the bringing together of Christians and Jews.[29]

> In the last few decades of the twentieth century, since the awful tragedy of the Holocaust, a number of Catholic and mainline Protestant theologians have proposed an alternative to supersessionism that is known generally as two-covenant theology. The key feature is the belief that Jews and Christians are related to God separately by distinct covenants. Christianity offers a covenant relationship to God for Gentiles through Jesus Christ. Judaism offers a covenant relationship to God for Jews through Torah. These covenants are distinct yet divinely sanctioned ways for their constituents to relate to God. It would be categorically wrong to deny the legitimacy of a favorable relationship to God for Jews or Christians on the basis of one covenant or the other. So, even though most Jews do not believe in Christ, according to two-covenant theology, Christians should not deny that the Jews have a favorable relationship to God. Rather, they should affirm that Jews are in a favorable relationship to God precisely on the basis of Torah. Quite consistent with this, those who take this dual-covenant view of Judaism and Christianity have repudiated Christian evangelism and mission to Jews not just as an affront, but as a theological violation of God's covenant with Israel.[30]

Such a view of salvation would, in the minds of dispensationalists and covenanters alike, undermine the truth of the biblical covenants, especially the Abrahamic covenant and how God dealt with Abraham on the basis of faith.[31]

Are there any major dispensationalists who have argued for such a position? I know of none. However, John Hagee has been accused of holding to two-covenant theology.[32] Even Falwell at one point had accused Hagee of holding to two-covenant theology, although the breech appears to be healed between the two.[33] Some of the reporting on this issue has not been clear, as I have sifted through the materials. Nowhere in Hagee's published written works have I been able to find two-covenant theology. His explanation of the present age consistently deals with salvation by grace through faith with no discernible distinctions.[34] It appears that most of

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[29] The origins of modern versions of two-covenant theology are usually traced to Franz Rosenzweig, a Jewish thinker in the early twentieth century. See Joseph P. Gudel, "To the Jew First: A Biblical Analysis of the 'Two Covenant' Theory of the Atonement," *Christian Research Journal* (July—September, 1998): 36-42. This article can be found at http://www.appleofhiseye.org/jewfirst.pdf; Internet; accessed 14 July 2003. Southern Baptist efforts at evangelizing Jews show a clear rejection of dual-covenant theology. See Keith Hinson, "To the Jew First? Southern Baptists Defend New Outreach Effort," *Christianity Today* 43 (15 November 1999): 18; http://christianitytoday.com/ct/9td/9td018.html; Internet; accessed 14 July 2003.

[30] Blaising, "The Future of Israel as a Theological Question," 440. Blaising does a good job of summarizing the reasons that two-covenant cannot be held by those who take the Bible seriously.

[31] Ibid., 440-41.

[32] "John Hagee," *Equip: The Online Ministry of Christian Research Institute*, http://www.equip.org /free/DH005.htm; Internet; accessed 14 July 2003; See also G. Richard Fisher, "The Other Gospel of John Hagee: Christian Zionism and Ethnic Salvation," *The Quarterly Journal*, Personal Freedom Outreach, (January-March 1999); http://www.pfo.org/jonhagee.htm; Internet; accessed 14 July 2003.

[33] Julia Duin, "Falwell Festivities Have Surprise Guest," *The Washington Times*, 3 July 2002; see http://washingtontimes.com; accessed 14 July 2003.

the detractors refer to personal interviews or correspondence, making it harder to verify. If Hagee does reflect such a position, which testimony of those who have heard him increasingly shows, it is clear that he does not represent mainstream dispensational views on this point. Dispensationalists would be glad to refute this kind of teaching if it exists and would ask the signatories of the Open Letter not to use Hagee to criticize dispensationalism.

The phrase "God's alleged favor" in the first point of paragraph three of the Open Letter might be taken a second way. It might not imply salvation, but only a positive posture of God in a temporal way. In other words, the issue of God's historical favor with respect to the nation of Israel may not imply their salvific acceptance with God. Israel could be in the land by divine help and still be in unbelief. If this is the Open Letter's intent with its first statement in paragraph three, then the dispensationalist gladly pleads "guilty" to the charge. Why is it a strange thing that God would favor a group such as the Jews? After all, God favored the Babylonians for a time and raised them up for his purposes (Habukkuk). Daniel says to Nebuchadnezzar, "You, O king, are the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, the strength, and the glory; and wherever the sons of men dwell, or the beasts of the field, or the birds of the sky, He has given them into our hand and has caused you to rule over them all" (Dan. 2:37-38a, NASB). Is this not God's favor? If it is not God's favor, what should it be called? If God can use a pagan king and a pagan people by showing distinct divine favor, why can He not have a plan with a specific people group like Israel, with both believers and unbelievers, to accomplish a specific purpose? The bottom line is "what does the Bible say?" At the heart of the disagreement is simply covenant theology's overdose on individual redemption as a central interpretive motif for the entire Bible. When reading biblical history through these kinds of presuppositional glasses, one can easily subvert other historical impulses that God is bringing to pass. One of those happens to be the timeline with Israel. Ryrie had warned long ago of the dangers of this kind of thinking for biblical studies.[35]

The second flawed proposition of dispensationalism according to paragraph three of the Open Letter is the belief that God has promised the Holy Land, a parcel in the Middle East, to a single ethnic group, namely the Jews. The Open Letter repeats this theme in various forms throughout the document.[36] As such it is a major point of contention between covenant theology and dispensationalism. Yet, the Bible, especially the Old Testament, is replete with statements affirming the promise of the land (now called Palestine) to the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Notice the following short survey (emphasis supplied):

- Genesis 12:1-3 – "Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house, to *the land* which I will show you."
- Genesis 15:18-21 – On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To *your descendants* I have given *this land*, from the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates …"
- Genesis 17:8 – "And I will give to you [Abram] and to your descendants after you, *the land* of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an *everlasting possession* …" Genesis 17:19 confirms that this promise is extended through Isaac and his descendants.

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[34] John Hagee, *The Revelation of Truth: A Mosaic of God's Plan for Man*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 185-228.

[35] Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 46-47, 86-109.

[36] See Propositions II, VIII, IX, and X.

- Genesis 28:13-15 – "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; *the land* on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants…And behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to *this land*…"
- 2 Samuel 7:10 – "I will also appoint a *place* for My people Israel and will plant them, that they may live *in their own place* and not be disturbed again, nor will the wicked afflict them any more as formerly." 2 Samuel 7:16 – "And your [David's] house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever."
- Amos 9:11-15 – "In that day I will raise up the fallen booth of David…Also I will restore the captivity of My people Israel, and they will rebuild the ruined *cities* and live in them, They will also plant vineyards and drink their wine, And make gardens and eat their fruit. I will also plant them *on their land*, and they will not again be rooted out from *their land* which I have given them," says the LORD your God."
- Ezekiel 37:21-25 – "I will take the sons of Israel from among the nations where they have gone, and I will gather them from every side and bring them into *their own land*; and I will make them one nation *in the land*, on the mountains of Israel; and one king will be king of them; and they shall no longer be two nations…And they shall live *on the land* that I gave to Jacob my servant, in which your fathers lived; and *they will live in it*, they, and their sons, and their sons' sons, *forever*…"

This small sampling of passages from Old Testament texts, taken at face value, shows the abiding relationship that Israel has with the land.[37] The forever aspects of the promises cannot be fulfilled in the return from the Babylonian captivity neither can that event be considered a return from among the nations. Furthermore, although the land promises do not get as much attention in the New Testament, there are no New Testament texts that clearly show that God has cancelled his earlier promises.[38] If such texts did exist, then the validity of those earlier Old Testament promises to each original audience is called into question. If this is so, on what grounds can Church saints possess assurance about God's promises for them, if God has chosen to change his earlier promises?[39] Could he not do so again? This is one particularly disturbing aspect of replacement theology from the dispensational perspective. It is simply not true that the Old Testament expectation of the Jews was limited to a heavenly inheritance as Proposition VI implies. One would have to allegorize their expectations as stated in the Old Testament text to affirm such a position.

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[37] For a good discussion of this line of thinking, see Ronald B. Allen, "The Land of Israel," in *Israel, the Land, and the People*, gen. ed. H. Wayne House, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 17-33.

[38] New Testament texts such as Luke 1:31-33, Acts 1:6, Romans 9-11, and Revelation 12 all teach a future for national Israel with its kingdom and associated land. For a dispensational perspective of the crucial passage in Romans 9-11, see Harold W. Hoehner, "Israel in Romans 9-11," in *Israel, the Land, and the People*, gen. ed. H. Wayne House, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 145-67.

[39] The way that abrogation of Old Testament promises to the Jews is handled takes more than one form in the Open Letter. The Open Letter treats some of the promises as already being fulfilled so that there is no future fulfillment necessary (see the use of Joshua 21:43-45 in Proposition IX). It also makes use (at least implicitly) of a belief in the conditionality of the Old Testament promises to the Jews. The Jews have forfeited a claim to the promises through unbelief. The focus on the unbelief of most ethnic Jews today that permeates the Open Letter from beginning to end suggests its framers believe strongly in this view. Finally, the abrogation of Old Testament promises to the Jews is handled in the Open Letter by an appeal to the expansion of some of the Old Testament promises so that the old promises are subsumed under a new, broader, and even different appearance of fulfillment. Proposition IX's appeal to passages that suggest an expansion of promises misses the idea that an expansion does not automatically preclude the fulfillment of the original promise as it was given. A change is assumed because of the theological grid of covenant theology, not because the passages compel the conclusion.

In summary, this third paragraph, along with the associated propositions that follow, can be confusing to the dispensationalist who does not operate within the theological framework of the authors of the Open Letter. Especially problematic is wording that can easily give the impression that dual covenant theology and dispensationalism go hand in hand, when in fact, they do not share the same views of the salvation of individual Jews.

An Analysis of the Ten Propositions

The formal propositions relate in some way to the claims of paragraph three discussed above. However, additional detail is given so that areas of agreement and disagreement between dispensationalism and replacement theology can be seen.

Proposition I
The Gospel offers eternal life in heaven to Jews and Gentiles alike as a free gift in Jesus Christ. Eternal life in heaven is not earned or deserved, nor is it based upon ethnic descent or natural birth.

On the face of things, dispensationalists have no quarrel with this proposition of the Open Letter. Whether for Jews or Gentiles, salvation is a free gift through Jesus. No one earns his way to heaven, Jew or Gentile. No one is born into a certain branch of the human family that guarantees his salvation before God. The only qualm about this proposition that a dispensationalist might have is the focus on heaven. In an amillennial scheme of the kingdom, there is no future earthly existence. Thus, the dispensational premillennialist might want to speak of salvation or eternal life in three ways: now as a present experience, in heaven when a believer dies, and in God's coming earthly kingdom to allow for continuing earthly existence to be recognized.

Proposition II
All human beings, Jews and Gentiles alike, are sinners, and as such, they are under God's judgment of death. Because God's standard is perfect obedience and all are sinners, it is impossible for anyone to gain temporal peace or eternal life by his own efforts. Moreover, apart from Christ, there is no special divine favor upon any member of any ethnic group; nor, apart from Christ, is there any divine promise of an earthly land or a heavenly inheritance to anyone, whether Jew or Gentile. To teach or imply otherwise is nothing less than to compromise the Gospel itself.

The first two sentences would probably not cause any difficulties for dispensationalists. The only possible problem is the meaning of "temporal peace." If it refers to a personal, individual sense of peace with God, then there is no problem. No one gains peace with God through self-effort. Only salvation by grace through faith in the blood atonement allows an individual to have such peace at that level.

However, the last two statements are potentially problematic for the dispensationalist. They echo the earlier discussion about paragraph three. If "divine favor" can be viewed as "salvific favor," then dispensationalists would have no problem. All people, regardless of ethnic descent come to God through Christ, although the dispensationalist would be more prone to acknowledge different levels of understanding as time progresses throughout the various dispensations.[40] If what is meant is non-salvific favor, there is a problem. God can sovereignly

[40] Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 123-26.

choose to favor any individual or people group to enact any divine purpose. What the dispensationalist would be careful to avoid is an insistence that all Jews would have to be saved to experience the favor of God granting them possession of the land promised to them at all points in biblical history. Possession of the land is not a salvation issue until the coming kingdom. No one enters into the coming Messianic kingdom, Jew or Gentile, without having peace with God. Before then, there is the possibility that God's favor rains upon the unjust Jew in the land the same way it rains upon the just Jew. However, eternal life is not in view, only possession of the land.

This second proposition is extremely important to the authors of the Open Letter. I asked Fowler White for a clarification on the question of whether they viewed dispensational statements of "God favoring Israel nationally" as always salvific in nature. He responded: "With statements about 'God favoring Israel nationally,' no, we do not assume that such statements are automatically salvific in nature, but we do maintain that those statements claim a divine favor toward Israel that belongs to them apart from Christ and that distinguishes them from any other ethnic group. The issue we have with dispensationalism is perhaps more explicitly stated in the second proposition of the Open Letter itself …"[41] After quoting the last two sentences of the second proposition, he adds the following clarification:

> In short, we believe it compromises the Gospel to teach that the promises originally stated in the Abrahamic covenant are intended for anyone apart from Christ, the true Heir of Abraham, and for those ingrafted into His promises. To insinuate to the unbelieving Jew that, based on his "first birth," he holds a perpetual title to the "holy land" by right of God's gracious favor to him because of Abraham—or that, as a consequence, he has the right and title to drive out the present inhabitants from "the Euphrates to the river of Egypt," as many dispensational teachers are now arguing—is certainly to confound and compromise the Gospel that teaches that all those not believing in the Son remain in the wrath of God, whether Jew or Gentile (John 3:36). We do not see how it makes sense, biblically or logically, to say, as dispensationalists customarily do, that God, who dispersed Israel in AD 70, "restored" or "regathered" that nation, still in its unbelief, in AD 1948. Such claims require us to affirm, as clearly and unequivocally as we can, that "apart from Christ, there is no special divine favor upon any member of any ethnic group; nor, apart from Christ, is there any divine promise of an earthly land or a heavenly inheritance to anyone, whether Jew or Gentile. To teach or imply otherwise is nothing less than to compromise the Gospel itself." Our hope is that you and other evangelicals, can join us in these affirmations.[42]

What this clarification shows, if I am reading it right, is that the Open Letter, at least on this point, has not really concerned itself primarily with "two-covenant theology" as discussed earlier. It views dispensationalism in general as violating the doctrine of salvation in some way when it allows any national favor to rest upon Israel apart from salvation in Christ. Thus, from the perspective of the Open Letter, God would never move in history to bring Israel back into the land in unbelief, if such action is seen as related to fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant. To preach that He would compromises the Gospel of Christ.

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[41] Fowler White, <fwhite@knoxseminary.org>. "RE: Concerning the Posted 'Open Letter." Private e-mail message to Michael Stallard. 12 April 2003.

[42] Ibid.

In response, the dispensationalist can say several things. First, this once again shows that covenant theology normally struggles with the idea of distinctions and views virtually all propositions through the lens of the doctrine of salvation. Such an approach to theological matters is a forced one from the dispensational perspective. Dispensationalists do not view Israel's possession of the land as primarily a soteriological matter until Messiah returns to set up the kingdom. At that time, only saved Jews will inherit the land in ultimate blessing. Until then God is raising up and pulling down nations in world history (quite apart from the issue of salvation on the part of various citizens) including his providential plan for the Jews and Israel. Covenant theology does not struggle with this last point. It would agree that God has in His sovereignty allowed the nation of Israel to be reborn in modern times. What it does not concede, however, is the possibility that the current state of Israel has prophetic significance relative to the keeping of the Old Testament covenant promises, especially when it is in unbelief. Many dispensationalists would say that the current state of Israel, in spite of its unbelief has potentially significant relevance to prophecy. We may be in the setup for the end time scenario that requires Israel in the land (see later statements). Other dispensationalists are more dogmatic about the current time being the setup for end times. Caution should be urged to avoid "newspaper exegesis."

Beyond this, the Open Letter on this point fails to do justice to the massive amount of Scriptural data pertaining to the promises of the land to the physical seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This point has already been addressed earlier and will be reviewed again in response to Proposition IX. In addition, White's comments above show a noble, although misguided, concern for the welfare of the Palestinians. I will offer some ideas on this in the response below to Proposition X.

Proposition III

God, the Creator of all mankind, is merciful and takes no pleasure in punishing sinners. Yet God is also holy and just and must punish sin. Therefore, to satisfy both his justice and his mercy, God has appointed one way of salvation for all, whether Jew or Gentile, in Jesus Christ alone.

Here dispensationalists have no quarrel. There is only one way to personal or individual salvation for all who come to God, whether Jew or Gentile, regardless of dispensation. Christ's atonement is the basis for all deliverance from sin. Dispensationalists do not compromise on this point. The only major concern a dispensationalist might have is the erroneous impression it might leave, in the context of the entire document, that dispensationalists teach more than one way of salvation. Even if not the intention of the authors, the focus on individual redemption adds to the tone of the rest of the document which views the divisive issues through the lens of individual redemption rather than their exegetical contexts as understood by dispensationalists.

Proposition IV

Jesus Christ, who is fully God and fully man, came into the world to save sinners. In his death upon the cross, Jesus was the Lamb of God taking away the sin of the world, of Jew and Gentile alike. The death of Jesus forever fulfilled and eternally ended the sacrifices of the Jewish temple. All who would worship God, whether Jew or Gentile, must now come to him in spirit and truth through Jesus Christ alone. The worship of God is no longer identified with any specific earthly sanctuary. He receives worship only through Jesus Christ, the eternal and heavenly Temple.

Dispensationalists would have no problem with the first two sentences that give simple straightforward biblical teaching about Jesus and the atonement. The third sentence becomes problematic. Dispensationalism has generally taught that there will exist some sacrifices in the

millennium although they will not be related to atonement in the same way as Mosaic sacrifices, which have been done away (see Ezekiel 40-48). The insistence on worshipping God in spirit and truth through Jesus as stated in the fourth sentence is not really a concern to dispensationalists. However, it is used to set up the final two sentences, which do demonstrate differences with dispensational thinking. The idea that worship of God is no longer associated with any specific earthly sanctuary is certainly true in the present Church Age, but in the millennial phase of the coming kingdom, there will be a temple in Jerusalem in fulfillment of prophecy.[43] Christ will reign as Davidic King from Jerusalem during that same time, with the nations of the world coming up to Israel to see Him (Is. 2:1-4). The last sentence leaves the impression that "temple language" applied to Jesus Himself replaces all other Jewish concepts of "temple." This approach inappropriately turns the temple metaphor into a technical theological term used to service the advancement of replacement theology in general.

Proposition V
To as many as receive and rest upon Christ alone through faith alone, to Jews and Gentiles alike, God gives eternal life in his heavenly inheritance.

Dispensationalists do not have any differences with the sentiment that eternal life comes through faith alone in Christ alone for all including both Jews and Gentiles. However, with more precision the dispensationalist might point out that eternal life is a present experience on earth, not just a future state in heaven one day (1 John 5:13). Furthermore, the dispensationalist would want to preserve an understanding of a future earthly existence for God's kingdom, which will also be a continuing expression of eternal life for those who believe.

Proposition VI
The inheritance promises that God gave to Abraham were made effective through Christ, Abraham's True Seed. These promises were not and cannot be made effective through sinful man's keeping of God's law. Rather, the promise of an inheritance is made to those only who have faith in Jesus, the True Heir of Abraham. All spiritual benefits are derived from Jesus, and apart from him there is no participation in the promises. Since Jesus Christ is the Mediator of the Abrahamic Covenant, all who bless him and his people will be blessed of God, and all who curse him and his people will be cursed of God. These promises do not apply to any particular ethnic group, but to the church of Jesus Christ, the true Israel. The people of God, whether the church in the wilderness in the Old Testament or the Israel of God among the Gentile Galatians in the New Testament, are one body who through Jesus will receive the promise of the heavenly city, the everlasting Zion. This heavenly inheritance has been the expectation of the people of God in all ages.

Dispensationalists would agree that Christ is the basis and provider of all hope and promise in the biblical covenants. However, there are several features of this proposition that differ from a dispensational perspective:

- The claim that the promises of the Abrahamic covenant do not apply to any particular ethnic group fails to take into account the fact that there are several elements to the covenant. Some elements clearly apply to more than one ethnic group ("in you all the families of the earth

[43] For an exhaustive treatment of biblical teaching about the Jewish temple, see Thomas Ice and Randall Price, *Ready to Rebuild*, (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1992) and Randall Price, *In Search of Temple Treasures*, (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1994).

shall be blessed"). Others are limited to just one man – Abram himself ("make your name great"). Other elements fleshed out throughout biblical history (see the earlier discussion of the land promises) pertain to the physical descendants of Abraham through Isaac. There is a lack of precision in the Open Letter's handling of these exegetical details of the texts that provide teaching about the Abrahamic covenant.

- The proposition does not do justice to the progress of revelation. To say that these promises apply to the church in the way the Open Letter does is a reading of the New Testament back into the Old.
- The designation of the church as the true Israel is an abandonment of literal interpretation and flirtation with allegory.
- The reference to the "church in the wilderness" as recorded in Stephen's speech (Acts 7:38) is the typical misuse of the word *ecclesia* by replacement theology. The word is not a technical term. Here the Open Letter takes the content of ecclesiology and pours it into a word that simply means "assembly" with no ecclesial overtones.
- There is no reason to take the "Israel of God" in Galatians 6:16 as the church. It would be quite appropriate for Paul, after his scathing attack upon Judaizers, to ask for a blessing upon the Jews to show that he was not attacking them as a whole.[44]
- The inclusion of Old Testament Israel with the New Testament Church in the body of Christ lacks theological precision. The body is defined in Pauline use by means of the baptism of the Spirit. However, the baptizing ministry of the Holy Spirit is a new ministry of the Spirit that begins on Pentecost and does not occur in the Old Testament. Both John the Baptist (Matt. 3:11) and Jesus (Acts 1:5) predict it. Peter looks back upon the day of Pentecost and the baptism of the Spirit as a "beginning" (Acts 11:15-16).
- The emphasis on a heavenly inheritance in the expectations of the saints throughout the ages downplays the entire tenor of biblical teaching about the future concrete earthly elements of the kingdom (whether millennium or new earth). Is Daniel only expecting a heavenly inheritance when the kingdom of God comes to destroy the fourth world empire in Daniel 2 and 7? Did Job mean a heavenly inheritance when he says, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will take His stand on the earth" in Job 19:25? Do the land promises, surveyed briefly before, amount to nothing? How would Amos understand a promise to be in the land never to be removed (Amos 9:15)? Even Jesus in the New Testament portrays future inheritance of church saints in terms of rewards of administration over earthly "cities" although these are not taken to be in the land of Israel (Luke 19:11-27). The dispensationalist claims that one should not underemphasize such a large body of scriptural evidence so easily in statements like these. While some covenant theologians disavow any future earthly elements to the inheritance of the saints, including the special promises of God concerning the land of Israel (thereby following a non-literal understanding of these many passages), some covenant theologians do affirm a future earthly inheritance.[45] The authors of the Open Letter apparently are among those who affirm such an earthly future although the focus on heaven throughout the letter does not make that clear.[46]

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[44] Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, "Israel and the Church," in *Issues in Dispensationalism* edited by Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master, (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 113-30.

[45] Anthony Hoekema, "Amillennialism," in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, edited by Robert G. Clouse, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 184-86.

[46] Warren Gage <wgage@knoxseminary.org>, "RE: Response to Open Letter," Private e-mail message to Michael Stallard, 30 July 2003.

Proposition VII

Jesus taught that his resurrection was the raising of the True Temple of Israel. He has replaced the priesthood, sacrifices, and sanctuary of Israel by fulfilling them in his own glorious priestly ministry and by offering, once and for all, his sacrifice for the world, that is, for both Jew and Gentile. Believers from all nations are now being built up through him into this Third Temple, the church that Jesus promised to build.

The first sentence of this proposition references John 2:19-22 where Jesus says, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up…" The Jews that were listening thought he was talking about the Jewish Temple itself, "but he was speaking of the temple of his body." Nothing here justifies the formal language of a "True Temple of Israel" or a "Third Temple." It is true that here Jesus used metaphorical language regarding the temple to speak of his resurrection. It is also true that metaphorical language regarding a temple is used to speak of the church (Eph. 2:19-22). However, the church is never called the Third Temple and Jesus' resurrection body is never called the True Temple of Israel. These associations and linkage derive from the theological system of replacement theology and not the exegesis of the passages that have been cited. Metaphorical language has been turned into technical theological terminology to portray a theological position. Dispensationalists would argue that such language does not rule out a future literal Jewish temple in either the tribulation period or the millennium. Dispensationalists would agree that the once for all sacrifice of Christ has done away with sin and the need for atoning sacrifices.

Proposition VIII

Simon Peter spoke of the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus in conjunction with the final judgment and the punishment of sinners. Instructively, this same Simon Peter, the Apostle to the Circumcision, says nothing about the restoration of the kingdom to Israel in the land of Palestine. Instead, as his readers contemplate the promise of Jesus' Second Coming, he fixes their hope upon the new heavens and the new earth, in which righteousness dwells.

The first sentence of this proposition is a debated point even among dispensationalists. Some see the 2 Peter 3:10-13 passage ("But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat…") as a reference to events that indeed transpire at the Second Coming and beginning of the millennium.[47] The context before verse ten points to the Second Coming. Other dispensationalists, perhaps a majority, see the melting of the elements as taking place at the end of the millennium.[48] They look at the following context with the focus on new heavens and new earth, which in the book of Revelation appear on the scene after the millennium following a literal, futurist approach to the book. In fact, Peter may be looking at end time events as a complex of events, beginning with the Second Coming and taking us into the eternal state.

The second sentence about Peter's silence about the restoration of the kingdom to Israel is just that, an argument from silence. In addition, it is not a loud silence. The intended readers of the letter are Christians. Even if they are taken to be Jewish Christians (which is not

[47] For a presentation of this view, see Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, *Charting the End Times: A Visual Guide to Understanding Bible Prophecy* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2001), 75.

[48] J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 231.

altogether clear), most dispensationalists, arguing from the nature and unity of the Church in Ephesians, would believe that they do not enter the kingdom as inheritors of the national and land promises to Israel. With a Christian audience in mind, the restoration of the kingdom to Israel would not be a necessary topic in the context. In addition, the focus on a new heavens and new earth, which to a dispensationalist is at least 1007 years from today, is also not problematic. I often preach and teach that my ultimate hope is not the rapture of the church or the Second Coming, but the day that God wipes away all tears from our eyes (Rev. 21:4). However, the events marking off the Second Coming (including the pre-trib rapture) are the beginning of the end-time scenario that takes all saints to that point.

Proposition IX

The entitlement of any one ethnic or religious group to territory in the Middle East called the "Holy Land" cannot be supported by Scripture. In fact, the land promises specific to Israel in the Old Testament were fulfilled under Joshua. The New Testament speaks clearly and prophetically about the destruction of the second temple in A.D. 70. No New Testament writer foresees a regathering of ethnic Israel in the land, as did the prophets of the Old Testament after the destruction of the first temple in 586 B.C. Moreover, the land promises of the Old Testament are consistently and deliberately expanded in the New Testament to show the universal dominion of Jesus, who reigns from heaven upon the throne of David, inviting all the nations through the Gospel of Grace to partake of his universal and everlasting dominion.

The dispensationalist disputes most of this proposition. The first statement is countered by the many passages cited earlier which show that God gave the land to Abraham and his descendants. They could be cast out of the land due to idolatry as happened in the case of the Babylonian Captivity. However, the Bible always looks at such occurrences as temporary.[49] Romans 9-11 affirm a future for Israel and do not seem to dismiss any national elements. The book of Revelation, which is to be dated after A.D. 70 and not before as preterists teach,[50] speaks of Jews in their land and in their capital city Jerusalem (along with a temple) during a future tribulation time. The nation will be delivered and restored.

As to the claim that Joshua 21:43-45 fulfilled the land promises so that no future fulfillment is necessary, the dispensationalist can make several responses. First, fulfillment of God's plan for Israel in the conquests of Canaan are not sufficient in and of themselves to fulfill the "everlasting" nature of the land promises. They are given to the descendants of Abraham as an "everlasting possession" (Gen. 17:8). The conquests under Joshua cannot exhaust this promise. Second, to use this to do away with any future claim to the land for Israel ignores the many promises about the land that occur in the biblical record after Joshua's time. For example, the replacement theologian who uses the Joshua passage in this way must explain how his use of it fits into, for example, the post-Davidic promise to Amos that Israel and Judah would be reunited and brought again into the land (following a time of judgment) never to be uprooted again (Amos 9:15). Finally, the dispensationalist would claim that Joshua 21:43-45 is a record of God's faithfulness with respect to that particular generation with its focus on the boundaries outlined in Numbers 34 and not the ultimate boundaries that God would eventually grant in his coming kingdom (Gen. 15:18-21).

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[49] John A. Jelinek, "The Dispersion and Restoration of Israel to the Land," in *Israel, the Land, and the People*, gen. ed. H. Wayne House, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 231-58.

[50] See Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary*, Chicago: Moody, 1992), 20-23; Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 6-9, and Thomas Ice and Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *The Great Tribulation: Past or Future*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999).

The last sentence of the proposition teaches that expansion in the New Testament changes the meaning of the Old Testament text as it was originally written. While the New Testament can expand promises, it cannot change any earlier unconditional promises. To do so eliminates any meaning for the text for the originally intended audience. Replacement theology often treats the Bible as a whole package and treats it as if all of it was available to earlier times. The dispensationalist would counter that the New Testament cannot rewrite the Old Testament. The reference to Jesus on the throne of David today will be addressed later.

Proposition X

Bad Christian theology regarding the "Holy Land" contributed to the tragic cruelty of the Crusades in the Middle Ages. Lamentably, bad Christian theology is today attributing to secular Israel a divine mandate to conquer and hold Palestine, with the consequence that the Palestinian people are marginalized and regarded as virtual "Canaanites." This doctrine is both contrary to the teaching of the New Testament and a violation of the Gospel mandate. In addition, this theology puts those Christians who are urging the violent seizure and occupation of Palestinian land in moral jeopardy of their own bloodguiltiness. Are we as Christians not called to pray for and work for peace, warning both parties to this conflict that those who live by the sword will die by the sword? Only the Gospel of Jesus Christ can bring both temporal reconciliation and the hope of an eternal and heavenly inheritance to the Israeli and the Palestinian. Only through Jesus Christ can anyone know peace on earth.

While the dispensationalist appreciates the genuine concern the Open Letter states for the moral responsibility he has before God in terms of the modern conflict over Palestine, this proposition, like the one before it, has many areas that the dispensationalist would reject. The mentioning of the Crusades is somewhat surprising since replacement theologians have complained, rightfully perhaps, about too many appeals to historical anti-Semitism to criticize their position. Do they not do the same thing with this guilt-by-association argument? They use the abuse of the Crusades to set up their criticism of dispensationalism. But is such an argument really valid? After all, so-called Christians who held to replacement theology led the Crusades. There was no national Israel in view. This weakens the analogy that is being drawn. No dispensationalist is arguing for the Church to conquer Palestine, even by proxy through Israel. He simply affirms that, if God allows Israel to do so politically in any given generation, Israel has a right to the land. God has allowed that historical development to take place in the present hour.

This proposition of the Open Letter certainly appears to side with the Palestinians in the political debate.[51] While there may be some dispensationalists who urge a wide conquering of the Palestinian "Canaanites," most dispensationalists are sober about this political rivalry and want political fairness and decent human dignity granted to the Palestinians. After all, Palestinians are made in the image of God the same as any Jewish people. Yet the truth of the matter is that it is the Palestinians and other Arabs who want to conquer Israel and eliminate the Jews from the Middle East altogether, not the other way around. The Palestinians could easily be absorbed by the other much larger Arab world. It is interesting that there was never any talk about a Palestinian state until Israel became a nation. When Jordan, the British, or the Ottoman Empire controlled the territory, there was no outcry about the subjugation of the Palestinians. It was the geopolitical events of the twentieth century, not the least of which was the Holocaust, that God used to raise up modern Israel and allow it to be a nation again. On its first day of

[51] The authors of the Open Letter would no doubt view themselves as being balanced between Israel and the Palestinians.

independence, Israel was attacked. Ever since, Israel has periodically been attacked and even given back territory (the Sinai more than once). When Israel has attacked it has been in response to attacks from Arabs or as a pre-emptive strike for national security reasons. It holds onto the West Bank and Gaza primarily to provide a security buffer for the nation. This does not sound like a people who want to eliminate the Canaanites and pursue a kingdom by charging to the Euphrates.[52] The entire attitude of the Open Letter comes across to the dispensationalist as a little naïve concerning the modern realities of the current geopolitical situation in the Middle East. This does not mean that Israel as a people should be given a free ride. Israel should be held accountable as any other nation when it does wrong. The dispensationalist should join in such criticism as necessary. Both sides should be urged to live in peace and to consider the claims of Jesus upon their lives, but both sides have the right to defend themselves, a sobering necessity, especially for the Jews of Israel who are surrounded by multiple millions of Arabs who for the most part genuinely hate them.

The Closing Paragraphs

The Open Letter follows the ten propositions with five substantial paragraphs to close the document, numbered here as 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8. The fourth paragraph is simply an affirmation of inaugurated eschatology, the belief that the messianic kingdom has already started. Usually, the ascension of Christ or some point in his incarnational ministry is given as the starting point for this inauguration of the messianic kingdom. Progressive dispensationalists have generally agreed to a form of inaugurated eschatology, while traditional dispensationalists believe the messianic kingdom will not come until the Second Coming of Christ. The Bible teaches that Jesus is a king-in-waiting (Heb. 1-2, esp. 2:5) who will receive the kingdom when Antichrist is destroyed (Dan. 7; Rev. 19).

The fifth paragraph of the Open Letter is a positive one that dispensationalists appreciate. The authors affirm the valuable place Israel and the Jews have had in biblical history. Israel is the nation that gave us the Bible and the Christ (Rom. 9:1-5). All Christians, including dispensationalists, should always affirm that there is no personal salvation outside of Christ. The authors and signatories of the Open Letter join dispensationalists in this proposition when they "acknowledge with heartfelt sorrow and grief the frequent oppression of the Jews in history, sometimes tragically done in the name of the cross."

Likewise, the sixth paragraph has much to commend it. It affirms that there is a remnant of believers in Christ among the Jews in the present age and that God has a heart for them. God has not lost his faithfulness in their behalf. Moreover, God uses the unbelief of Israel today to spur on the Gentile mission. However, the dispensationalist would disagree with the Open Letter's limitation of God's faithfulness to the Jews only in the matter of individual redemption and not the national, community, and land promises. Also, the Open Letter wrongfully speaks again of the Church as the true Israel of God.

This is a good point to ask how dispensationalists handle the fact that Israel has been regathered as a nation (1948) but is in the land now in unbelief. Most dispensationalists understand the Bible to predict a final gathering of Israel in the land in unbelief prior to the conversion of the nation as a whole at the Second Coming of Christ. Several lines of evidence point to this regathering in unbelief. There are many Old Testament prophecies that, if taken

[52] For a discussion of the history of the Arab-Palestinian conflict see Chaim Herzog, *The Arab-Israeli Wars*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), Mitchell G. Bard, *Myths and Facts: A Guide to the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, (Chevy Chase, MD: American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, 2001), and Randall Price, *Unholy War*, (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2001).

literally, suggest Israel will be regathered in unbelief in the last days before the day of the Lord wrath (tribulation period) is poured out upon the nation, which will lead to the eventual conversion and restoration of the nation in the coming kingdom (Ez. 20:33-38; 22:17-22; 36:22-24; Is. 11:11-12; Zeph. 2:1-2, etc.).[53] In addition, following a futurist scheme of the books of Daniel and Revelation (along with the Olivet Discourse), Israel is portrayed as in the land during the tribulation period with an active temple service and city of Jerusalem (Dan. 9:24-27; Rev. 11-12; Matt. 24). This entails a gathering in unbelief prior to the restoration of the nation when the Jews are converted to Christ when they see Him whom they pierced.

The seventh paragraph opens with the statement that the "present state of Israel…is not an authentic or prophetic realization of the Messianic kingdom of Jesus Christ." The traditional dispensationalist should have no trouble agreeing with this line since the messianic kingdom does not begin until the Second Coming. The Israeli nation today is not a manifestation of the Davidic kingdom. However, the dispensationalist would consider the possibility that the reestablishment of national Israel in 1948 may constitute a "setup" for the future tribulation period and the kingdom that follows in a premillennial scheme. Of course, no one can know that for sure until the end-time scenario unfolds so dispensationalists should not map current events to biblical prophecies as some sensationalists dogmatically do. Another important truth that emerges in this connection is that, because the present state of Israel is not the kingdom of God, there is no need to pursue the ultimate boundaries promised for the nation at the present time. If the current boundaries do not match precisely the biblical parameters, there should be no frantic push to make it so by military or political action. Messiah, when He comes, will take care of the ultimate boundaries.

However, the seventh paragraph also presents the usual amillennial dislike for any view of the kingdom that has a Jewish aspect and centrality. Such a spirit can be found back as far as Origen (185-254), who criticized the chiliasts of the early church with the words "such are the views of those who, while believing in Christ, understand the divine Scriptures in a sort of Jewish sense, drawing from them nothing worthy of the divine promises."[54] Dispensationalists affirm that a literal understanding forces the interpreter to acknowledge that the coming messianic kingdom, although including more than Israel, is headquartered in Jerusalem and has a concrete, earthly experience.

The eighth and final paragraph of the Open Letter asks for Christian educators and others to affirm its message by becoming signatories of the letter. It also reminds its readers that the Gospel of Christ is for all, whether Jew or Gentile, and of the need to help both sides in the current Palestinian-Israeli conflict. From the dispensational perspective, it is important to understand that to be pro-Israel is not to be anti-Arab or anti-Palestinian, at least from God's perspective, although it is doubtful that the Palestinians would ever see things this way. If there is any statement in the final paragraph that catches the negative attention of the dispensationalist, it is that the New Testament is once again the hub for thinking and the Old Testament is missing from the equation.

Conclusion

The Open Letter is the product of sincere evangelicals who oppose dispensationalism and hold to replacement theology. In this way, there is really nothing new in the letter that the two

[53] For a discussion of this issue, see Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps of the Messiah*, Rev. ed. (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 2003), 97-104.

[54] Origen, *Principles*, II.XI.2.

camps have not debated before. From the dispensational point of view, there is still the tendency in the Open Letter away from literal interpretation with its flirtation with allegory (although the face of allegory has become more sophisticated over time).[55] Consistent with past ways of arguing, there is still the tendency on the part of the Open Letter's replacement theology to start with the New Testament and work backwards, thereby diminishing the national thrust of the Old Testament promises. I have argued elsewhere that it is unlikely that dispensationalists and covenant theologians can come together on these issues.[56] Why? The reason is that one side would have to give up its hermeneutics and theological method. In the end, the unity that we can have is a spiritual unity as brothers in Christ who agree to disagree. Both sides can pledge to argue issues in a godly manner without overstatement and hateful language. The dispensationalist will continue to hope that replacement theologians are right when they say that the dispensational approach to the Bible is winning the day. Dispensationalists will also believe, convinced by the literal biblical record, that God has a future plan for Israel that includes national, community, and land aspects and that such a belief does not compromise the Gospel of Christ which is for all people.

[55] See Moisés Silva, gen. ed., *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996). For someone from the dispensational tradition who favorably deals with many of the broad evangelical approaches to prophetic language, see D. Brent Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002). I have always appreciated replacement theologian Vern S. Poythress because, in these many hermeneutical discussions, he has appeared to be among the few covenant theologians who is really trying to understand dispensationalists (*Understanding Dispensationalists*, [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987]).

[56] Mike Stallard, "Literal Interpretation, Theological Method, and the Essence of Dispensationalism," *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 1 (Spring 1997): 5-36.