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UNDERSTANDING COVENANT THEOLOGIANS: A STUDY IN PRESUPPOSITIONS

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PURPOSE

SHERLOCK HOLMES once underscored the danger of hypothesizing with paying attention to facts: "It's a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly, one begins to twist facts to suit theories instead of theories to suit facts." In all ages investigators of the biblical text have faced the same pitfall of assuming what is not in fact the case. In recent years this problem has found focus in discussions of presuppositions. One writer has gone so far as to say: "The whole of church history revolves around the presuppositions adopted in study of the Bible in different times and in different circumstances."[1] If this is true, and I believe it is, then any sensible disclosure of presuppositions will contribute to biblical scholarship. In fact, the more light we can throw on our presuppositions, the better our chance of approximating the truth.

In this study I have two main goals: 1) to answer in part the question of whether or not in his *Understanding Dispensationalists* Vern Poythress has read dispensationalism accurately and 2) to offer some contributions to the ongoing investigation of dispensationalism by contrasting it with a competing system.[2] Since my assigned topic is a single book, it would be very easy to single out for attack the author and the system he represents. However, my purpose is not to

[1]Graham N. Stanton, "Presuppositions in New Testament Criticism," in *New Testament Interpretation*, ed. I. Howard Marshall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 60-61.

[2]The full citation is *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987). I must indicate at the outset my personal and professional appreciation for Vern Poythress. I have great respect for his keen mind and believe that he has produced some of the most original and valuable evangelical works. I share with him an interest in the application of linguistics to biblical studies. I know him from my home area as a teacher, expositor and friend of students. I believe that in his book he honestly tries to deal with differences between covenant and dispensational theologians. His approach is irenic and gracious. I only hope that I can—and we all can—be the same in our discussion.

criticize Poythress, or covenant theology, but to use the book to help define the two systems. Since I cannot possibly cover in detail all the relevant passages that Poythress deals with, or even a portion of them, I want to attempt to show that covenant theology and dispensationalism are different for some reasons that are not usually dealt with. While I believe that the book constitutes a valuable contribution to the dialogue between covenant and dispensational theologians, I am also convinced that the book is more about covenant theology than dispensationalism.[3] So I want to try to learn about dispensationalism from what we see about covenant theology.

THE PROCESS OF INTERACTING WITH DATA[4]

In recent years many have attempted to formalize ways in which human beings interact with utterances and texts. Such work includes describing how we formulate, test and revise hypotheses about texts and how we bring prior knowledge to bear on any interpretive act.[5] This promises to have far-reaching implications for theologians, many of whom over the centuries have often assumed that approaching texts was a natural process.

In everyday life we determine the meaning of an utterance or text by means of making guesses about all the clues contained in the message.[6] We constantly make adjustments as we receive new information, linking new with old, bringing to bear prior conclusions we have made, setting parts of the message against what we know of the world, the speaker or the writer, what we believe he shares in common with us, and what he may be assuming.[7] We know how to work back

[3]For example, several of the latter chapters (10–13) appear to be an apologetic for covenant interpretation, rather than an exposure of dispensational thinking.

[4]Some of the concepts presented here are from my *Handbook to Bible Study* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 82–94.

[5]Linguists, psychologists, communication theorists, literary critics and others have been involved in this. See, for example, Robert de Beaugrande and Wolfgang Dressler, *Introduction to Text Linguistics* (London: Longman, 1981), 210, 211.

[6]De Beaugrande and Dressler, 15, 140. See also E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 207: "The root problem of interpretation is always the same—to guess what the author meant."

[7]De Beaugrande (6) speaks of stored knowledge of the world. Hirsch (177) points out: "That probability judgments inhere in all aspects of textual interpretation is easily demonstrated. First of all, we notice that the construction of meaning from a text embraces elements already construed and accepted for the moment as being known, and other elements acknowledged to be unknown which are the objects of our construing. The obvious example of this is the construing of a crux by an appeal to a known context. But the example of a crux does not represent merely a special case. The object of our construing is always for the nonce a question mark, that is, a crux, and the basis for our choice of a particular sort of meaning is always our appeal to what we assume we already know about the text. On the basis of that assumption, we infer that these words coming in this place in a text of this sort probably mean thus and so."

and forth from smaller to larger components of data. For instance, if someone tells me he went to the "bank," I might think of several possible interpretations of his words, especially if I knew that he often went fishing by a river and also makes transactions at a financial institution. However, if he later specifies that it was the First National that he went to, I rule out the possibility of his having been near water. I have eliminated an option—supplied by my prior knowledge—on the basis of subsequent information. Note the process: encounter with data, application of prior thinking, guess or hypothesis, further data, revision of guess, moving on.

In all of this activity—and we do essentially the same thing in all our waking hours—is the fact that we always bring prior conclusions about life and the universe, about how things function and how we ought to function, to any interpretive moment. We do it with regard to the First National as well as First Peter. We cannot avoid it and we could not live without it. All rational human beings function like Sherlock Holmes, making hypotheses about how things work, then confirming, revising or discarding them when we encounter new data. We also construct more and more hypotheses as we go through life, raising some of them to the status of global, highly influential and determinative canons. These are then viewed as givens and brought to bear on new data.

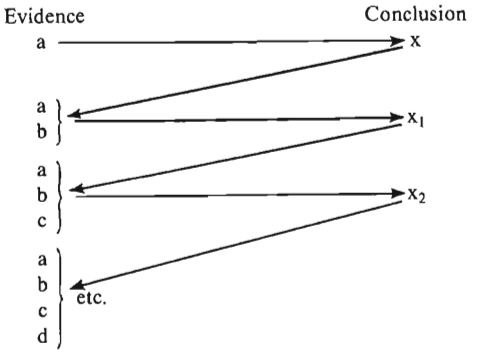
Because in working with the text of Scripture our task is made difficult by linguistic, temporal and cultural displacement, we must rather consciously duplicate this process of interpretation. We have to operate by intentionally making guesses, testing them by further data and then confirming, revising or discarding them. Just as in life as a whole, this process can never stop, since there is always more of Scripture to understand and the message has so many facets. Continual refinement is necessary, and we must always be open to the possibility that new data may alter some of our views. We must be very careful of those global conclusions that we have accepted as working hypotheses.

Furthermore, as with any interpretation in life, in approaching the Bible we can expect to gain the most information if we maximize the individual parts, that is, we try not to leave anything out—a word, paragraph, chapter, etc.—in working through a particular text. Every part is to be measured against the other as we attempt to assign information value to portions of language.[8] Although some parts do

[8]For a number of reasons I think it is valuable to talk in terms of assigning information value rather than "finding meaning." "Meaning" is only a step along the way to gleaning information from an utterance. This concept is presented in an interesting way by Jeremy Campbell in his *Grammatical Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982): actual communication involves the impartation of information, of something totally new or new with respect to the listener at the moment of reception of

not carry as much weight as others in terms of information value, all are significant.[9] By the way, implicit in all this is my assumption that interpreting the Bible is essentially the same task as interpreting secular poetry or the U.S. Constitution. The difference lies in the assumptions we make about the nature of the Bible as a God-given revelation.[10]

The following diagram will illustrate the process.[11] On the left are pieces of data, with each step in the cycle including more data. Conclusions are drawn at various points, and then the data is reexamined:



a message. (See de Beaugrande and Dressler, 9, concerning "informativity.") I prefer to use "meaning" to refer to the assignment of connections (whatever they may consist of) between linguistic symbols and their referents. Thus, determining what something "means" is only part of the total interpretive process.

[9]In regard to the comparative work involved, I have stated elsewhere (*Handbook*, 87–88): "This is a very reasonable way to proceed in approaching the Bible, for it actually views the Bible as a coherent document that can be understood as its parts are interpreted in light of the whole, and vice versa. This really amounts to saying that the Bible interprets itself, that is, all the different parts are needed in order to provide an explanation for the whole, and the whole, when related to the parts, explains them. That is why the supreme principle of biblical interpretation is that the Bible is its own best interpreter. All other principles of interpretation flow from this."

[10]Conservative biblical scholarship has for too long been the victim of a "holy hermeneutic," which sees interpreting the Bible as involving special canons that could never apply to lesser documents and that match the Bible in its uniqueness. We cannot afford not to learn all we can from those interpreting texts in other fields. Hirsch points out (207) that the principles of the logic of validation "are essentially the principles which underlie the drawing of objective probability judgments in all domains of thought."

Our assumptions about the nature of the Scriptures are, of course, of crucial importance. Those who do not hold to inerrancy have redefined the field of relevant data. For them, some portions of the biblical data are misleading or contradictory with respect to other portions, and are essentially to be discarded as far as the process of interpretation is concerned.

[11]This chart and the following one are taken from my *Handbook*, pp. 88 and 90.

One of the dangers in theology is that we stop too soon in the process. Just as a scientist must continually look for new data and attempt to falsify his hypothesis, so must the Bible interpreter.[12] To put it another way, we must remember that the text of the Bible is always primary, not our statements about it. In all our work of theologizing we are only attempting to summarize. That summarizing is absolutely necessary, but we can never allow it to take on a life of its own. The danger arises from the fact that we can easily come to hold the theological statements—our descriptions and summaries of the biblical text in our own words—as more important than the Bible itself, and, as they take on lives of their own, we pay more attention to them than to the Bible. Some of our conclusions along the way become determinative and damage our objectivity toward new data.

Allow me to summarize at this point. We bring background understanding, which includes guesses about how things work, to each interpretive moment. At that point we have already raised some of these guesses—for better or worse—to the level of global or determinative hypotheses. When we come to the biblical text we are attempting to give an explanation of it, to assign information value to it—globally and in regard to its parts. As with all data work, we should make guesses about the meaning of the parts, make more global guesses by way of summary, and continue to interact with the parts, allowing the parts to shape our guesses and hypotheses, not vice versa. Thus we are always obligated to try to disprove working hypotheses.[13]

BRANCHES AND ROOTS

As I turn to the text of Poythress's book, I want to mention some things I believe he does well. I think he is very much on the right track in saying that "literal interpretation" is a poor term and

[12]Let's take a central doctrine to illustrate stopping too soon. We may say that we believe that God is infinite, tripersonal, a rational being, etc. We may be very confident that everything in the Bible supports this. We may even believe this with all our hearts. But we must leave ourselves open to finding out more about Him from the text. Could we, for example, ever discover that the God of the Bible is a quadripersonal being? It is not likely, but theoretically possible.

[13]Stanton (68) phrases it this way: "The interpreter must allow his own presuppositions and his own pre-understanding to be modified or even completely reshaped by the text itself. . . . There must be constant dialogue between the interpreter and the text." Similarly, Hirsch (165) says: "The interpreter is convinced that the meanings he understands are inevitable. . . . When an interpreter maintains his unruffled certainty in the face of contrary opinions, we may assume that he has been trapped in the hermeneutic circle and has fallen victim to the self-confirmability of interpretations." "The interpreter's determination to entertain alternative hypotheses about his text . . . is the necessary precondition for objective judgment" (167). "The goal of interpretation as a discipline is constantly to increase the probability that [our interpretive guesses] are correct" (207).

should be replaced by "grammatical-historical" interpretation. I believe that no one has formulated this issue very well yet.[14] Certainly Poythress's knowledge of modern linguistics accounts for his valuable insights into how language works.[15] I wish we all had better understanding of these things. I appreciate his presentation of various ways of talking about literal meaning (taking texts as "flat," etc.).[16] He is also right in saying that "belief in dispensations . . . as such has very little to do with the distinctiveness of the characteristic forms of dispensational theologians."[17] I agree that this does not get at the heart of the matter at all.

I believe, however, that, like dispensationalists, Poythress carries on at a surface level the discussion of what dispensationalism and

[14]See Poythress, 86, 96. The issue of literal interpretation is tied to the matter of metaphor. Literary theorists are not agreed on what constitutes metaphor nor on how human beings recognize metaphor. For a helpful discussion, see Monroe C. Beardsley, "Metaphor," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards, 8 vols. (New York: Macmillan and the Free Press, 1967) 5:285. Under one view of metaphor, metaphorical interpretation involves assigning to data an interpretation that is less expected than another. For example, take the following two sentences:

He's caught on the horns of a steer.

He's caught on the horns of a dilemma.

It is likely that in isolation "horns of a" immediately leads most people to think of an animal. In the second sentence the presence of "dilemma" will lead most people not to think in terms of an animal. Even if they have not heard the entire phrase "horns of a dilemma" before, they will probably attempt to make the *transfer*, or leap, from thinking of physical animal horns to thinking of the bifurcating effect of a dilemma.

Literary critics point out that an overused metaphor quickly loses its surprise or shock quality, and then speakers no longer make the transfer. It is then a "dead" metaphor. As Nelson Goodman points out: "What was novel becomes commonplace, its past is forgotten and metaphor fades to mere truth" (*Languages of Art* [Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968], 80). Many new meanings enter languages through metaphor. In fact, one could view this process as one of the main channels of language change.

What is "expected" in messages depends heavily on one's prior assumptions. Thus, in regard to Rev 20:1ff., Poythress would expect "thousand years" to be non-chronological. I would not. For him the "literal interpretation" is the non-chronological one. To put it another way, "literal" and "metaphorical" are not opposites. We can read a text "literally" and conclude that it is metaphorical. Furthermore, literal interpretation is tied to presuppositions and prior knowledge. Thus it is begging the question to assert a belief in literal interpretation (contra Earl Radmacher, "The Current Status of Dispensationalism and Its Eschatology" in *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology*, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer and Stanley N. Gundry [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979]). Poythress believes in literal interpretation, too. In my view, the significant and thorny issue in trying to arrive at a "valid" interpretation is *when one should make*, or *how one knows when to make*, the leap to the less expected interpretation.

The whole communication process also depends heavily on our expectation of what data we will receive. See de Beaugrande and Dressler, 8, 9, 40, 88, 139 and 144 regarding expectation of information.

[15]E.g., Poythress, 79ff.

[16]82ff.

[17]11.

covenant theology are like. For example, he often suggests that some dispensational theologians are moving closer to covenant theologians.[18] He seems to suggest in places that covenant and dispensational theologians lie along a continuum regarding the Kingdom and related issues.[19] We are not dealing with a continuum but a polarity. There may appear to be a continuum if we look at the surface, but the factors controlling interpretation of the data are radically different.[20]

Thus it is fruitless for a dispensationalist to say "If only the covenant theologian would see that Israel and the church aren't the same." (I do not mean to suggest that moving closer together is bad or that it is impossible; just that we are going about it the wrong way.) Furthermore, it is not simply the case that the dispensationalist holds to literal interpretation of the prophets and the covenant theologian does not. That is not the distinguishing feature. The distinguishing feature is *why* the covenant theologian does not and the dispensationalist does (if we can identify it).

I would ask the question, then, whether or not Poythress understood dispensationalism? In a sense it is difficult to tell because his presuppositions so much get in the way. Perhaps Poythress cannot understand dispensationalism *because* of his presuppositions. But I would suggest also that until we deal with the presuppositions of both systems, dispensationalists will not have understood covenant theologians and will not have understood themselves. In his article "Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalists" Craig Blaising raised once again the question of the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism.[21] I do not believe we will get very far without

[18]E.g., 51.

[19]E.g., 38.

[20]Hirsch's insight (172) is: "Interpretations can have some things in common" but "an interpretation stands or falls as a whole." By the way, I think that Poythress did not follow the title of his book or his initial purpose. He appears to say (102) that he wants to write for covenant theologians so they will understand dispensationalists better. But many portions of the book are directed at dispensationalists, apparently to get them to change. For example, on p. 57 he uses the phrase "leave behind." Furthermore, much of his writing is an attempt to show that dispensationalists are wrong (e.g., 67). Of greater significance, however, is his failure to realize the radical difference between the positions. Suggesting that one could slide a little bit in one direction and end up in the other camp misses the point entirely (although some could). I am reminded at this point of the vigorous debate that has been going on for many years in the field of linguistics, where competing theories of language have developed from radically different views both of the nature of the human capacity for language and of the goals of linguistics. Opposing schools use the same terminology, since often they must talk about the same data, but comparing the surface features of their systems is usually frustrating and confusing, since their goals and initial assumptions are quite different.

[21]In *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (1988), 254–80.

rephrasing the question: What are the presuppositions of dispensationalism, what are the controlling assumptions? How are they different from those of covenant theology and other systems?

THE GLOBAL HYPOTHESIS

If we did not otherwise know what it was, we should get a clue as to Poythress's controlling assumption from the fact that he does not deal significantly with the "number of dispensations" issue. Poythress has not written his book about dispensationalists. His real object is the physical millennialist. While there are many premillennialists who are not dispensational, they are apparently not of particular interest to him. May I suggest that this is not because they are less influential than dispensational premillennialists. No, I think that instead it is because dispensationalists are the consistent premillennialists. I wish we had a better term to use at this point than "premillennialist," since the issue is a physical kingdom on earth for Israel. The dispensationalist has the most thoroughgoing position concerning a physical, *on earth* future for ethnic, redeemed Israel, even though we differ among ourselves and have not done very well at showing *what* Israel's kingdom life will be like.

Poythress's response to the dispensationalist's insistence on this future for Israel is summarized on p. 129: "One *cannot* contemplate a Millennium in which salvation is in union with one man, the last Adam, Jesus Christ, but in which that union is undermined by the distinctiveness of two peoples of God with two inheritances and two destinies, on earth and in heaven" [italics mine]. Similarly, on p. 48 he says: "Will there be one people of God at that time or not? I say that there will be, because there is only one representative Head who brings them to salvation by uniting them to himself." This is directly traceable to Poythress's view of the one covenant of grace.

In his "Israel as the Hermeneutical Crux in the Interpretation of Prophecy (II)" Willem VanGemeren phrases the question of the interpretation of the OT prophets in a way that appears to have this kind of progression: There is a soteriological unity in the covenant of grace; it joins all God's people across the testaments; to ask if we are to take the prophets literally is to ask the wrong question; the issue of the interpretation of the prophets is not one of literal versus spiritual/metaphorical/figurative but of the relation of the OT and NT, which is determined by the Covenant of Grace.[22]

[22]"Israel as the Hermeneutical Crux in the Interpretation of Prophecy (II)," *Westminster Theological Journal* 46 (1984): 254–97. VanGemeren has stated what appears to lie behind Poythress's writing (269): "The Reformed exegete approaches the prophets from the perspective of the unity of the covenant. Although God has entered into

If this rephrasing on my part is correct, then it is easy to see why questions of interpreting this or that passage "literally" will not get us very far in comparing covenant theology and dispensationalism. We are on the surface with that kind of approach. We have to get at the roots of the systems.

There can be no question that the covenant of grace is the deciding factor in the covenant theologian's eschatology. This observation is not at all a new discovery on my part. What I believe is significant, however, is that Poythress's book reveals over and over how controlling this presupposition is in his handling of passages and issues. It is very close to the surface at most points.

One might object, however, saying that not all covenant theologians consciously depend on the covenant of grace as a starting point. It is probably the case that many who partake of the covenant system have not made the covenant of grace a controlling factor. However, one can enter a system at any point in one's interpretive career without necessarily working through it from the roots on up. This is true of any area of investigation.

One of the most interesting things in all of this is that a covenant of grace *per se* is never specifically found in Scripture. And this is just my point: a hypothesis about the text—which serves well at one point (soteriology)—has been raised to the level of globally determinative status. The interpretive process has stopped and the data is no longer allowed to speak for itself. We could represent this by a second chart, in which the back and forth movement has stopped with a conclusion, and further data is not examined. Conclusion x_1 is accepted as final, and the piece of data c is never given a chance to speak. The

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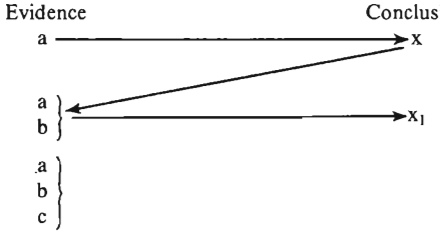
several administrations of grace . . . , there is but one covenant of grace. The various administrations are expressions of one covenant between the Father and the elect and whose Mediator is Jesus Christ. There are many differences between the experiences of God's people before and after the coming of Christ. However, the differences between the divine administrations before Christ and after Christ must be appreciated in such a way that they do not drive a wedge between the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments." See also his quotation of Jay Adams (265): "The affirmation of the Covenant of Grace correlates well with the eschatological chronology of amillennialism, because it is expected that the present imperfect age will be followed by the perfection of the eternal age." VanGemeren (271) adds: "To what extent does the NT set aside, correct, or affect the literal interpretation of the OT prophets? The answer to these questions does not lie in a definition of literal vs. spiritual interpretation. The issue is that of the essential relationship of the OT and the NT."

Another way of stating this in terms of *outcome* is: There is one covenant; all blessings are in Christ; Israel's blessings are in Christ; we are in Christ; therefore we inherit the blessings. It is noteworthy that many covenant theologians have sought to affirm a future for ethnic Israel, but affirm that dispensationalists have gone too far in their insistence on a separate track from the church.

interpretive process has broken down. Presuppositions have become dominant.



What is amazing is that in his entire discussion, as far as I can tell, Poythress never questions this presupposition. It is there, it is part of Reformed theology, and that's that. He suggests that some covenant theologians have moved in regard to certain eschatological features, that everyone needs to look at the Scriptures and find out what the Bible says, but never questions this determinative presupposition.[23] He urges the dispensationalist over and over to examine cherished assumptions. Yet he does not do the same. Is it the case that everything is open to negotiation for him but the covenant? In spite of his appeal to all of us to look at the Bible, tradition may condition his thinking far more than he suspects.[24]

I will take a few examples of how the covenant is used in his argumentation, and how logical fallacies are present. On p. 53, speaking about dispensationalism, Poythress says: "The decisions on what is figurative and what way it is figurative may be a product of the system as a whole rather than the inductive basis of it. Or rather we may have a circular process." This is exactly what he does himself at several points. In his discussion of Rom 11 he deliberates the "one people" question. He asks why the two separate terms "Israel" and "the church" are usually used for Jews and the church in the New Testament:

> Superficially this might seem to point to the idea of two parallel peoples of God. But one must remember that theology is not to be deduced directly from vocabulary stock (cf. Barr, Silva). . . ." [The use

[23]Poythress, 70. He points out (40) that dispensationalists do not really disagree with the single way of salvation provided by the covenant. But of course covenant theologians have extended the covenant into the realm of eschatology and the plan of God for groups.

[24]See Poythress's comments on church tradition on p. 64.

> of the term "Israel" in the NT] "need not entail any denial of the deeper conceptual and theological unity between Old Testament and New Testament phases of existence of one people of God. . . ."[25]

In other words, when forced to deal with the actual usage of "Israel," he brings the covenant back in again. There cannot be two peoples, even though the terms might seem to suggest it, because there is only one people, or stated negatively, there are not two peoples. The circularity is clearer when we put it this way: there are not two peoples because there are not two peoples.

Interestingly enough, he appeals to a valid discussion of meaning determination by Barr and Silva to escape having to acknowledge that "Israel" means an ethnic entity continuing to have its own identity.[26] Barr and Silva are right, but they are making a different point. Silva says that word studies alone will not give the interpreter all the information he needs. But they cannot be discarded! And that is what Poythress does here. His circularity is seen again on p. 48:

> The issue at stake in our present discussion is not how sweeping the consequences of the Second Coming are, how intensive the fulfillment is, but whether the fulfillment at that time will be an organic continuation of what Christ has done now. In this age he has integrated Gentiles and Jews into one body through the cross (Eph. 2:16). Will there be one people of God at that time or not? I say that there will be, because there is only one representative Head who brings them to salvation by uniting them to himself.

Instead of actually looking at the data, Poythress simply brings back the covenant.

What is so obviously missing in this is any proof for a connection between the salvatory unity of the elect and the economic/historic/prophetic unity. The economic unity is for Poythress a subhypothesis of the salvatory unity. But whenever he gets face to face with texts that would disprove the economic unity, he simply repeats the main hypothesis and its subhypothesis: There is a salvatory unity and therefore an economic unity. There is an economic unity because there is a salvatory unity.[27]

[25]Poythress, 44–45.

[26]His reference is to James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961) and Moises Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983).

[27]On p. 43 he states: "We cannot think of the Old Testament people of God as a second people of God alongside the New Testament people of God." Why not? The answer seems to be "Because we *can't*!"

Poythress's presupposition is so strong that in places it leads him to alter his appeal to the dispensationalist to practice consistent grammatical-historical exegesis.[28] I suspect that were it not for the presupposition he would never say this.

Circular argumentation can take several forms, some of which are:

> repeating a claim or assumption without new data
> repeating a claim without allowing new data to speak
> finding what one claims is true (what Poythress accuses the dispensationalist of doing).

I think that Poythress's argumentation particularly falls into the second and third forms. Raising an assumption to a global/determinative status and applying it so that one does not see data or acknowledge what it says constitutes a circular argument.[29]

At times Poythress's argumentation involves him in other logical fallacies. By focusing on Heb 12, to the exclusion of other passages that speak clearly of a physical, earthly Kingdom, he leads the reader to think that the spiritual future for Abraham is all there is. This is the fallacy of the false dilemma: too few choices.[30]

Poythress also depends on inductive (analogical) argumentation to invest kingdom prophecies with symbolic qualities. He often reasons from the existence of symbolic qualities in some features of the OT (e.g., the spiritual aspects of Israel's priesthood) to their existence in other areas (kingdom prophecies).[31] Just because there are some symbolic things in the Bible does not mean that the transfer can be made to other things by association through some other shared feature. Inductive argumentation is never conclusive and is only as strong as the connections that can be established through the shared features.

[28]Poythress, 116. I tend to think that grammatical-historical interpretation includes within it the authorization to switch to metaphor. Only when we have no valid reason to switch do we think of abandoning grammatical-historical exegesis. True grammatical-historical exegesis, which should probably be called something else (perhaps "continuous interaction with the text"), must be formulated to take this into account. I don't think anyone has done this well yet. Ultimately it involves the process outlined earlier of continually going back and forth and comparing the pieces.

[29]See my quotations from VanGemeren above in n. 22.

[30]Poythress, 120, 123. On p. 129 he asserts: "The difference between Israel and the church is fundamentally the difference between the people of God *before* and *after* the coming of Christ to accomplish salvation." I believe that at this point we can see how much of the richness of Scripture Poythress misses. This is where the dispensationalist really allows Scripture to open up. God has done, is doing and will do many things with human beings—through one Savior and one way of salvation—to show Himself and His love and our sinfulness. In this sense the dispensations are a corollary of the two peoples distinction.

[31]Ch. 10.

What should we learn from this? I do not believe that Poythress really wants to use poor logic. But I am firmly convinced that his assumptions, or rather one main one, blind him time after time. However, we should all be very careful at this point. Poythress appeals to the dispensationalist to be careful of making false assumptions. His point is well taken. Both sides are guilty at many points of careless logic and exegesis.

As an example of carelessness by dispensationalists, I would point to the use of *oikonomia* in Eph 3:2 to establish a rationale for dispensations. Often the dispensationalist says, on the basis of all its uses in the NT, that this word refers to responsibility as a steward, management of a household, a specified time, etc., and then maps all of this onto the concept of "dispensation."[32] Not only does this involve illegitimate totality transfer, but I suspect that in context the word refers only to Paul's responsibility, not a plan of the ages. I hope we stop using this argument. It involves poor exegesis and poor lexicography.

Another example of lack of thoroughness on the part of dispensationalists is in the area of double fulfillments (e.g., Joel 2 and Acts 2).[33] We must at least recognize that there is a lot of work to do in order to account for such passages under some global approach.

In his first chapter Poythress suggests that in the present dispute "both sides cannot be right" or "one position is mostly right but still has something to learn from the opposing position."[34] There is a third possibility: both are wrong. I think we all ought to leave ourselves open to this option. While I think dispensationalism does a better job with the data, it has a lot of cleaning up to do on its act.

On p. 70 Poythress says: "We do not need to cling tightly to our previous beliefs in order to be safe. In fact, we will not be safe if we are not open to having the Bible challenge even views that we dearly cherish." Perhaps the fact that we are meeting like this is a sign that many of us on both sides really want to find out what the Bible says.

May I suggest some steps to take in what I hope will become an ongoing, fruitful dialogue.

1) Let each side make a concerted effort to identify and examine its presuppositions. Take the ones that the other side points out and be open enough to talk about them. Put the best minds to work on solving them. The dispensationalist ought to ask if the economic difference between Israel and the church is actually an assumption or just the by-product of a deeper feature of the system. It may be a *sine*

[32]See Ryrie's discussion in his *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 24–33.

[33]See Poythress's discussion on p. 53ff.

[34]Poythress, 7.

qua non, but is it a deep-level assumption? In what way is the *absence* of the assumption about the covenant of grace significant?

2) Work together on some particular projects. Put a covenant theologian and a dispensationalist together on a specific problem for presentation at a future meeting. Identify topics to spend time on. Find points of agreement. List points of disagreement, too.

3) Take Poythress's statements on p. 43 about the unity of salvation for the elect as a springboard for future discussion.[35] Explore the nature of the work of Christ toward the elect. What does Rom 5 teach about the application of the work of Christ? I would ask Poythress if it is absolutely necessary to make a salvatory unity an economic unity. We are all agreed on the salvatory unity. No question about that. But is it really undermined by seeing two tracks?

4) Do not forget the areas most of us agree on: inerrancy, the substitutionary work of Christ, and many others. Some of these are ultimately much more important and affect us more directly.

5) Dispensationalists should use constructive criticism from covenant theologians to reexamine the correspondence of their view with Scripture, and vice versa.

Just as it is true that to a great extent we are what we eat, we are what we assume. We all need to follow Holmes' advice: "It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data."

[35]"There can only be one people belonging to God, because there is only one Christ. Obviously this oneness works in a different way before the Incarnation and the Resurrection. It can have only a preliminary and shadowy form until Christ's work is actually accomplished. But we cannot think of the Old Testament people of God as a second people of God alongside the New Testament people of God. These are two successive historical phases of the manifestation of the corporate and community implications of Christ's representative headship.

. . . When it comes to human redemption, Romans 5:12–21 shows us the way we must think. It excludes in principle the idea of two parallel peoples of God, because the corporate unity of the people of God derives from their common representative Head."