

***A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* by Robert L. Reymond**

A Review of Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, Second Edition – Revised and Updated, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2002), 1210 + xxxvi pages, hardback, \$44.99.

Whether one is a friend or foe of the brand of Reformed Presbyterian theology treated in Dr Robert L. Reymond's *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, the success of the work, with its full-orbed exposition of Westminster theology, is worthy of notice. But in addition, its vigorous anti-dispensationalist stance draws our attention to it. The work is now in its second revised edition, the author having time to address issues raised by many of the rather varied reviews of the first.

1. General Remarks.

In his "Introduction" Reymond does a good job of orienting his reader to the lineaments of a systematics along his chosen lines. He does not linger, but says as much as he needs to say, and then the reader is at Chapter One. In the Introduction one is given a taste of things to come, not only as far as Reymond's foundational principles are concerned, but also of his elegant style. The author has written his theology with the intelligent and mature believer in mind. He does not adopt the highbrow language of some of his predecessors in the Reformed camp, but neither does he dumb-down his language to cater for those who insist on having everything said to them at 8th Grade level. For this he is to be commended. There are many things that must be said with a certain amount of precision and which may make demands of the reader. Christianity is for the mind. It is for heart and soul too, but it always challenges the way we think. Therefore, a true systematic theology will have in mind primarily those who require the meat of the Word and not milk. Reymond has written an exegetical theology, so throughout, he assumes that the person who would pick up his tome to read it will be serious about the subject. He writes with the sort of solid gravity reminiscent of the Westminster Seminary theologians of yesteryear. It is God's Truth, first and foremost, that we are studying. This makes this volume an attractive resort from much of the literature of theology that has been produced since the 1970's.

Reymond divides his book into five parts: Part One concerns itself with the Word of God. The author puts us in no doubt that any true theology must be derived from a supernatural source. He will not just use the Bible to do his theology, he says there is no other way to do theology. Part Two is entitled "God and Man." This section takes us from Theology proper through to biblical Anthropology. In Part Three; "Our 'So Great Salvation,'" the work of Christ is taken up. This section seeks to set forth Reymond's supralapsarian order of decrees, plus his arguments for the Covenant of Grace; so essential to covenant theologies. It is just here that the author mounts his objection to Dispensationalism – nearly forty pages of it. He sees, as some dispensationalists do not, that these two systems are contrary to one another, and are different approaches to the Bible. In the rest of this third division, he looks at "the Cross Work of Christ," as he puts it. From the work of Christ we are then turned, in Part Four to a study of "The Church." Here, Reymond's Presbyterian sympathies are clearly set forth, including a forthright defense of infant baptism.

Part Five, “Last Things,” deals with Eschatology. To round the study off there are seven appendices. Biblical, Person, and Subject indexes follow. Like too many indices today these could have been better.

The book is a handsome production from (surprisingly) Thomas Nelson. I say surprisingly, because this publisher has not been known as a producer of scholarly works in the past. Hopefully, there will be many more such works in the future.

My procedure in this review will be to give attention to those areas in the work that are, in my view, especially noteworthy. In the course of my remarks I shall try to highlight both those positive and negative parts of the book that the reader might want to look out for.

2. Biblical Authority and Epistemology.

More theologians today have recognized the importance of beginning their systematics with the subject of epistemology. Reymond believes (as Calvin before him) that there is such a thing as a biblical epistemology or theory of knowledge. As a thoroughgoing presuppositionalist myself, this reviewer wholeheartedly applauds the author’s belief that, “Christians should not tell unbelievers that they may presuppose less than the whole truth about the Bible.” (p.4 n.1). To do such a thing would be, in effect, to tell them that the Bible is not the only true Word of God to sinful men. Again, in contrasting general revelation and common grace, he asserts:

“General revelation – that is, God’s revelation in humanity, in creation generally, and in his ordinary acts of providence – makes possible all the knowledge that humans as humans have (see Acts 17:26-29a). Common grace makes possible all the knowledge that humans as sinners have by inhibiting the sinner’s total suppression of truth and by providing for life amidst the destructiveness of sin (Ps.145:9; Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:35-36; Acts 14:16).” (p.5 n.7).

This is a good start. Reymond has placed his theology upon solid ground going forward. After giving the traditional standpoint on revelation, he addresses himself to answering the objections from neo-orthodoxy and language philosophy. Unfortunately, he does not interact with the so-called New Literary Criticism of the post-modernists. He may feel that this movement is laden with the seeds of its own demise, and that it will soon curl up and die. Who can say? But it would have been better to have included something about the kinds of criticisms postmodernists are bringing of language and historiography. Howbeit, there are few who will regard this as a serious omission.

On page 22 Reymond cites John 3:16 as a “plain and clear” example of the Bible’s clarity: “It means only one thing: The Son of God, the Father’s gift of love to undeserving people, will save from eternal perdition and give eternal life to everyone who puts his trust in him.” This is a rather awkward example, since, as one who holds to limited atonement, Reymond must interpret “world” (kosmos) in the verse as a reference only to the elect – which is hardly the “plain and clear” sense one would get from a straight reading of the verse.

After revelation comes the doctrine of inspiration. We are treated to a fine exegetical section that unpacks the major Old and New Testament passages. Then the subject of the canon is studied.

Reymond makes use of the important insight of Meredith Kline's *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, that Scripture in its entirety is a covenantal document, and so, "is intrinsically "canonical" and in a class by itself." (p.69).

It was interesting to read our author picking apart the poor argument for Bible authority offered by the Ligonier apologists (Sproul, Gerstner, Lindsley) (pp.74-78). Each of their steps from Premise 1: The Bible is a generally reliable document; to the Conclusion that the Bible is the inspired, inerrant Word of God would be utterly unconvincing to the non-believer. In like manner Reymond deals a blow to E. J. Carnell's (and Francis Schaeffer's) verificational criteria (pp.78-79). The Christian is always (not most of the time) under the authority of the Bible. Therefore, he is duty bound to discover what the Bible says any matter. Scripture cannot be anything other than self-identifying and, so, self-authenticating. If it were not, the doctrine of divine inspiration would have to be placed in a category below human attestation, and, thus, under human authority. Reymond will not allow the ultimate authority to be other than what it is. In this reviewer's opinion, his presentation of the doctrine of biblical authority and the sufficiency of Scripture is one of the best he has read.

Chapter Four is entitled, "The Nature of Biblical Truth." In this chapter the question of the correspondence between God's thought and ours is tackled. Reymond poses the problem: "Can the content of God's knowledge of himself and the content of man's knowledge that is gained from God's verbal revelation be univocal (the same), or must it inevitably be either equivocal (different) or analogical (partly alike, partly not alike)...?" (p.96). No orthodox theologian plumps for the equivocal option, since to do that would be to aver that our concepts (e.g. of "good") are not in any way the same as they are for God. Since God knows all there is to know, and we know nothing of what God knows, equivocacy would mean that we could not know anything at all. Is man's knowledge, then, analogous or univocal to God's knowledge? Reymond notes that Thomas Aquinas wrote extensively in defense of analogical language. "Aquinas declared that nothing can properly be predicated of God and man in a univocal sense..." This is because God is different than man. Notwithstanding, Aquinas also saw that there must be some relationship between God's knowledge and man's knowledge – he rejected equivocacy. So Reymond explains that, "the assertion, "God and man are both good," means analogically that man's goodness is proportional to man as God's goodness is proportional to God, but it also means that the goodness intended cannot be the same goodness in both cases." (p.96).

Reymond correctly identifies the flaw in this line of reasoning, noticing that, "the success of any analogy turns on the strength of the univocal element in it." (p.97). Thus, Aquinas cannot deny univocal predication without denying his whole teaching on analogy. At this juncture Reymond introduces the old controversy between Cornelius Van Til and Gordon H. Clark. He states:

"Throughout his writings Van Til insisted again and again that human knowledge is and only can be analogical to divine knowledge. What this means for Van Til is the express rejection of any and all qualitative coincidence between the content of God's mind and the content of man's mind...for Van Til this means that man qualitatively knows nothing as God knows a thing." (pp.97-98. Emphasis supplied).

Here Reymond repeats the arguments of Gordon Clark and his followers against Van Til's references to "analogous reasoning." He concludes, "...it is vitally important that we...work with a Christian theory of knowledge that insists upon the possibility of at least some identity between the content of God's knowledge and the content of man's knowledge." (p.102). Reymond (as Clark, Nash, Robbins, etc., before him) thinks that Van Til held that there is no such identity of content. Now, it is true that Van Til's language is sometimes misleading, but it can be easily proved that he did not deny that God's knowledge and man's knowledge do coincide. What God means by "good" is what man means by "good." There remains, however, a qualitative difference. Here is Van Til:

"If we speak therefore of the incomprehensibility of God, what is meant is that God's revelation to man is never exhaustively understood by man...It is only if these two points be taken together, the fact that man knows something about everything, including the very essence of God, and on the other hand that he does not know anything exhaustively, that the doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God can be seen for what it is.

In the first place, it is possible in this way to see that the knowledge of God and the knowledge of man coincide at every point in the sense that always and everywhere man confronts that which is already fully known or interpreted by God. The point of reference cannot but be the same for man as for God."

The above quotation makes it quite clear that Reymond has misrepresented Van Til. It also shows how Van Til could believe that man's knowledge (and language) can be univocal with God's, while at the same time having no point of correspondence when the "mental activity" and acuity of the mind of God is at issue (Isa. 55:8-9; Rom. 11:33-34). Reymond, as Clark, would have us believe that Van Til was simply confused on this point; that they have, in fact, interpreted him better than either Van Til himself or his followers interpreted him. One must ask Dr. Reymond, therefore, why Van Til always taught that men "think God's thoughts after Him," and how this oft-repeated refrain of his could be at the very core of his epistemology? How could Van Til be guilty of such an amazing blunder? Reymond appears to be holding a candle for Dr. Clark here. As Reymond's apologetic approach has so much in common with Van Til's it is disappointing that he does not show more appreciation for Dr Van Til's work.

When the Rich Young Ruler called Jesus "Good Master" Jesus' response was to ask, "Why do you call me good? There is only one who is good, that is, God." (Mk. 10:17-18). The Lord was not saying, "You do not really know what "good" is, for you only know it by analogy." No, He meant that the young man had the right idea of goodness as far as it went, but he did not understand that Jesus' understanding of "good" was so exhaustive as to call forth Jesus' answer that only God is actually good. Therefore, if he wanted to continue applying the word to Jesus he must acknowledge Him as God. There was (and remained) a qualitative disparity between the two views of "good."

From the problem of "God-talk" the author turns to the issue of paradox. He disagrees with the idea. We shall not follow him there, but will only say that we encounter paradox in most of the main doctrines of the Faith: The Trinity, the Hypostatic union, Predestination, sanctification, the Problem of Evil, etc. Naturally, these are not real antinomies, but our finitude makes them appear so.

Chapter Five is really outstanding. It deals with the justification of our knowledge and our personal significance. It rounds off what is overall a first class prolegomenon to this book.

3. The Doctrine of God.

In the next chapter, "Introduction to the Doctrine of God," which starts off Part Two of the work, the writer takes up where he left off. He does a superb job of defusing the standard theistic arguments for God's existence, demonstrating them to be substandard. He says many fine things in this chapter. For example, he maintains that, "an argument that reduces revelational data to "brute data" pointing at best to the possibility of God's existence is a totally inadequate, even apostate, argument that Christians should not use or endorse." (p.140). Again, in speaking of the Lord as the self-attesting "transcendental, necessary ground of all meaning, intelligibility and predication," he sets forth an excellent summary of the presuppositionalist theology and apologetic method. Men as sinners are the interlopers, the "felons" who are on trial, not the Creator. "It is not then the Christian primarily who must justify his Christian presence in the world but the non-Christian who must be made to feel the burden of justifying his non-Christian views." (p.146. Emphasis mine). By the end of the chapter we are over 150 pages into the book. If a person only read this far in this Systematic Theology he would have easily got his money's worth. But there is more good material to come.

It will come as little surprise to discover that Dr. Reymond is averse to any formal categorizing of the attributes. He notices the several attempts to formulate God's perfections in terms of natural and moral, absolute and relative, communicable and incommunicable, etc. None of these is an expressly biblical arrangement, but is more a Protestant scholastic effort to examine the attributes individually. Reymond prefers to study the attributes under the Shorter Catechism definition. Thus he adopts the rubric of God as "Infinite, Eternal, and Unchangeable" and relates these "transcendent" adjectives to God's being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth. This seems to me to be a well thought out framework, one that constantly keeps before the reader the glory of our great God, a doctrine which Dr. Reymond has deliberately aimed at.

In with his discussion of the divine names the writer brings up both God's relation to Time and the subject of "Middle knowledge" (which he rejects). On the former he surprisingly prefers to say that God is everlasting, but not outside of time. This outlook is nowadays taken by Arminian theologians and philosophers. It is not usually held by those who are of an Augustinian stamp. He thinks the view that God is timeless does not go together with the teaching that God experiences the passage of time. It is strange that he did not consider the problem in correlation with God's transcendence and immanence.

Middle knowledge, which is a theory of divine foreknowledge that tries to explain the apparent paradox (see above) between predestination and free will, teaches that between God's innate knowledge of all potentialities (or, possible worlds), and His knowledge of those potentialities (i.e. the possible world) which He has decreed will come to pass, is a *scientia media* or middle knowledge whereby God knows what a certain individual would do with his free will when placed within any possible set of circumstances. This scheme is thought by its supporters to provide the answer to the predestination versus man's will conundrum, while also preserving the libertarian free will of the creature. Reymond notes that, "absolutely arbitrary (or contingent)

future actions of men are not knowable, even granted divinely created and determined conditions, because these conditions, on this view, never determine human arbitrary actions.” (p.189 Emphasis his).

Concerning the treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity, some readers may know that the work under review, on its first outing, suffered one or two brickbats from those who took exception to the author’s thesis that the formulations of the doctrine of the Trinity by the Nicene-Constantinopolitan fathers was not as orthodox as that of the Westminster divines. This whole section (pp.317-342) has been completely revised and constitutes the only real difference between this second edition and its predecessor. Gone is the claim referred to above. Further, the teaching of the coinherence of the Divine Persons (perichoresis), rejected in the first edition, is now accepted (pp.321-322 n.5). And the author’s controversial dismissal of the eternal generation of the Son has now been rewritten to distinguish between the Son’s relational dependence upon the Father in contrast to an essential generation, and, thus, subordination (p.327).

After a long argument Reymond finds little scriptural support for the eternal continuing procession of the Spirit from the Father and the Son (pp.336-337). He also marshals strong reasons, both exegetical and historical, in order to prove that, “There can be no question that in his paternity the Father is the Father of the Son. But we must not attempt to define, beyond the fact of the clearly implied order, a modal “how” of the Father’s paternity” (p.341 author’s emphasis). He says, rightly, that not only the Father is autotheotic, but the Son and the Spirit too.

This chapter has been greatly improved from the first edition. The writer has definitely regained some lost altitude by his revisions. Still, the chapters on the Trinity are definitely slanted towards a defense of the deity of Christ rather than a full explication of the Triune doctrine and its implications for Christian thought. Here the author might have interacted with the positive contributions of Cornelius Van Til, Colin Gunton, and others who have worked in this area. Students will need to repair to other sources so as to gain a comprehensive treatment of this vital doctrine.

I noticed some editorial glitches here and there. Turretin’s Institutes of Elenctic Theology are misspelled “Elenctic” on pages 324 & 337, and Herman Bavinck is referred to as if he were still living (p.342). I also noticed that some of the errata in the first edition had been corrected.

4. The Order of God’s Decrees.

In his chapter on “God’s Eternal Plan of Salvation” the author writes, “The church of Jesus Christ – the redeemed community – also stands in Jesus Christ at the beginning, the center, and the end of God’s eternal purpose.” (p.464. Author’s emphasis. Cf. also pp.465, 490). Earlier he had stated: “Creation’s *raison d’être* then is to serve the redemptive ends of God.” (p.398). Dispensationalists have often accused covenant theologians of seeing only a soteriological purpose in God’s decrees, but this is even more the case when a theologian adopts a supralapsarian order of decrees – as Reymond does. Even though the present reviewer takes the position that some have termed sublapsarianism, it is intriguing to find a mainline theology text that does not shy away from a forthright presentation of the supralapsarian view. In his

discussion of his position the writer tries to cast it in the best light by first criticizing opposing positions. Unfortunately, 5-Point Calvinists Roger Nicole and B. B. Warfield are summoned to represent the Arminians. The Amyraldian scheme doesn't fair much better. It ought to be unnecessary to say that if one is going to criticize a different viewpoint, that viewpoint's defenders ought to be cited. Again, in dealing with infralapsarianism, Reymond spends little time expounding it and a lot of space criticizing it. The reader will have to consult other writers (say, Berkhof, Berkouwer, or Thornwell) for a more balanced presentation. He does consider some of the objections to his view, but there are others he should have dealt with. For instance, if God decided to create men as elect and non-elect how is it that Paul can employ the analogy of elect and non-elect as originating from "one lump" in Romans 9:21?

5. Critique of Dispensationalism.

We must now come to Dr. Reymond's problems with Dispensationalism. He is to be commended for seeing, as some dispensationalists have not, that the main issue between covenant theology and dispensational theology is the former's "Covenant of Grace." As covenant theologians define it, the covenant of grace serves both as the unifying principle of Scripture, and as the hermeneutical lens through which all Scripture must pass before it can be correctly evaluated. As such it dominates the thinking of covenant theologians, sometimes making it difficult for them to see dissenting views clearly. There are the usual misrepresentations and false implications in this section. For example, about dispensationalists holding that the Church is God's "heavenly people" while Israel is His "earthly people" (p.510), or that we all hold that the kingdom of God must be distinguished from the kingdom of heaven (p.538). In fact, the majority of dispensationalists do not hold these opinions. It will come as news to CTS members that we, as dispensationalists, "argue on the basis of Ezek. 44:9 that Gentile believers must be circumcised in the kingdom age!" (p.525). On the contrary, the verse implies they must be circumcised in order to enter the Millennial Temple, but that will be their choice.

Central to Reymond's critique is the following note from the New Scofield Reference Bible on Matthew 4:17:

"The Bible expression "at hand" is never a positive affirmation that the person or thing said to be at hand will immediately appear, but only that no known or predicted event must intervene. When Christ appeared to the Jewish people, the next thing, in the order of revelation as it then stood, should have been the setting up of the Davidic kingdom. In the knowledge of God, not yet disclosed, lay the rejection of the kingdom and the king, the long period of the mystery-form of the kingdom, the world-wide preaching of the cross, and the out-calling of the Church. But this was as yet locked up in the secret counsels of God (Mt.13:11,17; Eph.3:3-12)."

After quoting also from the Dallas Seminary Doctrinal Statement the author makes the following remark:

"Of course, if no one before the time of Jesus' public ministry knew about the rejection of the Messiah, this present age, the worldwide proclamation of the cross, or the outcalling of the church, because God had disclosed none of these things to men before that time, then the faith of the Old Testament saint could not have been directed toward the person and work of the suffering Christ as its saving object."

A few initial comments: first, although Reformed scholars do it commonly when attacking our position, is it really good practice to cite as one's authority from a Study Bible, with all of its confines? Should not a work generally accepted as a representative explication of the system, such as Charles Ryrie's Dispensationalism, be cited? Second, there is a big difference between OT Jews knowing that the name of Yahweh would be esteemed among the Gentiles, and their knowing about the proclamation to the Gentiles of the Cross of Christ. Thirdly, if the "outcalling of the church" was known to the OT saints, why does Paul call the Church a mystery in Ephesians 3? How could they have known that "the Gentiles should be...of the same body" when the body of Christ was not formed until after the ascension (1 Cor. 12:13; Jn. 7:39)? And how could they know about the Church if Jesus hadn't begun to build His Church yet (Matt. 16:18)? Dispensationalists have asked these questions for years, but all they have received back as answers have been inferences built upon the covenant of grace. This is why dispensationalists charge covenant writers like Robert Reymond with denying progressive revelation in practice. Regarding the quotation from the New Scofield Bible: two thousand years ago the Apostle Paul told the Romans that, "the night is almost spent, and the day has drawn near (engiken)" (Rom.13:12). This is the word used by Matthew in 3:2 and 4:17. So the term can refer to an event that may be a long time in the offing, even though it is the next thing on the prophetic calendar. Whether or not one agrees with the Scofield editors that, "The Bible expression "at hand" is never a positive affirmation that the person or thing said to be at hand will immediately appear" is beside the point. In the context in Matthew 4:17 (cf. Matt. 3:2; 10:5-7), Jesus would have been understood as referring to a literal Messianic kingdom (cf. Lk. 1:32-33). If He had intended to preach a spiritual kingdom, He would certainly have clarified His message, but He never did. Acts 1:6-7 (taken at face value without reading it through some "covenant of grace") is proof that Jesus was proclaiming a literal earthly kingdom. Jesus went through the Old Testament Scriptures with His disciples (Lk. 24:45 cf. v.32). How is it then that they still believed in a restored kingdom of Israel in Acts 1:6? The conclusion of one who conducted an in-depth evaluation of Luke's view of a national restoration was that:

"Luke, by the way he has structured his two-volume work and by the insertion of material peculiar to him, displays an unmistakable interest in the question of the national restoration of Israel. We have seen that the opening two chapters of Luke's gospel raise the issue in terms of expectancy. This hope, while modified by Jesus' ministry, is never rejected. Indeed at the end of the gospel the hope is still visible. At the outset of the book of Acts (chaps. 1-3) the hope of restoration is still alive and well. There is no indication that the hope is abandoned. It is simply put on hold. That it is Luke who exhibits a keen interest in the question is in all likelihood owing to the influence of his theological mentor, the apostle Paul. Luke's manner of presenting the nationalistic hopes of the Jewish people implies that he himself believed that there would be a future, national restoration. If Luke really believed that there would not be a restoration, he has certainly gone out of his way to give the contrary impression."

Reymond comes close to saying that those before Calvary understood all about the Cross of Jesus Christ (and doubtless His resurrection), and the organism known as the Church, the Body of Christ (see p.521f., and the quote above [FN 9]). But if they did, why did they offer sacrifices at the Temple? Why the sign of the rent veil? Of course, Reymond says that they knew these things in types and shadows. But what, exactly, did they know? Did they know more than Jesus' own disciples (Jn. 2:22)? Did they comprehend through types and shadows more than the

disciples did from the Master's own lips (Lk. 18:31-34)? And what of Matthew 16:15-17? Reymond states that Peter was able to identify Jesus as both Christ and Son of God, "with the aid of the Father's illumination" (p.811). It is pretty clear that this confession marked a new phase in the disciples' training. No OT saint could have possibly known what was only vouchsafed to Peter during Jesus' ministry on earth. If such things are so, then dispensationalists are not ashamed to plead guilty to Reymond's charge that, "the faith of the Old Testament saint could not have been directed toward the person and work of the suffering Christ as its saving object." (p.509). His citation of OT passages to prove that OT saints knew about and exercised faith in "the person and work of the suffering Christ" is paltry. He is content, for the most part, just to read NT revelation back into the Old, a procedure that, as we have seen, effectively nullifies progressive revelation. No dispensationalist would deny that believers before the time of Christ had an expectation of a coming messianic Deliverer. The bone of contention is over what they understood. But even if, for the sake of argument, we allow that they rightly comprehended the significance of, say, Isaiah 53, this still does not dent the dispensationalist position one bit. As John Feinberg expresses it, "Since dispensationalism is not about whether Christ was the revealed content of faith in the Old Testament, a dispensationalist can certainly hold that He was without having to surrender his dispensationalism." We may readily admit that at least some prophets and some among their auditors knew that Messiah would come and would suffer for men's sins. But even that would not constitute the same content as Paul's gospel. The author wants to make a case that "the faith of the Old Testament saint [must] have been directed toward the person and work of the suffering Christ as its saving object." It is surely plain to see that they could not have known about the Person of Jesus. But the NT gospel demands that salvation is only in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:12)! A prospective Christ will not do. So Reymond would still have lots of work to do. The key thing is whether OT believers knew that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. Feinberg states,

"It is definitely debatable as to how much understanding there was of the full import of the prophecies about the Messiah or how much the truth about Christ's coming redemptive work was involved in the presentation of the gospel in the Old Testament. What does not seem to be the case is that men consciously believed in Jesus Christ, for we do not find until the New Testament the explicitly stated revelation that Jesus of Nazareth is the long-awaited Christ... it seems to overlook the progress of revelation to say that knowledge of Jesus was universally or even widely known in Old Testament times."

If, then, the OT saints did not know to believe on the crucified and resurrected Jesus as Savior, then whatever they did believe in was different in content from the NT Gospel! The author says of the covenantal perspective that it, "insists that Old Testament saints were saved through conscious faith in the future, anticipated sacrificial work of the promised Messiah in their behalf." (p.509). But he is very short on proof for his belief. And, in any case, as we have shown, they would have needed faith in Jesus as Messiah in order for the content of their faith to be the same as ours. The "covenantal perspective" is just that, an outlook on the Bible that sees everything in terms of the covenant of grace. If it were not for the fact that this extra-biblical covenant is both starting-point and goal for anything stated in the Bible, there could be no objection to the dispensational viewpoint on salvation in the Old Testament. Throughout the chapter there is no real argument for the "covenant of grace." It has no basis in exegesis. Though he highlights the importance of the Abrahamic Covenant (p.513), Reymond, as

all covenant theologians, identifies it with an already existent covenant of grace (pp.517-518). To do this he must assert that, “the land promises were never primary and central to the covenant intention, and a literal and complete fulfillment of these promises under Old Testament conditions was never envisioned by God.” (p.513 n.19). That is quite a thing to say! It involves two crucial negations and one interesting affirmation. First, it denies that the land was ever “primary and central” to the covenant. The land issue is thus relegated to a place of minor importance. Secondly, that God never intended His promises about the land to be taken at face value, but that the conditions of the covenant changed from the way they were worded in the OT. We shall look at these presently.

But there is an important affirmation contained in the quotation that should not go unnoticed. The writer mentions, “a literal and complete fulfillment of these [covenant] promises” that were “never envisioned by God.” Here Raymond has admitted that literal interpretation is readily identifiable when one wants to so recognize it. It is common for covenant theologians to question what “literal” meaning means when their views on prophecy are scrutinized. Just as commonly they deflect any accusation that they are spiritualizing the text. Now it appears that a literal interpretation is recognizable, otherwise how could it be declined? So we ask, if the literal meaning is to be denied to great quantities of OT covenant passages, just what sort of meaning is to be accepted? Dispensationalists have quite rationally called this other hermeneutic “spiritual” as opposed to “literal.” The interpretation of these texts lies in something other than what they actually say. With apologies for belaboring the point, this “spiritualizing” of certain parts of the Bible is mandated by adherence to the domineering covenant of grace.

We should again commend the author of this work for him asking why the Scriptures must be interpreted literally (p.511 n.16), although he wrongly suggests the reason for dispensationalist’s fondness for literal hermeneutics is ultimately to do with a desire to avoid Galatianism. As a dispensationalist myself I would say that the onus is not on me to defend consistent interpretation, but upon those who would use two or more sets of hermeneutical principles. Covenant theologians like to advance the “Analogy of Faith” principle as their justification for departing from a single consistent method (see p.535). In doing so, they transform it from a theological check upon exegesis into a key interpretive assumption that is then allowed to steer the exegesis to the desired end. As Robert Thomas comments, “The analogy of faith finds its proper use at the conclusion of the exegetical process as a double check on the accuracy of exegesis rather than at the beginning of the process as a preunderstanding that will adversely affect the accuracy of the exegesis.” The only reason one would bring it forward to the commencement of one’s exegesis would be to maintain one’s pet theories. We are all liable to do this kind of thing, which is why our hermeneutics must be safeguarded against subjectivity.

An example of this kind of thing is to be found on pages 526-527 where the author discusses the Olive Tree of Romans 11:

“Paul’s metaphor of the two olive trees (Rom. 11:16-24) also reflects this same perception: olive shoots from a wild olive tree, that is, Gentiles, are being grafted into the cultivated olive tree, that is, Israel, from which latter tree many natural branches, that is, Jews, had been broken off. This tree, Paul says, has a “holy root” (the patriarchs; see Rom. 11:28). Clearly, Paul envisions saved Gentile Christians as “grafted shoots” in the true “Israel of faith.”

There is no room here to provide a full interpretation of Paul's figure, but an accurate exegesis would have to conclude that:

- a. The branches from the wild olive tree are the Gentiles (v.17, cf. v. 25).
- b. Those branches we are not to boast against are the Jews (vv. 18-20), the "natural branches" (v. 21), that is, Israel (v. 25).
- c. If the rejected natural branches return to belief, they will be engrafted back into their own olive tree (vv. 23-24).
- d. In the figure as explained by Paul, it is Israel who has been partly blinded until "the fullness of the Gentiles is brought in." (v. 25).
- f. Those warned against "being wise in [their] own conceits" (v. 25), are the same as those told neither to boast (v. 18), nor to be "highminded" (v. 20). These are identified as the Gentiles in v. 25.
- g. Likewise, those, "natural branches," some of whom were broken off through unbelief (v. 20), are distinguished from their olive tree (v. 24), (just as branches are distinguishable from any tree), are identified in verse 25 as Israel.
- h. To make quite sure that no one supplants national Israel with some "spiritual Israel" Paul calls Israel by the name of Jacob (v. 26). This maintains the contrast between Israel and the Gentiles which the Apostle has set up throughout the chapter (see vv. 1-4, 7-14, 28-29).
- i. The identification of the actual olive tree must have something to do with that which pertains to Israel as a nation. What is it that the apostle has had in mind all through chapter 11? The answer lies in verses 26-29. It refers to the salvation of Israel ("Jacob") (vv.26-27a); in virtue of God's covenant (v.27b); which was made with the fathers (v.28); and which covenant promises cannot be revoked (v.29).

More could, and probably ought to be said, but we must move on to the two negations in the quotation we are dealing with:

That [i] "the land promises were never primary and central to the covenant intention..."

And,

That "[ii] a literal and complete fulfillment of these promises under Old Testament conditions was never envisioned by God." (p.513 n.19).

Although these statements run together, they involve assumptions on the part of the author that need to be assessed. The first assertion should be incredible to anyone who reads passages like Genesis 15:1-21; 17:7-8; Deuteronomy 30:1-10; or Jeremiah 30. The Covenant promises pertaining to Israel and the land are explicit (Gen. 12:7; 13:14-17;15:7, 18-21;17:7-8;18), and sealed by an unconditional covenant, entered into by God alone (Gen. 15:12-21). This covenant was of such a nature that no part of it could ever be altered or revoked. It is called "everlasting"

in Genesis 17:7, 13, 19; 1 Chronicles 16:17, 18; and, Psalm 105:10, just as the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam. 23:5; Isa. 55:3; Ezek. 37:25), and New Covenant (Isa. 61:8; Jer. 32:40; 50:5; Heb. 13:20) are also called everlasting. As Paul reminds his Gentile readers, “the gifts and calling of God are without repentance.” (Rom. 11:29). David’s throne is never referred to as if it were not a physical throne upon which the Messiah would reign over a physical kingdom (e.g. Isa. 9:6-7; Jer. 23:5-6; Amos 9:11; Lk. 1:30-33; Matt. 19:28; Acts 2:30). Revelation 3:21 implies that the throne of God in heaven is not the same as the throne of Christ. Christ shall rule the nations from this throne with “a rod of iron” (Rev. 19:15; cf. Gen. 49:10-12; Psa. 2:9). To say that the land promises are of only secondary importance after reading these passages appears to display a determined resistance to words used by the Holy Spirit.

But this brings us to the second half of the assertion where Reymond says that, “a literal and complete fulfillment of these promises under Old Testament conditions was never envisioned by God.” Or, to put it bluntly, God did not really mean what He actually said. Lest any one think that I am accusing Dr. Reymond, or any other covenant theologian of impugning the veracity of God, I hasten to add that they would never do so. It is their covenantalist hermeneutic that forces them to read the above passages in another way than grammatical-historical interpretation can impart to them. But did God mean what He said? Did He have a completely different idea in mind than He expressed in words? As dispensationalists we dare not agree to such a thing. Does not the LORD use the strongest and plainest language when He tells Jeremiah that, “If those ordinances [of sun, moon and stars (v.35)] from before me, says the LORD, Then the seed of Israel shall also cease from being a nation before me forever.” (Jer. 31:36)? And, in one of the most solemn transactions in Scripture God binds Himself to a unilateral and unconditional covenant, does not the land figure prominently? – In fact, more prominently than the other terms in the covenant? One way he gets around this is to cite O. Palmer Robertson who teaches that the term “Land,”

“as a factor of theological significance begins with “Paradise.”... In this “land” called “Paradise” man could serve his God and find meaningful purpose for life.” But man fell and so were “ejected from this land of bliss... But a divine promise gave [fallen man] hope. There was a “land,” a land flowing with milk and honey... God had promised to redeem man..., to restore him to the land of blessing he had lost...

This glimpse of hope found concrete expression in the promise given to Abraham...

Under Joshua’s general leadership the people conquered the land, receiving in a limited fashion the paradise God had promised. But it quickly became obvious that this territory could not be the ultimate paradise...

All this hyperbolic language – what could it mean?

It meant that God had something better... The promise of the land would be fulfilled by nothing less than a restored paradise...

When the Christ actually came, the biblical perspective on the “land” experienced radical revision...”

I confess that it is hard for me to read such things, so tenaciously do I believe in the use of consistent hermeneutics. Let me simply list a few of the problems that I, along with those who share my system of theology, have with the quotation.

- a. The whole quotation presupposes acceptance of the extra-biblical covenants of works and grace, which most dispensationalists today reject.
- b. The equating of the Edenic paradise with the promised land of the Abrahamic covenant is a brash demonstration of theological tyranny. The Bible does not even hint at this.
- c. By putting the word “land” in inverted commas the authors (that is, Reymond citing Robertson) show that they intend to spiritualize the word further on – which is exactly what they do.
- d. The word “paradise” is never given to the land given by an unconditional covenant to Abraham and his descendants. The link is necessary for the covenantalists to connect the biblical Abrahamic covenant with the non-biblical covenant of works.
- e. In answer to the question about what all the “hyperbolic language” really means, a dispensationalist would point out that the meaning is crystal clear as long as one does not convert plain and clear language into “hyperbolic language.”
- f. To admit that, “the biblical perspective of the “land” experienced radical revision” is to say that God can promise something with an oath that He intends to change down the road. But unless one accepts the scholastic teaching called voluntarism, wherein God’s decisions are not made with any reference to His character (in other words, God can call good evil and evil good) this would seem to be a slippery slope on which to settle. After all, if God can change a covenant made so solemnly with Abraham (Gen. 15), why can He not radically change the New Covenant whereby we think we are saved and destined for glory? (See Heb. 6:13-20).
- g. Finally, there are some clear indications in Scripture that God really does mean exactly what He says (e.g. 2 Kings 1:1-17; Jn. 21:20-23; Num. 22:20, 35). Hebrews 11:10 does not overthrow a literal interpretation of the promises. The fact that Abraham looked for a heavenly city does not mean that he did not expect God to stick to the explicit terminology of the covenant that He made with His servant.

Much more could be said, but space does not permit any more interaction with Reymond on the subject.

6. Additional Comments.

We have had to spend a little time on Reymond attack on dispensationalism, but we would notice a few more things before closing. The author has written excellent chapters on “The Supernatural Christ of History” and “The Christ of the Early Councils.” Reymond’s ten arguments (pp.673-683) for Particular Redemption (Limited Atonement) are predicated upon one’s approval of the maxim “Christ must save all for whom He died.” We see no evidence in Scripture or from reason to grant that assumption. The author also tries valiantly to provide exegetical proof for the covenant of works (pp.430), but it is unconvincing. Hosea 6:7 is called upon as a proof-text, but even if one were to accept the translation, “like Adam they have transgressed the covenant ” one would only arrive at the “Adamic Covenant” favored by some dispensationalists, not the

supposed covenant of works of the Westminster Confession.

To many dispensationalists, the covenant of works appears to be a gospel of salvation by works. Thus, it is covenant theology, not dispensationalism, which teaches two plans of salvation.

But we do not want end this review in disagreement. We were very pleased to find Reymond defending a Six Day Creation and a young earth (pp.392-396).

Conclusion.

After reading this book this reviewer can say that, although he had some strong differences with the author on some areas, nevertheless he was edified. We applaud Robert Reymond for producing such a substantial volume, written, we think, with an eye for the furtherance of the glory of his God. Would that a dispensationalist would take up the daunting task of producing a book that would represent our theology as well as Dr. Reymond represents his.

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