

THE "SEED OF ABRAHAM" IN
GALATIANS 3:29

by

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The "seed of Abraham" in Galatians 3:29 seems to imply that Gentile Christians partly fulfill promises given to Abraham and to his natural seed and are therefore a part of Israel. In general, covenant theologians claim to interpret Galatians 3 in a literal sense, with verses such as Galatians 3:29 affirming equality of the Church and Israel. Dispensationalists claim that the "seed of Abraham" is spiritual and receives the same spiritual blessing promised to Abraham.

Historically, the Galatian recipients were predominantly Gentile converts and not Jewish-Christians. Therefore, when Paul states "ye are the seed of Abraham" (Gal 3:29), he has the Gentile in mind. Thus, the immediate context, which includes at least Galatians 3 and 4, must be examined. Galatians 3:7-9,16,28; 4:21-31 show that Gentiles, Jews (believing), and Christ are all "seed of Abraham." An extended context includes key passages in Romans (e.g., 4:11-16; 9:1-8) which illustrate that the "seed" are Christians irrespective of race. In New Testament usage, σπέρμα (seed) is only used in a literal sense once, while "offspring" of Abraham has the prevalent usage. But this does not mean that Gentiles are physical "offspring" of Abraham. Dispensationalists and most covenant theologians understand the "offspring" as spiritual. These spiritual "offspring" are heirs of the ἐπαγγελίαν (promise). The primary biblical usage of "promise" is "God's promise," and in this context is salvation through faith in Christ. Yet, covenant theologians argue that if Israel is the "seed of Abraham," and Christians are the "seed of Abraham," then Israel and the Church are equal. They often use Romans 11 and the figure of the Olive Tree to support this contention.

The heart of the difference between the two theological viewpoints is interpretation principles. Covenant theologians use an analogy of interpretation, in which the Old Testament is interpreted in light of the New Testament and the spiritual takes precedence over the natural. Antithetically, the dispensationalist claims to use the grammatical-historical interpretation principle consistently throughout Scripture. This principle shows Israel and the Church are distinct. Covenant interpretation principles can show that Israel and the Church are equal, but this is only affirmed and not proved by Galatians 3:29.

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INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Paul wrote to the Galatians: "And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Gal 3:29).¹ The "seed of Abraham" (Authorized Version) has been a subject of much debate throughout the centuries since Paul penned these words under the influence of the Holy Spirit. There seems to be an implication that Gentile Christians are part of the fulfillment of promises given to Abraham and to his natural seed and are therefore a part of Israel.

Those who have had religious training in the Reformed tradition, this author included, have customarily accepted covenant theology and amillennialism without question. They accept the covenant relationship between God and His people, with the first Covenant teaching one way of salvation (works) and the second Covenant another (grace), with no distinction between Israel and the Church. This author had always understood the first Covenant to be the Old Testament and the second Covenant to be the New Testament, but this is not exactly what is taught by covenant theologians as will be illustrated.

¹All Scripture quotations are from the NASB, unless otherwise specified.

There are therefore two systems of theology at stake in the interpretation of this verse. The dispensationalist who attempts to take the Bible literally is forced to accept the "seed of Abraham" as spiritual. The covenant theologian who spiritualizes many passages takes Galatians 3 in a literal sense and points the finger at the dispensationalist for being inconsistent. Concurrently, the amillennial covenant theologian has to treat the material blessings as conditional in order to have Israel and the Church equal. In the eschatological system of the dispensationalist, the material blessings are dealt with as being future. But it can be demonstrated that there is a spiritual "seed of Abraham" which receives the spiritual blessing, without a requirement that Israel and the Church are equal.

CHAPTER I

THE BACKGROUND OF GALATIANS 3:29

This chapter will attempt to provide the necessary background material before an indepth study of its problem is examined. It is especially important that a determination of the recipients of the Galatian Epistle be made. At least one commentator believes that Paul wrote Galatians to Judaizers who were Jewish-Christians from Jerusalem and who evidently had made known their concern about Paul's liberal treatment of the Jewish law.¹ It is obvious that if the Galatian-Christians were Jews, then they are indeed the "seed of Abraham" and there is no problem.

The Historical Setting of Galatians

The Recipients

In Galatians 1:2, Paul addresses his recipients with "to the churches of Galatia." It is a group of churches that is being addressed by Paul, not just one. These recipients are all called Galatians (cf. Gal 3:1). That these Galatians were predominantly Gentile converts is implied from select passages of the Epistle. Galatians 4:8 states

¹James L. Blevins, "The Problem in Galatia," Review and Expositor 69:4 (Fall 1972):457.

that "when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods." This points to Gentile idolaters and not religious Jews. Paul also writes: "Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised, . . ." (Gal 6:12). One would assume that Jews had already been circumcised. Galatians 6:12 (cf. 3:10-12) also indicates that Judaizers were present in the churches, and being familiar with the law, were probably Jewish converts.¹

At the time Galatians was written, Galatia had two possible meanings. First, it was used as the name of a Roman province. As such, it included Galatia, part of Lycaonia, southeastern Phrygia, and part of Pisidia.² Secondly, it referred to the northern district of Galatia which was ethnic instead of political. Ethnic Galatia was named after the Gauls, Celtic tribes who had settled in the area in the early part of the third century B.C.³

From the above two possibilities there has developed a North-Galatian and a South-Galatian theory. The South-Galatian theory proposes that Paul is referring to the Roman province of Galatia and therefore the recipients are the churches established by Paul and Barnabas during

¹D. Edmond Hiebert, The Pauline Epistles, vol. 2 in An Introduction to the New Testament (Chicago: Moody Press, 1954), pp. 71-2.

²Merrill C. Tenney, New Testament Times (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), pp. 240-41.

³Hiebert, Pauline Epistles, pp. 72-3.

the first missionary journey (cf. Acts 13:13-14:23). This view received its strongest support from William Ramsay¹ in the last century and modern scholarship has been moving in this direction.² The North-Galatia theory holds that Paul established churches in north or ethnic Galatia during his second missionary journey. In Acts 16:6, Luke states that "they passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia." Advocates state that this verse refers to ethnic Galatia and that Paul again visited this region on his third missionary journey (cf. Acts 18:23).³ In support of this second view is the Church Fathers⁴ and the well-known J. B. Lightfoot.⁵

The arguments for both the North- and South-Galatia views are quite complex with attempts to synchronize places and events in the book of Acts with the context of the Galatian epistle. No attempt, although quite interesting, will be made to cover these arguments. This author agrees with Hiebert who concludes that "Fortunately, neither the value

¹William Ramsay, St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1894), p. 124.

²Hiebert, Pauline Epistles, pp. 74-5.

³Ibid., p. 74.

⁴Herman N. Ridderbos, The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia, NICNT (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1953), pp. 22-23.

⁵J. B. Lightfoot, Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1957), pp. 1-35.

of the epistle or its interpretation is seriously affected . . . not a liberal versus conservative controversy . . . rather a question of historical and biographical interest."¹

Authorship and Date

That Paul is the author of this epistle has rarely been questioned. There is both ample internal and external evidence to the fact. Internally, Paul's name appears in the salutation (Gal 1:1) where he refers to himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ. Much of what follows in chapters one and two is autobiographical in nature. Paul relates: "For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the Church of God beyond measure, . . ." (Gal 1:13). If this did not refer to Paul (cf. Acts 8:3, 22:4,5; 26:9-11), then it would have referred to someone with a similar background. Galatians has a personal tone to it throughout as shown by: "Behold I, Paul, say to you . . ." (Gal 5:2) within the body of the epistle itself. And finally, in the conclusion, the author refers to his suffering with: "I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus" (Gal 6:17).²

External evidence also supports Pauline authorship. Tenney states that: "even among the so-called heretics of

¹Hiebert, Pauline Epistles, p. 80.

²Merrill C. Tenney, Galatians: The Charter of Christian Liberty (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950), pp. 42-4.

the second century, such as Marcion, Galatians was recognized as Pauline, and the Muratorian Canon (c. A.D. 180) and Eusebius' list (c. A.D. 325) contain it."¹ The Church Fathers advocated the same. Irenaeus (A.D. 120-202) quoting from Galatians 4:8,9, wrote: "And the Apostle Paul also, saying, 'For though ye have served them which are no gods; ye now know God, or rather, are known of God, . . .'"² Also, Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 153-193-217) quotes Galatians 4:19 and attributes it to Paul: "Wherefore Paul also, writing to the Galatians, says: 'My little children, with whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you.'"³ Other examples could be cited, but there is little doubt that the early Church believed Galatians to be Pauline and accepted it as canonical.

Dating of Galatians is also complex, with very little unanimity of opinion. Some would date the epistle as early as 47 A.D. and before the Jerusalem Committee of inquiry met to discuss the issue of the Gentiles being obligated to observe Jewish law.⁴ Others feel that Galatians is

¹Ibid., p. 44.

²Irenaeus, "Irenaeus Against Heresies, Book III," in vol. 1 of ANF, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), p. 420.

³Clement of Alexandria, "The Stromata, or Miscellanies," in vol. 2 of ANF, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), p. 400.

⁴Donald Guthrie, "The Letters," in Eerdmans' Handbook to the Bible, ed. David Alexander and Patricia Alexander (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973), p. 601.

a very mature letter with a parallel theme to the Book of Romans. They also note that there seems to be no hint of a problem in the Galatian churches during the first two missionary journeys. Dating in this case falls between 54 and 58 A.D.¹

A third group of commentators, including Jerome and Lightfoot, believe that Galatians was written from Rome as a prison epistle. A basis for this is that: "The epigraph ἐγράφη ἀπὸ Ρώμης is found in several MSS., as B², K, L, the two Syriac and Coptic versions."² The complexity of determining a date is demonstrated by Eadie who gives eleven pages to the subject.³

The Context of Galatians 3:29

There are some portions of Scripture in which a consideration of context is of no help in the interpretation of a verse, phrase, word, etc., but such is not the case with Galatians 3:29. The "seed of Abraham" is both an Old Testament and New Testament concept. Therefore, a consideration of the immediate and extended context will be attempted.

¹J. Lawrence Eason, The New Bible Survey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1963), pp. 439-41.

²John Eadie, A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians, vol. 1 in The John Eadie Greek Text Commentaries (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. li.

³Ibid., pp. 1-1xi.

Immediate Context

As a general hermeneutical principle, it is: "the first responsibility of every interpreter . . . to note carefully what precedes and what follows any verse or passage which he is interpreting."¹ There is some disagreement among commentators as to the limits of the verses included in the context of Galatians 3:29. Most place Galatians 3:29 in the context of 3:1 to 4:31,² while a few extend the limits from 3:1 to 5:12.³ But all would agree that this passage deals with the theme of justification by faith apart from works of law.

There are several verses in this context which contribute to an understanding of Galatians 3:29. Paul writes in Galatians 3:7 that "it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham." He then adds, "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All the nations shall be blessed in you' . . . those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer" (Gal 3:8,9). At face value, it would appear that Paul is saying that faithful

¹A. Berkeley Mickelsen, Interpreting the Bible (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963), p. 102.

²William Hendriksen, Exposition of Galatians, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968), pp. 23-24.

³Herman N. Ridderbos, "The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia," trans. Henry Zylstra, in NICNT, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1953), p. 109.

Gentiles are Abraham's sons. He continues, "Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, 'And to seeds,' as referring to many, but rather to one, 'And to your seed,' that is, Christ" (Gal 3:16). Regardless of how one feels about how Paul uses "seed" in this verse, it is obvious that he is saying that Christ is the one true seed of Abraham.

Concerning Galatians 3:16 and Paul's use of "seed" in a singular sense, it may well be that God expected Abraham to understand it as such. In Genesis 17:20,21, God revealed to Abraham, "And as for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him, and will make him fruitful, . . . I will make him a great nation. But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, . . ." The singular "seed" Isaac was to receive God's special covenant blessing (cf. Gen 21:12); Rom 5:7). This narrowing down process of one "seed" continued with the next generation as Jacob received the blessing instead of Esau (Gen 25:23, cf. 27:27-29). But Abraham himself must have known that from him would come the ultimate singular "seed." Jesus revealed to the Jews, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad" (Jn 8:56, cf. Heb 11:13). The Jews of Jesus' day who knew the Old Testament and the writings of the prophets knew that the ultimate blessing rested in one person, the promised Messiah (Matt 2:4-6). So Paul, in Galatians 3:16,

was illustrating how "seed" was understood by the patriarch Abraham.¹

As the verses in context grow even closer to Galatians 3:29, Paul writes, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). The significance of this statement is perhaps missed in this day of equal rights. But in Paul's day:

Jew and Greek are in reciprocal alienation; bond and free are separated by a great gulf; to the male much was accorded in prerogative which is denied to the female, such as the ordinances on which the Judaists insisted; . . . Such differences were specially prominent and exclusive in ancient times. 1 Cor Xi. 7-9.²

This verse, Galatians 3:28, as it breaks down all barriers between persons is a fitting introduction to Paul's: "And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring (seed), . . ." (Gal 3:29). Here Paul is using "seed" in a plural sense in contradistinction to the singular sense of Galatians 3:16. Whether "seed" is viewed here in a spiritual or in a physical sense, it is obvious that all Christians, regardless of race or sex, are in view.

Galatians 4 continues Paul's argument of justification by faith as opposed to the works of law. Much of this chapter contributes to the understanding of "seed of Abraham" and especially to the understanding of "heirs according to

¹Hendriksen, Galatians, pp. 134-37.

²John Eadie, A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians, vol. 1 in The John Eadie Greek Text Commentaries (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 288.

promise" (Gal 3:29b). Paul's allegorical handling of the story of Hagar, Sarah, and their two sons (Gal 4:21-31) contributes to the understanding of "seed of Abraham." He states, "And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise (Gal 4:28)," which is another way of saying the same thing. Meyer is right in saying:

So, namely, as Isaac was born to Abraham 'in virtue of the promise' (v. 23), are Christians by means of divine promise also children of Abraham, in virtue of the fact that they were promised by God to Abraham as τέκνα, 'children'; without which promise, having reference to them, they would not stand in the relationship of sonship to Abraham.¹

Extended Context

To cover the complete context of Galatians 3:29 would be a voluminous undertaking and beyond the scope of this paper. Nave's Topical Bible, for instance, includes this verse under the topics of Abraham, adoption, faith, faith in Christ, heir, promises to the righteous, covenant, Judaism, false and corrupt minister, and insufficiency of works.² Therefore, for our purposes, we will consider some key New Testament and Old Testament verses. An extended discussion of the Abrahamic covenant will be covered in the next chapter.

¹Heinrich A. W. Meyer, Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Epistle to the Galatians, in vol. 7 of Meyer's Commentary on the New Testament (reprint ed., Winona Lake: Alpha Publications, 1979), p. 210.

²Orville J. Nave, Nave's Topical Bible (McLean: MacDonald Publishing Company), p. 1603.

Key New Testament Verses

Perhaps the passages which contribute the most to an understanding of Galatians 3:29 are found in Paul's epistle to the Romans. Paul writes, "For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith" (Rom 4:13). This verse sets up an anti-thesis between law and promise. The "law" here is probably not the Mosaic law since that came 430 years after Abraham.¹ But the relevant point is Paul's use of descendants (seed) in a plural sense. In this instance, he answers the question with, "For this reason it is by faith, that it might be in accordance with grace, in order that the promise may be certain to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all . . ." (Rom 4:16). Concerning this verse in light of Romans 4:11,12, Murray states:

And these verses also establish the denotation as being not the natural descendants of Abraham, but all, both of the circumcision and the uncircumcision, who are 'of the faith of Abraham' (v. 16). The 'promise' is therefore that given to all who believe and all who believe are Abraham's seed.²

Romans 9:6-8 also has bearing upon the interpretation of Galatians 3:29. Here Paul states:

¹John Murray, The Epistle to the Romans, NICNT (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959), pp. 140-41.

²Ibid., p. 142.

For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; neither are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, . . . that is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants (Rom 9:6-8).

In the context of these verses (cf. Rom 9:1-5), it is quite obvious that Paul is here speaking of the natural seed of Abraham. When Paul says, "they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel" (Rom 9:6), he can only be speaking of ethnic Israel with elect and non-elect within Israel. Verse 7 expands upon this denotation with the point that being of Abraham's seed does not make one a true child.¹ Commenting on Romans 9:8, Dr. Sproule adds, "The promise is a word of GRACE. Divine promise (not natural birth) is the basis of belonging to Abraham's fatherhood."²

There are many other New Testament passages which could contribute to our understanding of Galatians 3:29 (cf. Matt 3:9; Jn 8:38-40; Rom 15:8; Heb 9:15; 11:8-10,17-19; etc.), but the foregoing Romans passages are enough to illustrate that the "seed of Abraham" are Christians irrespective of nationality.

Key Old Testament Verses

Excluding for the moment that in God's divine call of Abraham (Gen 12:1-3) there is the promise of a multitude

¹John A. Sproule, "Greek Exegesis: Selections in Romans" (Unpublished class notes, Grace Theological Seminary, Fall, 1981), p. 4.

²Ibid.

of physical descendants (Gen 12:2a) and a multitude of implied spiritual descendants (Gen 12:3b), we find his children to be few. Abraham's first son, Ishmael, was born to Sarai's Egyptian maid when Abram was eighty-six years old (Gen 16:1-16). Abraham's second son, Isaac, the son of promise, was born to Sarah when Abraham was one hundred years old (Gen 31:1-5). After the death of Sarah (Gen 23:1-2), "Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah" (Gen 25:1). Keturah bore Abraham six more sons sometime before Abraham died at the age of one hundred and seventy-five years (Gen 25:2-8).

But, in spite of the fact that Abraham had eight sons, he knew that his seed would be named through Isaac (Gen 21:12). And he knew that even though he would become the father of a great ethnic nation through his seed, Isaac (Gen 12:2), yet from this line of descendants would come the ultimate seed, Christ (Gal 3:16, Jn 8:56). This greatest "seed of Abraham" expanded Abraham's descendants to include not only physical, but spiritual seed.

The Grammar of Galatians 3:29

Galatians 3:29--"εἰ δέ ὑμεῖς Χριστοῦ ἄρα τοῦ Ἀβραάμ σπέρμα ἐστέ κατ' ἐπαγγελίαν κληρονόμοι."¹

AV--"and if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal 3:29).

¹UBSGNT, p. 656.

Regarding textual variant readings, none are shown by the UBS text, but a καί precedes καί in some manuscripts. Meyer states that καί "is wanting in ABCDEK, 89**, and a few VSS, and many Fathers, and is expunged by Lackmann, Tisch, and Schott; justly, because it was inserted for the purpose of connection."¹ But even if καί had a high probability as a variant, it would have little significance in the interpretation of Galatians 3:29.

Semantical Considerations

Before considering any morphology or syntax of Galatians 3:29, it would be well to examine some of the semantics behind the three significant nouns in this verse. These words are seed (σπέρμα), promise (ἐπαγγελίαν), and heirs (κληρονόμοι).

Seed (σπέρμα)

The primary meanings of this word include the seeds of plants or the semen of a male.² The secondary use is in the metaphorical sense. Here seed is "a residue, or a few survivors reserved as the germ of a new race (just as seed is kept from the harvest for the sowing), Ro. ix. 29 after Is. i.9 where Sept. for טִרְיָץ, . . ." ³ As the product of

¹Meyer, Galatians, p. 100.

²BAGD, p. 761.

³C. G. Wilke, C. L. Wilibald Grimm, Clavis Novi Testamenti (A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament), translated, revised, and enlarged by Joseph Henry Thayer (New York: American Book Company, 1886), p. 583 (hereafter cited as Thayer, Lexicon).

semen, σπέρμα refers to "seed, children, offspring, progeny; family, race, posterity, . . ." ¹

Contrary to the singular use of σπέρμα in the Old Testament, it is used with reference "to the spiritual sons of Abraham, i.e., those who have faith like his, Ro. 4:16,18 (Gen 15:5); . . ." ² Kittle points out, that "In this function, σπέρμα is a term for 'what has grown,' 'what is growing,' 'what is alive,' 'new growth,' and it denotes the organic and purposeful structure of the national body; . . ." ³

In New Testament usage, σπέρμα is used in the literal "seed" sense only in the parables (Matt 13:24,27,32, 37,38). The Sadducees used the term in the sense of "progeny," "offspring," and "child" (Mk 12:19-22). Other non-Pauline New Testament examples of this transferred sense include Abraham's seed (Lk 1:55; Acts 3:25; 7:5,6; Jn 8:33; 8:37), David's seed (Acts 13:23; Jn 7:42), and the "seed of the woman" (Rev 12:17). ⁴

Paul's usage of σπέρμα is also in the transferred sense with only one (2 Cor 9:10) example of literal use. He refers to the seed of David, Abraham, and Isaac with the "seed of Abraham" having the prevalent usage. ⁵

¹Ibid.

²BAGD, p. 762.

³TDNT, s.v. "σπερμα," by Gottfried Quell, 7:538.

⁴TDNT, s.v. "σπερμα," by Siegfried Schulz, 7:545.

⁵Ibid.

Promise (ἐπαγγελίαν)

The primary biblical usage of this word, according to BAGD, is "God's promise."¹ It is this usage which is listed for Galatians 3:29 instead of the second meaning of "what was promised."² However, it is admitted that it is not always easy to distinguish between the two usages.³ Under the first usage, Thayer adds that it refers to "the divine promises of blessing, especially of the benefits of salvation by Christ, . . ."⁴

In tracing the etymology of this word, we find that in Greek usage it was originally synonymous with words of the form ἀγγελ-. As such, it had the sense of "to indicate or to declare."⁵ It developed into a term used in the Greek court of law meaning: "declaration of a complaint or accusation and delivery of a judgment."⁶ The next major transition of meaning is as we find it in the New Testament. It is the sense of "to offer to do something, to vow, or to promise."⁷

It is interesting that although Paul uses ἐπαγγελία in reference to the Old Testament, it is not the Greek word

¹BAGD, p. 280.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Thayer, Lexicon, p. 226.

⁵TDNT, s.v. "επαγγελια," by J. Schniewind and G. Friedrich, 2:576.

⁶Ibid., 576-7.

⁷Ibid., 577.

that we find in the MT and LXX for promise. But, prior to Paul, the word had reached a full development as "the promise of God" in Judaism. Numerous references could be cited, such as 3 Maccabees 2:10, Testament of Joseph 20, Psalms of Solomon 12:8, and even the relationship of Abraham, promise, and Law was found in the Syrian Apocalypse of Baruch 57:2; 59:2 (100 A.D., although originally Hebrew). These writings and other Rabbinic writings show that ἐπαγγελία has taken on an eschatological character.¹

The importance of the above is seen in the fact that Paul had been educated in the best of the Rabbinic schools and as such understood the usage of ἐπαγγελίαν. In Paul's writings, he developed the idea that "promise" is God's free grace. God is able to perform what He promises (Rom 4:21), He "gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist (Rom 4:17), and He cannot lie (Tit 1:2).² But, in the context of Galatians 3:29, Paul is dealing with the mixing of Jewish legalism and the Gospel. He had written: "For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise (Gal 3:18; cf. Rom 4:13,14)." And finally, "The content of the promises, of the promised benefit, . . . is always Messianic salvation."³

¹Ibid., 579-80.

²The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, s.v. "Promise," by E. Hoffman, 3:71 (hereafter cited as NIDNTI).

³TDNT, s.v. "επαγγελια," by J. Schniewind and G. Friedrich, 2:583.

Heirs (Κληρονόμοι)

This word literally "denotes one who obtains a lot or portion (klēros, a lot, nemomai, to possess), especially of an inheritance."¹ Vine analyzes the New Testament usage of this word under four categories as:

- (a) one who receives property upon the owner's death (e.g., Matt 21:38);
- (b) one who has been assigned an inheritance by God, but has not yet made possession, such as Abraham, Romans 4:13,14; Christ, Hebrews 1:2; poor saints, James 2:5;
- (c) Christians who will share in Christ's glory as joint heirs at His return (Rom 8:17); and
- (d) one who like Noah receives an unmerited inheritance (Heb 11:7).²

Galatians 3:29 is listed by Vine under (c) above, but Christians could be considered to have received "the promise of Abraham of justification by faith . . ." ³ now and not future.

In tracing the etymology of κληρονόμος, it is found that the meaning never varies much from the concept of inheritance. Primarily it referred to material possessions, but as early as the fourth century, B.C., it had non-material Greek usage as in Demosthenes Orationes 21:20, where it had the idea of bearing the consequences of one's action.⁴

¹W. E. Vine, An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words (Lynchburg: The Old Time Gospel House, n.d.), pp. 541-42.

²Ibid., p. 542.

³Homer A. Kent, Jr., The Freedom of God's Sons (Winona Lake: BMH Books, 1976), pp. 108-9.

⁴TDNT, s.v. "κληρονόμος," by W. Foerster, 3:768.

In the LXX, κληρονόμος is only used four times and always for שָׂרָה , to possess by inheritance. The majority of the other forms of the Greek word (i.e., κληρος , κληρώω , κληρονομία , and κληρονομέω) are used for forms of לָקַח , to take possession of.¹ Most of the translations into Greek in the LXX are of the word κληρονομία of which, "There can be no doubt that κληρονομία refers originally and almost exclusively to the possession of land."² The important exception to this material possession is the statement concerning the priests and Levites: "The Levitical priests, the whole tribe of Levi, shall have no portion or inheritance with Israel; . . . the Lord is their inheritance, . . ." (Deut 18:1,2). This indicates that "through the example of the Levites, Israel is to learn that God's people must not seek safety and security through the land, but only in the Lord, and giver of the land, Yahweh."³

Although in the Rabbinic and other Jewish works, one finds that κληρονόμος was used usually in the material sense, yet there was often an eschatological expansion. In the pseudepigraphical writings (e.g., Psalms of Solomon 14:9f, from first century B.C.), there is the idea: "that the

¹TDNT, s.v. "κληρονόμος ," by J. Herrmann, 3:769.

²Ibid., p. 774.

³NIDNTI, s.v. "Inheritance," by J. Eichler, 2:297.

inheritance is regarded as spacial. This is supported by the factual description of future torment and bliss."¹

In the New Testament usage of κληρονόμος, one finds that Christ had set the stage even before Paul. In the parable of the wicked husbandmen (Mk 12:1-12), Christ ties sonship and inheritance together and shows that an heir need not be a blood relation. Paul follows the same line of thought in his writings.² It is also worth noting that in first and second century A.D. inscriptions there is the concept of responsibility of heirship. For instance, in the Macedonian Inscription, it is written, "But if my heir neglect anything, he shall pay to the treasurer a fine of 750 denarii."³ In the insistence by Paul that true heirs are those who meet the conditions, "he is using a principle that is well-known."⁴

The Morphology and Syntax

The first thing that one notices is that Galatians 3:29 is a conditional sentence. It is introduced with εἰ in the protasis and ὅρα in the apodosis. This verse is defined to be a first class or simple conditional sentence.⁵

¹TDNT, s.v. "κληρονομος," by W. Foerster, 3:780-1.

²Ibid., pp. 781-2.

³James H. Moulton and George Milligan, The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament (Hodder and Stoughton, 1930; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), p. 347.

⁴Ibid.

⁵William Hendriksen, "Exposition of Galatians," in New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968), p. 151.

Normally, a simple conditional sentence has a verb in the indicative mood in the protasis,¹ but here we have no verb, but instead, the genitive construction, ὑμεῖς Χριστοῦ. The significance of a first class condition is that the protasis is assumed to be true, but may or may not be. It is context, theology, etc. which determines its truthfulness.² In the case of this verse, the context, Galatians 3:26-28, has shown it to be true. Boyer agrees that this is a first class condition, but states that its truthfulness is, ". . . uncertain by reason of man's spiritual condition."³ The ἄρα in the apodosis is illative and introduces a double inferential conclusion.⁴

The construction, ὑμεῖς Χριστοῦ, instead of Χριστοῦ ἐστέ, is emphatic and evidently lays stress upon the marvelous transformation which Paul has presented in Galatians 3:26-28.⁵ And since this construction in this conditional

¹H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament (Toronto: The Macmillan Company, 1927), p. 289.

²John A. Sproule, "Intermediate Greek Notes," class notes, Grace Theological Seminary, 1979, p. 95.

³James L. Boyer, "First Class Conditions: What Do They Mean?" Grace Theological Journal 2 (Spring 1981):75-105.

⁴Dana and Mantey, A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament, p. 241.

⁵Frederic Rendall, "The Epistle to the Galatians," in vol. 3 of The Expositor's Greek Testament, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), p. 175.

protasis sums up Galatians 3:26-28, it follows that the expression "to be Christ's" and "in Christ Jesus" are not different in meaning.¹ Lightfoot points out that the significance here is that Christians "are part of Christ, are members of Christ; not merely 'are the property of Christ, are servants of Christ.' The argument turns on the entire identity of the Christian brotherhood with Christ."²

In discussing the first conclusion of the apodosis, Meyer clearly states: ". . . Christ is indeed the 'Αβ, 'seed of Abraham' (v. 16), and, since ye have entered into the relation of Christ, ye must consequently have a share in the same state, and must likewise be Abraham's σπέρμα, 'seed'; . . ."³ The absence of the article with σπέρμα lays stress upon its quality and not its identity.⁴ The qualitative aspect is important because, "it keeps the necessity of a union with Christ constantly before the Galatians."⁵ This

¹Hans Dieter Bety, "Galatians," in Hermeneia--A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible, ed. Helmut Koester, et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), p. 201.

²J. B. Lightfoot, The Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), p. 150.

³Heinrich A. W. Meyer, Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Epistle to the Galatians, in vol. 7 of Meyer's Commentary on the New Testament (reprint ed., Winona Lake: Alpha Publications, 1979), p. 158.

⁴Dana and Mantey, Grammar, p. 149.

⁵James Montgomery Boice, "Galatians," in vol. 10 of The Expositor's Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), p. 469.

was in opposition to the legalizers who held before the Galatian Christians the possibility of becoming physical seed of Abraham through the ceremonial aspects of Judaism.¹

Concerning the second conclusion, κατ' ἐπαγγελίαν κληρονόμοι, there is some disagreement among expositors as to whether the emphasis falls on ἐπαγγελίαν (promise) or on κληρονόμοι (heirs). First, we notice that both words are anarthrous, which brings out their qualitative aspects. But, it is not uncommon for the article to be omitted when an expression has been stereotyped or technicalized.² And, since ἐπαγγελίαν has been used numerous times in Galatians 3 with the article, its absence here may not be significant. On the other hand, κληρονόμοι has only been used in Galatians 3:18 to this point in the epistle. On this basis, the Cambridge Greek Testament states that κληρονόμοι is, "The closing and emphatic word, implying possession actually received, not merely expectancy."³

In support of κληρονόμοι being emphatic, Meyer perhaps gives the strongest argument. He points out that this word forms the connecting link between chapters three and four. "This κληρονόμοι is the triumph of the whole,

¹Ibid.

²Dana and Mantey, Grammar, p. 149.

³A. Lukyn Williams, ed., "The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians," in Cambridge Greek Testament for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1910), p. 84.

accompanied with the seal of divine certainty by means of κατ' ἐπαγγ.; the two together forming the final death-blow to the Judaistic opponents, . . ."¹ Since τοῦ Ἀβραάμ is not supplied with κληρονόμοι , one is led to believe that this word refers to the Messianic salvation.²

There are good arguments, although not extensive, by both Lightfoot³ and Eadie⁴ for ἐπαγγελίαν having the greater emphasis, but in this writer's opinion, both words are tied closely together and therefore form an emphatic dual.

¹Meyer, Galatians, p. 158.

²Ibid., p. 159.

³Lightfoot, Galatians, p. 151.

⁴John Eadie, A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians, vol. 1 in The John Eadie Greek Text Commentaries (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 289.

CHAPTER II

THE PROBLEM OF GALATIANS 3:29

A recent unbiased commentator, reflecting on Galatians 3:29, wrote:

Does this mean that the promises to national Israel are cancelled? This is a controversial point among Christians today. Many say that there is a time in the future when Israel will be gathered and dealt with by God once more in a unique way. Another school of thought among Christians insists statements such as this one by Paul means there is no place in history for the Jew except as he comes to Christ in faith.¹

It is not an easy task to state clearly the problem for the dispensationalist in Galatians 3:29, but basically it reduces to the argument that if Israel is the "seed of Abraham" and Christians or the church are the "seed of Abraham," then Israel and the church are equal. Israel would here refer to "spiritual Israel" as defined by such New Testament passages as Romans 2:28,29.

But the above argument really receives force when presented by Fuller. He argues that the dispensationalist is concerned about keeping the seed of Abraham, consisting of physical descendants, separate from the spiritual seed consisting of those blessed through Abraham. He insists that

¹Fred M. Wood, The Glory of Galatians (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1972), p. 70.

"there is nothing, however, in Galatians 3 to indicate that Paul thought of these as sons of Abraham only in a figurative, 'spiritual' sense."¹ And finally he argues:

Because Christ was a physical descendant of Abraham, there would then be every reason to regard those united to him as the seed of Abraham in a physical sense. So if a 'face value' hermeneutic were the only concern in interpreting Galatians 3:6-29, there would be no need to designate the people mentioned in Galatians 3:7 and 29 as 'spiritual' seed in distinction from a 'physical' seed of Abraham. In fact, the very language conventions of Galatians 3 require the idea of an ontological or physical relationship to Abraham.²

Bass also argues that a literal interpretation of Galatians 3 establishes a closer unity between the church and Israel than dispensationalists want to admit. He asks if the answer might not be "that the church is indeed the spiritual Israel; that the covenantal relations of God to Israel have indeed passed over to the church; that the promise to Abraham may be fulfilled in some measure in the church; . . ."³

James E. Bear sees yet another problem in the "heirs according to the promise" of Galatians 3:29. He claims that dispensationalists have:

. . . conceded that the New Testament uses the term 'seed of Abraham' to apply to those who are not necessarily Jews at all and declares that these are heirs, not of the promise (which might be a certain one of the promised blessings), but according to the promise, which

¹Daniel P. Fuller, Gospel and Law: Contrast or Continuum (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), p. 125.

²Ibid.

³Clarence B. Bass, Backgrounds to Dispensationalism (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1960), p. 152.

on the basis of literalism would seem to mean the whole promise to Abraham.¹

It is the contention of this writer that most lay people and perhaps many seminary students are not completely aware of the difference between covenant and dispensational theology. Without a basic understanding of these two systems, the problems and solutions presented in this thesis may not be understood. Therefore, the next section, "Theological Background Considerations," gives some basic tenets of the two systems. This cannot be exhaustive for as much as complete books have been written on the subject. Also, the Abrahamic Covenant will be discussed as background to Galatians 3:29.

Theological Background Considerations

Covenant Theology Distinctives

Even Dr. Ryrie admits that "Formal definitions of covenant theology are not easy to find even in the writings of covenant theologians."² In an attempt to bring out the most salient features of covenant theology, the distinctives will be enumerated as follows:

1. All of Scripture is represented by two covenants:³

¹James E. Bear, "The People of God," The Union Seminary Review 52 (October 1940):50.

²Charles Caldwell Ryrie, Dispensationalism Today (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), p. 177.

³Baker's Dictionary of Theology, s.v. "Covenant Theology," by George N. M. Collins.

- a. The covenant of works was established between God and Adam.¹
 - b. The covenant of grace was established in successive pronouncements including the protevangelium (Gen 3:15), Noah (Gen 9), Abraham (Gen 12), Isaac, Jacob (Israel), and the New Covenant (by Christ).²
2. The covenant of grace contains two aspects:³
 - a. ". . . the covenant of redemption between the Father and the Son, . . ." ⁴
 - b. ". . . the covenant of grace between God and his people." ⁵
 3. The "Old Testament is reinterpreted in light of the Christ event" ⁶ or New Testament.
 4. "The New Testament applies Old Testament prophecies to the New Testament church and in so doing identifies the church as spiritual Israel." ⁷
 5. Therefore (supra, 4.), Old Testament prophecies find their fulfillment in the Church. ⁸
 6. There is a future salvation of Israel with details open to God's future. ⁹

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology, 3 vols. (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, and Co., 1872), 2:358.

⁵Ibid.

⁶George Eldon Ladd, "Historic Premillennialism," in The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1977), p. 21.

⁷Ibid., p. 23.

⁸Ibid., p. 17.

⁹Ibid., p. 28.

7. The millennium is interpreted in three possible ways:
- a. Ammillennial - "The millennium is to be interpreted spiritually as fulfilled in the Christian Church."¹ Some say that it is symbolic of heavenly life now while others say that it is symbolic of the future heavenly life.²
 - b. Postmillennial - The millennium is "ushered in through a gradually Christianized world. Christ comes at the end of this 'millennium.'"³
 - c. Historic Premillennial - Following a visible return of Christ, He "will reign personally and visibly with His saints on and over the earth for a thousand years."⁴
8. Old Testament Prophecy cannot be interpreted literally.⁵

Dispensational Theology Distinctives

Scofield states that "A dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God."⁶ Ryrie states that "A concise definition of a dispensation is this: A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose."⁷ He admits that in Biblical usage the

¹Oswalt T. Allis, Prophecy and the Church (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1945), p. 3.

²Paul Lee Tan, The Interpretation of Prophecy (Winona Lake: BMH Books, 1974), p. 51.

³Ibid., p. 367.

⁴Allis, Prophecy and the Church, pp. 8,9.

⁵Ibid., pp. 16-54.

⁶C. I. Scofield, ed., The Scofield Reference Bible (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909), p. 5.

⁷Ryrie, Dispensationalism Today, p. 29.

term does not ascribe time,¹ but time certainly is implied. An enumeration of some of the salient features of dispensationalism are as follows:

1. The unity of progressive revelation and the various stages of revelation are apportioned in accordance to seven dispensations as follows:²
 - a. Innocency - Man created innocent, lived in perfect environment, subjected to a simple test, warned not to disobey, fell in disobedience, was judged, and expelled from the perfect environment.³
 - b. Conscience - Man now had knowledge of good and evil, was under the Adamic Covenant which included doing good, abstaining from evil, and through sacrifice, were to approach God, failed their test, and were judged by the Flood.⁴
 - c. Human Government - Begins following the Flood, a new test is put forth in the Noahic Covenant which allows man to govern the world, man is allowed to judicially take life, and all other governmental powers implied in this. Human government ends in three stages: racial with the confusion of tongues, Jewish with the captivities, and Gentile with the second advent.⁵
 - d. Promise - Initiated with the Abrahamic Covenant which was gracious and unconditional, the heirs of promise had to abide in their own land to inherit the blessings, and the dispensation ended with Israel accepting the law. But the Covenant continues and is everlasting.⁶

¹Ibid.

²The number of dispensations varies between three and twelve among dispensationalists. See Arnold E. Ehlert, A Bibliographic History of Dispensationalism (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1965). No attempt to establish the validity of any particular number will be made, but instead, the Old Scofield Reference Bible will be used as the basis.

³Scofield, Reference Bible, p. 5.

⁴Ibid., p. 10.

⁵Ibid., p. 16.

⁶Ibid., p. 20.

- e. Law - Extends from the receiving of the law at Mt. Sinai to the death of Christ at Calvary with the actual testing of the Jewish nation ending with the captivities.¹
 - f. Grace - Begins with the death and resurrection of Christ, is a free gift, not conditioned by works of the law, is based on acceptance or rejection of Christ, has good works as fruit, is sometimes called the church age, and ends with the apocalyptic judgment.²
 - g. Kingdom - Begins with the second advent, is identical to the covenanted Davidic kingdom, Christ takes the throne and ends misrule and oppression, the Gentile nations are judged, time of toil and suffering ends with rest and reward, the chastisement and blindness of Israel ends, mankind's bondage of corruption ends, the time of the Gentiles ends, and the Kingdom of heaven extends into eternity.³
2. Hermeneutical principle that Old Testament prophecies must be interpreted literally.⁴
 3. ". . . the Old Testament is not complete apart from the New Testament and . . . the New Testament cannot be comprehended apart from the Old Testament."⁵
 4. "Old Testament prophecies about the first coming of Christ were literally fulfilled."⁶
 5. The millennium is predicted in the Old Testament and helps one picture Christ's millennial reign.⁷

¹Ibid., p. 94.

²Ibid., p. 1115.

³Ibid., p. 1250.

⁴Ladd, "Historic Premillennialism," p. 18,

⁵Herman A. Hoyt, "A Dispensational Premillennial Response," in The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1977), p. 42.

⁶Ladd, "Historic Premillennialism," p. 20.

⁷Ibid., p. 18.

6. The promises to Israel that they will inherit the land of Palestine forever will be fulfilled in the millennium.¹
7. The distinction between Israel and the Church exists throughout eternity.²
8. ". . . the Jewish temple will be rebuilt and the entire sacrificial system reinstated, according to the prophecies of Ezekiel 40-48 . . . will be a memorial to Christ's sacrificial death."³
9. Use of grammatical-historical interpretation consistently throughout the whole Bible.⁴
10. Dispensationalists "are pretribulational in their eschatology . . ."⁵
11. Dispensationalists believe that "the unifying principle of the whole of God's program is God's glory."⁶
12. ". . . the dispensations are not methods of salvation but rules of life, and . . . man has always been saved by faith through the blood of Christ in every age, . . ."⁷

The reader could perhaps add more distinctives to the above list, but what has been presented is sufficient to show the major divergences between the covenant and dispensationalist systems. Note that no attempt to give scriptural support for the distinctives of either system was given. To do so would be beyond the scope of this paper. But, in general, it can be stated that covenant theology has been built on a

¹Ibid., p. 19.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., p. 26.

⁴Ryrie, Dispensationalism Today, pp. 86-90.

⁵Tan, Prophecy, p. 246.

⁶Ibid., p. 245.

⁷Ibid., p. 255.

deductive approach in its use of Scripture, whereas dispensational theology has used the inductive approach in its use of Scripture. Ryrie has effectively demonstrated the veracity of this assertion.¹

Moving now into a consideration of the Abrahamic Covenant, this author agrees with Walvoord who states that "It is safe to say that all systems of prophetic interpretation, especially as regarding unfulfilled prophecy, are determined in their main features by their attitude toward the Abrahamic Covenant."²

Abrahamic Covenant

Before a consideration of the Abrahamic Covenant is made, it would be of worth to examine the definition and use of the word Covenant.

Covenant Defined

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word בְּרִית is translated "covenant" in about 271 out of 290 times. The other nineteen times it is translated league, confederate, or confederacy.³ The root of the word is בָּרַח, which is a cognate of כָּרַח with the primary meaning of "to cut." There

¹Ryrie, Dispensationalism Today, pp. 183-7.

²John F. Walvoord, "The Fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant," Bibliotheca Sacra 102 (January-March 1945): 29.

³Charles Fred Lincoln, "The Biblical Covenants," Bibliotheca Sacra 100 (April-June 1943):310-11.

are two other cognate roots, כָּרַח and כָּרַח , which although not used in the Hebrew text, also have the meaning of "to cut." Cutting meat in two halves is part of the covenant process (e.g., Gen 15:9,10). Included was the custom of passing between the two halves of the victims (e.g., Gen 15:17) in making a solemn covenant. Additionally, it was an Oriental custom, carried over into the Hebrew culture, to eat or banquet together as part of the covenant process (e.g., Gen 31:54).¹

There are numerous ways that כָּרַח is used in the Old Testament, including covenants between nations, between individuals, marriage, and between God and man. For purposes of this paper, only the last usage will be considered.² There are two major covenants between God and man in the Old Testament. They are the "Noahic Covenant" (i.e., Gen 9:9,11) and the "Abrahamic Covenant" (i.e., Gen 11:31; 12:1ff, 12:7; 13:3, 14-17; 13:8; 15:1-21; 17:1-14; 22:15-18; 26:2-5; 28:10-15).³ At least three features of these major covenants may be observed. First, "the condition and blessings of the covenant apply to the sons and future generations of the person or peoples with whom the original covenant is made (e.g., Deut 6:1-2, 2 Sam 7:12-17)."⁴

¹Gesenius' Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon, trans. Samuel Prideaux Tregelles (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 141.

²Ibid.

³Lincoln, "The Biblical Covenants," p. 316.

⁴Ibid., pp. 312-13.

Second, the covenant-language used is easily recognized and unique.¹ Third, "when in the prophets, or other subsequent writers, mention is made of a covenant which applies to the generations there addressed, it is always possible to go back to the place where the covenanted relationship was originally established."²

God's Promise to Abraham

An examination of Genesis 12:2,3 shows that the first six blessings were either to Abraham himself and/or to his descendants.³ But when Genesis 12:3 is examined, we see that the blessing is extended beyond the Jewish nation.⁴ The Revised Standard Version of the Bible translates Genesis 12:3c as ". . . by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves." Kidner points out that grammatically the phrase וְנִבְרַכְתֶּם (shall be blessed) could be either passive or reflexive. The New Testament, influenced by the LXX, quotes this phrase as passive in Acts 3:25 and Galatians 3:8. The LXX also understands this phrase in Genesis 22:18 and 26:4, where the Hebrew verb form is almost always reflexive, as

¹Ibid., p. 313.

²Ibid.

³Howard E. Dial, "The Idea of Covenant in the Old Testament," in vol. 13 of Post-Graduate Seminar in Old Testament Theology, Grace Theological Seminary, October 1967, p. 11.

⁴Ibid., p. 12.

being passive.¹ But "bless" is a Niphal verb and as such should be medio-passive in meaning. It should be translated passive unless otherwise required by context.² Leupold agrees and feels that some scholars are "consciously or unconsciously bent on removing the Messianic element from the Old Testament, . . ."³

That the last clause in Genesis 12:3 is Messianic is agreed upon by both covenant and dispensational theologians. Chafer, a dispensationalist, states that: "'In thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed,' which promise looks on to the Seed, Christ, and contemplates all that Christ is or ever will be to the whole earth."⁴ Hodge, a covenant theologian, states concerning the Abrahamic to Moses dispensation, that "the promise of redemption was made more definite. The Redeemer was to be of the seed of Abraham. He was to be one person. The salvation He was to effect should pertain to all nations."⁵ Leupold believes the blessing extends to the people before Abraham also:

¹Derek Kidner, Genesis, in The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, ed. D. I. Wiseman (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977), p. 114.

²Thomas O. Lambdin, Introduction to Biblical Hebrew (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), pp. 175-77.

³H. C. Leupold, Exposition of Genesis, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), pp. 413-14.

⁴Lewis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 4:314.

⁵Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology, 3 vols. (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, and Company, 1872), 2:374.

This word reaches back to the divided 'families' (10:15,20,31) of the earth, divided by their sins, as well as to the curse of 3:17 which is now to be replaced by a blessing. A blessing so great that its effect shall extend to 'all the families of the earth' . . .¹

It is at this point that Walvoord states that it is ". . . conceded that some of the promises given to Abraham are intended to extend to the Church."²

God's Covenant with Abraham

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the Abrahamic Covenant is that it was unconditional. In this regard, Walvoord, in a very concise manner, states:

The covenant was confirmed by subsequent reiteration and enlargement. It was ratified by an oath of God (Gen 15:7-21), solemnized by the recognized method of conferring an oath (cf. Jer 43:18). It was given a visible symbol in the rite of circumcision (Gen 17:9-14). It was confirmed by the birth of Isaac, by the reiterated promise given to Isaac (Gen 17:19) and to Jacob (Gen 28:12,13). Its unalterable character is revealed in that portions of the covenant have been fulfilled through the centuries in disregard of human unworthiness. . . . (Jer 31:35-37).³

The prophetic aspects of the Abrahamic Covenant can be summed up in land, seed, and blessing. The land promise of Genesis 12:1-13 finds its fulfillment in the Palestinian Covenant (Deut 30:3-5; Eze 20:33-37). The seed promise finds its fulfillment in the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam 7:11-16).

¹Leupold, Genesis, p. 413.

²John F. Walvoord, "The Fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant," Bibliotheca Sacra 102 (January-March 1945):33.

³Ibid., p. 31.

And the blessing promise of Genesis 12:3 finds its fulfillment in the New Covenant (Jer 31:31-40).¹

In light of the foregoing theological considerations, we now consider the covenant and dispensational viewpoints of Galatians 3:29.

Covenant Theology and Galatians 3:29

In this section, an attempt will be made to develop the covenant view of Galatians 3:29. This will be done systematically, as possible, without being overly extensive. As views are expressed, refutation, where possible, will also be made.

Interpretation Principles

Using the covenant theologian's approach to interpretation of Scripture, it is not difficult to show that the Church and Israel are equal. Lightfoot has applied this approach to Galatians 3:29 as follows:

Doubtless by the seed of Abraham was meant in the first instance the Jewish people, as by the inheritance was meant the land of Canaan; but in accordance with the analogy of Old Testament types and symbols, the term involves two secondary meanings. First; with a true spiritual instinct, though the conception embodied itself at times in strangely grotesque and artificial forms, even the rabbinical writers saw that 'the Christ' was the true seed of Abraham. . . . In Him it fulfilled its purpose . . . blessing . . . whole earth. Without Him its separate existence as a peculiar people had no meaning. . . . In this way the people of Israel is the type of Christ and in the New Testament parallels are sought in the career of the one to the life of the

¹Dial, "Covenant in the Old Testament," p. 11.

other. . . . But secondly; according to the analogy of interpretation of the Old Testament in the New, the spiritual takes the place of the natural; the Israel after the flesh becomes the Israel after the spirit; the Jewish nation denotes the Christian Church. So St. Paul interprets the seed of Abraham, Rom IV:18; IX:7, and above, ver. 7."¹

This is difficult to refute since it is the use of the spiritual interpretation principle that contributes to the conclusion. Notice that Lightfoot does, however, opt for a spiritual seed of Abraham, but not in the same sense as the dispensationalist.

In his appeal to equate Israel and the Church, Pieters quotes from Justin Martyr²; "As, therefore, Christ is the Israel and the Jacob, even so we, who have been quarried out from the bowels of Christ, are the true Israelitic race."³ In response, the theology of the Church Fathers was not fully developed and Justin Martyr certainly was not infallible.

Galatians 3:29 and the Abrahamic Covenant

To the covenant theologian, the call of Abraham was the second epoch under the old dispensation. Believers had already been given moral law, sacrifices, the Sabbath, the Church (i.e., family worship in the home), and the promise.

¹Lightfoot, Galatians, p. 143.

²Albertus Pieters, The Seed of Abraham (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950), p. 61.

³Justin Martyr, "Dialogue of Justin, Philosopher and Martyr," in vol. 1 of ANF, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), p. 267.

With Abraham came the separation of a peculiar people from the world formed into what might be called a church-state. Membership in this church was through circumcision which was a pledge of righteousness of faith. This Church tended, in spite of numerous warnings, toward idolatry and apostasy. The need for a separate visible Church became obvious. Temporal possession of land by Abraham and his seed was promised, but there was a gospel and spiritual implication that subsequent Scripture made plainer. Romans 3, 4 and Galatians 3 are considered the best exposition of the Abrahamic Covenant.¹ These passages teach:

. . . the seed in whom the promise was made was Christ; that the central benefit received by Abraham, was gospel salvation through faith: that the sacrament was a gospel one, a seal of the righteousness of faith: that the promise of Canaan was typical of that of heaven: that Abraham is the exemplar and head of all gospel-believers: and that the society founded in his family was, and is, the visible Church of Christ, reformed and enlarged at the new dispensation.²

This is just another way of saying that Christians are the "seed of Abraham" and Israel and the Church are equal. In relating the Abrahamic Covenant to Galatians 3:29, Pieters states that "there is always but one group that is recognized by God as being the Seed of Abraham, the community with which He is, in covenant, and that group, after the rejection of Jews by the rulers and majority of the Old Covenant Israel, was the remnant with whom he set up the New

¹Robert L. Dabney, Lectures in Systematic Theology (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972), pp. 448,9.

²Ibid., p. 449.

Covenant in His blood."¹ In response to both Dabney and Pieters, it will be shown in the section on "Dispensational Theology and Galatians 3:29" that there is more than one "seed of Abraham."

There is very little agreement among covenant theologians as to whether Galatians 3:29 implies that Christians inherit the land of Canaan. As seen above, Dabney believed that Canaan was typical of heaven. Robert Gundry, a post-tribulationist, states that:

In Galatians 3:16, Paul, directly quoting Genesis 13:15; 17:8 ('And to your seed'), applies the promise of the land of Palestine to Abraham's spiritual seed, i.e., all who believe. He quotes not merely from God's promise of general blessing upon all families of the earth (Gen 12:3), but from the later promise specifically concerned with the land itself.²

But James Bear points out that "the New Testament also does not say that the spiritual seed of Abraham shall possess the literal land of Canaan for an everlasting possession, . . . is seen to be vastly expanded and transformed . . . not Canaan, but the earth."³ The dispensationalist does not have this problem since Israel inherits the land in the millennium.

Galatians 3:29 and Romans 11

Many commentators of the covenant persuasion use Romans 11 and the figure of the Olive Tree in their interpretation of Galatians 3:29. Buswell asserts:

¹Pieters, The Seed of Abraham, p. 73.

²Robert H. Gundry, The Church and the Tribulation (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973), pp. 15,16.

³Bear, "The People of God," p. 59.

Gentile Christians have their position in grace as being grafted into the Abrahamic tree (Rom 11, passim). 'If ye (Gentiles) be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise' (which was made to Abraham)' (Gal 3:29, see vv. 7,8).¹

Bear really forces the issue:

We may liken Israel to a good Olive Tree. The roots are the Patriarchs, the trunk is the covenant people, reaching down to our own times. God has now removed some of the branches of this Olive Tree because of their unbelief in His Son, their Messiah. At the same time, He has taken some branches from a wild olive, and has grafted them in among the branches of the good Olive Tree. . . . The Gentile branches were grafted in because of their belief.²

After a short discussion of the above, Bear then states:

From this starting point we advance into Paul's argument. He is dealing with the situation in his own day, the Church Age, and is describing what has happened. Note what he does not say. He does not say that God has now made a new beginning, has formed a new people different from Israel. He does not say that Jews and Gentiles have been brought together into a new body. What he says is that wild olive branches have been grafted into the good Olive Tree--Israel in covenant relations with God--and take their place among the believing Jewish branches which remain in the tree and with them partake of the root and the fatness of the olive tree.³

As one reads through Romans 11, it does seem clear that Paul is talking about Israel being the olive tree, the broken off branches being the unbelieving Jews, and the grafted wild olive tree, the Gentiles. But there are other

¹James Oliver Buswell, A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962), pp. 487-88.

²James E. Bear, "The People of God in Light of the Teaching of the New Testament," The Union Seminary Review 52 (January 1941):152.

³Ibid., pp. 154-55.

interpretations of this passage such as that of R. L. Saucy who states that the olive tree is representative of " . . . the blessings promised to Abraham's seed. Though Gentiles do not, by faith in Christ, inherit Israel's particular promises, they do receive the blessing promised to 'all families of the earth'" (Gen 12:3; cf. Gal 3:6-9).¹

There are questions internal to Romans 11 that prevent one from believing that Paul taught that Israel and the Church were one. First, in Romans 11:1, Paul asks: "I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He"? What purpose does this serve if the Church is in view since God cannot reject the Body of Christ. Second, Paul writes in Romans 11:25: "that a partial hardening of the Gentiles has come in." But if Israel and the Church are the same, then part of the Church is experiencing hardening. The part of the Church experiencing hardness must be the Jewish element, but Galatians 3:28 states that there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile in Christ. Third, why did Paul, in Romans 11:26, add: "and thus all Israel will be saved; . . ."? What purpose does this statement serve since there is no question about the salvation of the Church?² For these reasons, Romans 11 does not contribute to the

¹R. L. Saucy, The Church in God's Program (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), p. 77.

²Nicholas Kurtaneck, "Dispensationalism--A Builder of Faith," presented to the faculty of Grace Theological Seminary, February 8-11, 1977.

interpretation of Galatians 3:29 in light of the equality of Israel and the Church.

Galatians 3:29 and the Immediate Context

Daniel P. Fuller's view of the seed of Abraham was posited at the beginning of this chapter. He views Galatians 3:29 in context as follows:

. . . people become the physical seed of Abraham by virtue of union with Christ, who was a physical descendant of Abraham. Since union with Christ came by the response of faith to the word of God and by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, members from any and all nations of earth could become bona fide descendants of Abraham. In talking about the seed of Abraham in Galatians 3:8, Paul appealed to Genesis 12:3, where God promised Abraham that all the families of earth would be blessed in him. Later on in that chapter he affirmed that Christ was the seed of Abraham (v. 16), so that those who are united to Christ by faith are Abraham's seed (v. 29).¹

It is interesting to note that few if any covenant theologians would state that Christians are the seed of Abraham in a "physical" sense as Fuller has here presented. In fact, most covenant commentators are careful to avoid the use of the word "physical" which leads one to believe that they teach that Gentile Christians become members of the new Israel or Church in a spiritual sense. A typical interpretation of Galatians 3:29 which avoids the word "physical" is as follows:

We are all Abraham's children by virtue of our faith-union with Christ, who was Abraham's true offspring since he was the one true Israelite. We therefore receive the benefits which God decreed should come to the nations through the historical channel which he appointed, the people of Israel, now reconstituted as

¹Fuller, Gospel and Law: Contrast or Continuum?, p. 133.

cation by faith and its attendant blessings is shared by those who are in Christ the Seed.¹

The question then is, can "seed of Abraham" be interpreted as spiritual in light of the grammatical-historical interpretation principle?

Interpretation Principles

The dispensationalist agrees with Milton Terry, who after discussing the various methods of biblical interpretation, states that it is "the Grammatico-Historical . . . method which most fully commends itself to the judgment and conscience of Christian scholars."² This method attempts to find the precise meaning intended by the biblical writer, and uses the same reason, common sense, and grammatical process one would apply to secular writing. This includes mastering the writer's language, dialect, style, expression, circumstances, and purpose.³ A consideration of "the accepted rules of grammar and rhetoric, as well as the factual historical and cultural data . . ."⁴ is a necessary part of this mastery.

Additionally, the "exegete, furnished with suitable qualifications, intellectual, educational, and moral, will accept the claims of the Bible without prejudice or adverse

¹Kent, The Freedom of God's Sons, pp. 108-9.

²Milton S. Terry, Biblical Hermeneutics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974), p. 173.

³Ibid.

⁴Tan, The Interpretation of Prophecy, p. 29.

prepossession, and, with no ambition to prove them true or false, will investigate the language and import of each book with fearless independence."¹ This is what is called literal interpretation.

The question is then asked whether literal means non-figurative? All great literature, including the Bible, uses both figurative and non-figurative language. These figures are a legitimate part of language which makes it linguistically more lively. For instance, we would not equate Christ with the sun, moon, and stars when in John 8:12 He says, "I am the light of the world; he who follows Me shall not walk in the darkness, . . ." This is a normal and customary part of biblical language and we can find a literal meaning behind it without forcing an unnatural element on it.²

Covenant interpreters argue that when the dispensationalist's literal interpretation "is pressed in a rigid and unyielding manner upon every Scripture, this very principle, which is the natural one to be employed, actually perverts the meaning of the text."³ The argument then follows that the spiritual element of Scripture is missed. But the literal interpreter recognizes that the Bible is

¹Terry, Biblical Hermeneutics, p. 173.

²Tan, The Interpretation of Prophecy, p. 31.

³Bass, Backgrounds to Dispensationalism, pp. 21-

divine in its content and origin and that it contains spiritual truths. These spiritual truths can be brought out by the literal interpretation method.¹

The Seed of Abraham

In Scripture, there are three different groups of people who are referred to as "the seed of Abraham." First, there is the natural seed which came through Jacob and his twelve sons--"O seed of Abraham, His servant, O sons of Jacob, His chosen ones!" (Psa 105:6). Jesus also referred to this natural seed with: "I know that you are Abraham's offspring" (Jn 8:37); as did Paul (cf. Rom 2:17, 8:3, 9:4, 10:1). Second, there is a spiritual seed which is contained within the natural. Paul points this out in at least two passages in Romans: "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; . . . But he is a Jew who is one inwardly . . ." (Rom 2:28-29); and ". . . For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel" (Rom 9:6). Third, the seed denotes Christians regardless of race (Gal 3:28, 29). This seed was provided for in the Abrahamic Covenant with the promise that ". . . in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:3).² Ryrie points out that Christ is also a seed born to Abraham: "There is Christ-- 'Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He

¹Tan, The Interpretation of Prophecy, p. 32.

²Kurtaneck, "Dispensationalism--A Builder of Faith."

saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ'" (Gal 3:16).¹

An examination of such Old Testament verses as when God said to Abraham concerning Isaac: ". . . I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him" (Gen 17:19), reveals that the descendants (seed) are physical. Note that the promise was also made to Jacob (Gen 28:13-14) at a later time. In light of this, Walvoord points out that:

Nothing should be plainer than that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob understood the term seed as referring to their physical lineage. While blessing is promised those outside the seed of Abraham if they believe as godly Abraham believed, the particular promises of a great posterity, of possession of the land, and being the channel of blessing to Gentiles is never given to any except the physical seed.²

Galatians 3:29 and the Abrahamic Covenant

The Abrahamic Covenant was adequately covered in the first part of this chapter. And the resulting fulfillment of that covenant can be stated quite simply: "Through Jesus Christ the promise is fulfilled. He is the seed within the seed of Abraham through whom the fullness of blessing is mediated (3:15-18,29)."³ It is only through faith in

¹Charles C. Ryrie, Dispensationalism Today (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), p. 148.

²John F. Walvoord, The Millennial Kingdom (Findlay: Dunham Publishing Company, 1959), p. 161.

³Norman C. Habel, "The Gospel Promise to Abraham," Concordia Theological Monthly 40 (June, July, August 1969): 354.

Christ that the Gentile receives any blessing from the promise given to Abraham. Martin Luther understood this clearly:

Indeed the promise was made only to the Jews, and not to us that are Gentiles (Psal. cxlvii.). 'He showeth his word unto Jacob,' & c, 'He hath not dealt so with every nation,' & c, Notwithstanding, that which was promised cometh unto us by faith, by that which only we apprehend the promise of God. Albeit then that the promise be not made unto us, yet it is made as touching us and for us; for we are named in the promise: 'In thy seed . . . blessed.' For the promise showeth plainly that Abraham should be the father, not only of the Jewish nation, but of many nations; and that he should be the heir, not of one kingdom, but of all the world (Rom IV).¹

But dispensationalists also understand that some of the promises to Abraham are unconditional and also eschatological.

This eschatological element has been nicely presented:

As far as Christians or the Church sharing in the blessings of the Covenant, this is certainly true not because the Church is merged with Israel but because the Church is inseparably united to Christ, the Bridegroom, and thus becomes co-regent with Him. As we have previously noted, the Church is a regal body destined to rule and reign with Christ the King and thus to be partakers of the promises and blessings of the Abrahamic covenant.²

Galatians 3:29 and the Immediate Context

In general, the dispensationalist agrees with Feinberg that "It is proper to speak of believing Jews and believing Gentiles as Abraham's spiritual seed (so Paul

¹Martin Luther, A Commentary on Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians (London: James Duncan, 1838), p. 324.

²Rolland D. McCune, "The Church and the Abrahamic Covenant," a thesis presented to the faculty of Grace Theological Seminary, May 1966, p. 69.

designates them in Galatians 3), but spiritual Israelites are believing Jews only."¹ This is based on a proper interpretation of Romans 9:6, which was previously mentioned, and Galatians 6:16, which must refer to spiritual Israelites as defined above.²

Galatians 3:29 in the context of 3:26-29 contributes to the understanding of Galatians 3:14 which states ". . . that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith." Galatians 3:26-29, in conjunction with 1 Corinthians 12:13, explains that:

By faith in Christ men become the sons of God, being baptized into Christ. Those who are in Christ are then said to be Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise (3:29). Thus they become eligible to receive the blessing promised in the Abrahamic covenant by being joined to Christ through baptism. By comparison with 1 Corinthians 12:13, it is evident that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is in view in these verses. He is the one who places believers into mystical union with Christ.³

At this point, there is agreement between covenant and dispensational theologians. In fact, Barnes who was of the covenant persuasion, commenting on 3:29, stated:

The promise made to Abraham related to the Messiah.
. . . Abraham believed in that Messiah, . . . If they

¹Charles L. Feinberg, Premillennialism or Amillennialism (New York: American Board of Missions to the Jews, Inc., 1961), p. 147.

²Ibid.

³Herschel D. Pumphrey, "An Exegetical Study of Galatians 3:1-14, with Special Reference to the Promise of the Spirit and the Abraham Covenant" (Thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, May 1974), p. 68.

believed in Christ, therefore, they showed that they were the spiritual descendants of Abraham. No matter whether they were Jews or Gentiles . . .¹

Calvin states that Paul, in Galatians 3:29, intended "to repress the pride of the Jews, who gloried in their privilege, as if they alone were the people of God."² And in his interpretation of Galatians 6:16, he interprets the "Israel of God" to be the Church and ties it back to Galatians 3:29.³ But, viewing Galatians 3:29 in light of 3:28, reveals that:

The statements of Paul in regard to this being in Christ (Gal 3:28) show the distinction between the Church and Israel. They are maintained in this passage which so strongly unites Christians with Abraham in the matter of promise.⁴

Of interest is the method used by some covenant theologians in refuting the distinction between Israel and the Church. A case in point:

. . . the distinction between Israel and the Church, so basic and crucial to dispensationalism, is difficult to maintain consistently. Dispensationalists have carefully selected passages that favor (or at least can accommodate) their interpretation. Other passages, however, are not so easily disposed of. In Romans 9 and Galatians 3, for example, it is difficult to escape the

¹Albert Barnes, Barnes' Notes on the New Testament, edited by Ingram Cobbin (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1962), p. 944.

²John Calvin, "Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians," trans. William Pringle, in Calvin's Commentaries, 22 vol. (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 112.

³Ibid., p. 186.

⁴Stephen E. Rumley, "The Promises to the Seed in Galatians Three," monograph, Winona Lake, Grace Theological Seminary, May 1975, p. 54.

conclusion that Paul regarded the Church, Jew and Gentile alike, as the true heir to the promises originally made to national Israel.¹

In response to Mr. Erickson, the "All the nations shall be blessed in you" (Gal 3:8) refers to more than national Israel. The promises came to Christ (Gal 3:16) and the promise, that is salvation in Christ, comes to believers (Gal 3:29).

In summary, when the dispensationalist examines a verse like Galatians 3:29, he first applies the literal interpretation principle to it. He realizes that there is a literal/physical seed of Abraham, but the context (Gal 3:26-29) tells him that the seed of Abraham are those who are in spiritual union with Christ. This union with Christ is accomplished by Holy Spirit baptism (1 Cor 12:13) and therefore Christians are spiritual seed and not physical.

And finally, concerning "heirs according to the promise," this author believes that those in Christ are the heirs and not Abraham. Meyer argues for this interpretation as follows:

For if Paul had wished to express the idea that Christians as the children of Abraham were also the heirs of Abraham, the καὶ ἐπαγγ. would have been inappropriate; because the promise (ver. 16) had announced the heirship of the Messianic kingdom to Abraham and his seed, but had not announced this heirship in the first instance to Abraham, and then announced to his seed in their turn that they should be Abraham's heirs.²

¹Millard J. Erickson, Contemporary Options in Eschatology (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), p. 123.

²Meyer, Galatians, p. 159.

CHAPTER III

THE SOLUTION OF GALATIANS 3:29

This chapter will first summarize both the covenant and dispensational views concerning Galatians 3:29. Then, in the conclusion, this author will divulge his viewpoint concerning a solution to the problem expressed in the "Introduction and Statement of Purpose" section of this paper. And, finally, a practical consideration will be suggested.

Summarization of the Covenant Viewpoint

At the heart of the covenant theologian's interpretation of Galatians 3:29 is the Covenant of Grace and the insistence that the Church is identified with spiritual Israel. In order to support this contention, Old Testament prophecy cannot be interpreted literally. And therefore an analogy of interpretation, in which the Old Testament is interpreted in light of the New Testament, and the spiritual takes precedence over the natural, is used. This does not mean that all covenant theologians believe that the Church in this age fulfills all Old Testament prophecy, for there are amillennial, postmillennial and historical premillennial views of the millennium among them.

In the covenant system, the Church or Church-state, as a peculiar people set apart from the world, began with Abraham. Because of idolatry and apostasy, it became necessary for a visible Church. In fact, the true seed promise made to Abraham was Christ and the ultimate blessing is salvation through faith. Within this view is the spiritual interpretation that the promise of the land of Canaan is a type of heaven. It is true that some believe that Christians inherit the land (Canaan or earth), but this is the exception rather than the rule.

Many covenant theologians use Romans 11 and the figure of the Olive Tree in their interpretation of Galatians 3:29. Here the Olive Tree is Israel or the Church with the tap root being Abraham. The unbelieving Jews are removed from the Olive Tree and Gentile believers are grafted in. Therefore, the "seed of Abraham" equals all believers, Jew and Gentile, who are grafted into Israel, represented by the good Olive Tree. This Israel was in covenant relation with God and is still in covenant relation with God in the New Covenant. Both covenants are a Covenant of Grace.

The resulting interpretation of Galatians 3:29 in view of the covenant theologian's interpretation of Romans 11, the Abrahamic Covenant, and other New Testament passages, has resulted in primary and secondary meanings. First, the "seed of Abraham" are the Jewish people and the inheritance is the land of Canaan or the earth. Secondly, using the analogy of Old Testament types and symbols, the

"seed of Abraham" is Christ, and the Church or Israel is a type of Christ. Thirdly, using the analogy of interpreting the Old Testament in light of the New Testament, natural Israel becomes spiritual Israel of which all believers are a part. As such, the "seed of Abraham" is spiritual Israel. It is true that some theologians, such as Fuller, who may be neither covenant nor dispensational, view the "seed of Abraham" as physical, but this is an exception.

Summarization of the Dispensational Viewpoint

At the heart of the dispensationalist theologian's interpretation of Galatians 3:29 is the use of the grammatical-historical interpretation principle. He believes that using this principle consistently throughout Scripture evinces that the distinction between Israel and the Church exists throughout eternity. This means that Old Testament prophecies must be interpreted literally and proof positive of this is that Old Testament prophecies concerning the first coming of Christ were fulfilled literally.

The Abrahamic Covenant was a solemn occasion visibly made between God and Abraham. It was confirmed by subsequent historical occurrences in the Old Testament record. That the covenant is unconditional is shown by the fact that portions of the covenant have been fulfilled in spite of Israel's unworthiness.

The covenant and dispensational theologians both agree that: "And in you all the families of the earth

shall be blessed" (Gen 12:3) is Messianic. Christ is the fulfillment of this promise to Abraham as is demonstrated in Galatians 3. And in that respect, this promise also extends to the Church, the body of Christ. It is only through faith in Christ that the Gentile partakes of this promise.

The "seed of Abraham" in Galatians 3:29 does not confirm that there is only one group in covenant relation to God at every point in history. The covenant with Israel that they will inherit the land of Canaan is an everlasting covenant and is not superseded. In fact, there are three different groups of people who are referred to as the "seed of Abraham." These include the natural seed through Jacob and his twelve sons, a spiritual seed within the natural seed which consists of believing Jews, and Christians, regardless of race. And then there is the ultimate seed of Abraham which is Christ.

The "if you belong to Christ" of Galatians 3:29 in the context of Galatians 3:26-29 means to be "baptized into Christ." This is a spiritual and not a physical union with Christ, as shown by this context and the Holy Spirit baptism of 1 Corinthians 12:13. So it follows that the "seed of Abraham" in Galatians 3:29 are those who have been spiritually united to Christ through faith. They are therefore spiritual seed as agreed upon by dispensationalists and most covenant theologians.

The "heirs according to the promise" of Galatians 3:29 are those who "belong to Christ," and not Abraham. The

"promise" of this verse is singular and does not refer to all the promises made to Abraham. Likewise, the "promise" is not Christ per se, because it would make no sense to say that: "those who are of Christ inherit Christ." Rather, the "promise" is salvation through Christ which comes to Christians as well as to Abraham.

Conclusion

This author would not be so bold as to say that there are no problems with the dispensational approach to biblical interpretation. There are portions of Scripture which have apparent problems which will probably never be solved by any theological system this side of heaven. Galatians 3:29 is not a problem passage except in that its interpretation varies somewhat depending on the theological system, i.e., covenant or dispensational, used.

In the "Introduction and Statement of Purpose" section, it was posited that in Galatians 3:29, "There seems to be an implication that Gentile Christians are part of the fulfillment of promises given to Abraham and to his natural seed and are therefore a part of Israel." The first part of this statement has been shown to be true because all Christians are "seed of Abraham" through Christ in a spiritual sense. But it does not follow that they are therefore part of Israel, or does it? For the dispensationalist, it does not follow since he has shown Israel and the Church to be distinct. On the other hand, if the covenant theologian is

consistent in his interpretation principles, then it follows that Gentiles are part of Israel. We would insist, however, that Galatians 3:29 does not prove Israel and the Church equal, but only affirms it under the covenant system. We also would insist that we do not entirely agree with the covenant theologian's interpretation principles which lead him to this conclusion.

On the practical side, this verse, Galatians 3:29, or the different interpretation principles used by the covenant and dispensational camps, should not divide us as Christians. We are all brothers in Christ. For "if you belong to Christ (i.e., born again), then you are Abraham's offspring (i.e., spiritual seed), heirs according to promise (i.e., salvation)" (Gal 3:29).

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