

Faith Pulpit

Faith Baptist Theological Seminary 1900 NW Fourth Street, Ankeny, IA 50021



Richard W. Houg, President

George G. Houghton, Th.D., Academic VP.

Robert G. Delnay, Th.D., Seminary Dean

The Problematic Development of Progressive Dispensationalism

by Manfred Kober, Th.D.

(Part 1 of 2)

March 1997

In recent years major changes have occurred within dispensationalism. A new system, known as progressive dispensationalism, has caused major concern among traditional dispensationalists.

I. THE PERIODS OF DISPENSATIONALISM

Several periods of development within dispensationalism have been suggested.

1. The foundational period: 1885 -1920 (John Nelson Darby, 1800-1882).
2. The classical period : 1920-1950 (C.I. Scofield, 1843-1921, Lewis Sperry Chafer, 1871-1952).
3. The defining period: 1950-1990 (Alva J. McClain, John F. Walvoord, J. Dwight Pentecost, Charles C. Ryrie).
4. The progressive period: 1990 and on (Darrell L. Bock, Craig A. Blaising, Robert L. Saucy).

II. THE PRINCIPLES OF DISPENSATIONALISM

Dispensationalists see God's dealing with mankind in distinguishable stewardships to accomplish His sovereign purpose.

The *sine qua non*, as succinctly delineated by Ryrie, is the following:

1. A clear distinction between Israel and the Church.
2. The consistent use of literal interpretation.
3. A concerted emphasis on the glory of God as the underlying purpose for His actions. (*Dispensationalism Today* [1965], 43-44).

Traditional dispensationalists have always clearly and consistently distinguished Israel and the Church and God's program for each. An explanation of traditional dispensationalism may be found in my colleague's article, "Progressive Dispensationalism: A Traditional Dispensational Critique" (Myron J. Houghton, *Faith Pulpit*, January 1995, 1).

III. THE PROPONENTS OF PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM

1. Craig A. Blaising, until recently at Dallas Theological Seminary (Systematic Theology), presently at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY.
2. Darrell Bock, at Dallas Theological Seminary, (New Testament).
3. Robert L. Saucy, Talbot Theological Seminary (Systematic Theology).

IV. THE PUBLICATIONS OF PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM

Besides the publication of numerous periodical articles, progressive dispensationalists have stated their views to date in three major works:

1. *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 1992 (edited by Bock and Blaising)
2. *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 1993 (written by Bock and Blaising).
3. *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 1993 (written by Saucy).

V. THE PURPOSE OF PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM:

The movement arose out of the Dispensational Study Group which first met on November 20, 1986, in connection with the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Atlanta, Georgia. Five years later, at the 1991 meeting, the actual label "progressive dispensationalism" was introduced. The purpose of the study group appears to be to clarify dispensational issues in order to bridge the gap between dispensationalism and covenant theology. Related to this effort of the rapprochement with a totally different theological approach was a rejection of the *sine qua non* of traditional dispensationalism, thus permitting a conscious movement toward covenant theology.

The new dispensationalists appear to desire the following:

1. To develop further the system of dispensationalism.

- A remaking of dispensationalism according to their theological presuppositions, in part adopted from European theologians.
2. To discover similarities between dispensationalism and covenant theology.
A rapprochement with a totally dissimilar system.
 3. To delineate the progressive fulfillment of God's plan in history.
A rejection of God's distinctive purposes for Israel and the church.

It is a sad commentary on the present situation that whereas premillennialism (out of which dispensationalism gradually emerged) arose in America primarily through early Bible conferences held in opposition to the postmillennialism and liberalism of the day, progressive dispensationalism, in following the ecumenical spirit of the times, is seeking common ground with amillennialism.

VI. THE PROPOSITIONS OF PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM:

Ryrie notes that in contrast to his listed *sine qua non* of dispensationalism, "progressive dispensationalism (1) teaches that Christ is already reigning on the throne of David in heaven, thus merging the church with a present phase of the already inaugurated Davidic covenant and kingdom; (2) this is based upon a complementary hermeneutic which allows the New Testament to introduce changes and additions to Old Testament revelation; and (3) the overall purpose of God is Christological; holistic redemption being the focus and goal of history" (*Dispensationalism*, 164).

Interestingly, to date the progressive dispensationalists have neither been successful in their attempt to define dispensationalism nor to state what its essential principles are. By highlighting the basic tenets of progressive dispensationalism, Ryrie shows how far this system, which he rightly labels, "revisionist dispensationalism," has departed from traditional or authentic dispensationalism:

- (1) The kingdom of God is the unifying theme of biblical history.
- (2) Within biblical history there are four dispensational eras.
- (3) Christ has already inaugurated the Davidic reign in heaven at the right hand of the Father which equals the throne of David, though not yet reigning as Davidic king on earth during the millennium.
- (4) Likewise the new covenant has already been inaugurated, though its blessings are not yet fully realized until the millennium.
- (5) The concept of the church as completely distinct from Israel and as a mystery unrevealed in the Old Testament needs revising, making the idea of two purposes and two peoples of God invalid.
- (6) A complementary hermeneutic must be used alongside a literal hermeneutic. This means that the New Testament makes complementary changes to Old Testament promises without jettisoning those original promises.

The one divine plan of holistic redemption encompasses all people and all areas of human life, personal, societal, cultural, and political (Ryrie, *ibid.*, 164 [emphasis in the original]).

VII. THE PROBLEMS OF PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM

1. Hermeneutical Problems.

Progressive dispensationalism denies that consistent literal interpretation is a defining essential of dispensationalism. Craig Blasing maintains "that consistent literal exegesis is inadequate to describe the essential distinctive of dispensationalism" ("Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145, No. 579 [July-September, 1988], 272). Progressive dispensationalism further introduces a new method of interpretation, called "complementary hermeneutics," by reading into Old Testament promises much more than they contain. Progressive dispensationalists teach that "the New Testament does introduce change and advance; it does not merely repeat Old Testament revelation. In making complementary additions, however, it does not jettison old promises. The enhancement is not at the expense of the original promise." (*Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 392-93.) The Old Testament promises concerning Christ's rule relate to a future millennial kingdom when He would rule on the throne of David. Complementary hermeneutics insists that the New Testament revelation complements the Old Testament promise by revealing Christ presently ruling on the Davidic throne in heaven. The problem of this new method of interpretation is that its limits are not clearly spelled out. Furthermore, who determines how much New Testament truth should be read back into literal Old Testament promises? Does not this destroy the concept of literal interpretation? The apparent reason why the revisionists would like to see the kingdom established now is out of a desire to show their appreciation for this aspect of covenant theology; while at the same time they want to maintain a future fulfillment of the Old Testament promises in the Millennial Kingdom.

Robert L. Thomas, in his incisive study, "A Critique of Progressive Dispensational Hermeneutics," deplors the departure of progressive dispensationalism from traditional historical-grammatical interpretation. He notes that progressive dispensationalism practices "a selective use of passages seemingly in support of their system--avoiding others that do not." He cites ample illustrations of this method and concludes that "thorough-going grammatical-historical interpretation does not condone this kind of superficial treatment of text, particularly when they are critical to support a doctrine being propounded" (Ice and Demi, eds., *When the Trumpet Sounds*, 423-424).

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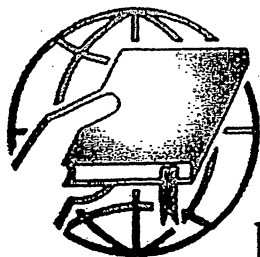
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2. Messianic Problems

Traditional dispensationalists have always understood that the Davidic rule of Christ would be in Jerusalem on the literal throne where his ancestor David ruled. Progressive dispensationalism believes this but also teaches that the Lord already rules on the throne of David in heaven, a rule which began at His ascension. This view ignores the clear scriptural distinction between Christ's present rule on the Father's throne in heaven (Hebrews 12:2) and His future rule on His throne on earth (Revelation 3:21). Traditional dispensationalists reject the notion that Christ's present rule in heaven constitutes an inaugural fulfillment of the Davidic covenant of 2 Samuel 7:14. No wonder John F. Walvoord concludes with other classic dispensationalists "that progressive dispensationalism, as it is called, is built upon a foundation of sand and is lacking specific scriptural proof" (Willis and Masters, eds., *Issues in Dispensationalism*, 90). Progressive dispensationalists have manufactured out of thin air an artificial view that Christ's rule is present and yet future at the same time. This "already/not yet" dialectic is borrowed from George E. Ladd whose slippery slope of subjective hermeneutics led him from a premillennial to a modified covenant theology position. His form of realized eschatology, in turn, was borrowed from European theologians like C.H. Dodd.

3. Ecclesiastical Problems

By magnifying the continuity of various dispensations, revisionists are minimizing the distinctiveness of the church. Their mystery concept of the church is not that it was unrevealed in the Old Testament but it was unrealized. As a corollary, God has no separate program for the church. The church is simply a sub-category of the Kingdom. It is called a "sneak preview" of the Kingdom and a "functional outpost of God's Kingdom" (*Progressive Dispensationalism*, 257). The church is the Kingdom today. In fact, David Turner calls the church "the 'new Israel'" (Blaising and Bock, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 288). It is not surprising, therefore, that Bruce Waltke observes that Turner's "position is closer to covenant theology than to dispensationalism" (*Ibid.*, 334). With their theological neutering of the church, the revisionists are clearly de-emphasizing the pretribulational rapture, God's distinct event involving the church.

4. Definitional Problems

Progressive dispensationalists are neither able to give a clear definition of a dispensation nor make a convincing case for their number of dispensations. They subscribe to four primary dispensations. The first is the patriarchal, beginning with creation and continuing to Sinai. It is strange that the revisionists do not see the pre-fall stewardship that God sustained with Adam and Eve as a separate dispensation. Ryrie correctly notes, "To lump pre-fall conditions, post-fall conditions and the Abrahamic covenant under common stewardship arrangement or dispensation is artificial, to say the least" (*Dispensationalism*, 166). The second dispensation is labeled the Mosaic (from Sinai to Christ's ascension). The third is called the Ecclesial (from the ascension to Christ's second coming). The fourth dispensation is the Zionitic which is divided into (1) the millennial kingdom and (2) the eternal state. The practical fusion of the millennium and the eternal state evidences a disregard for the uniqueness of the kingdom age, an emphasis which had always been an integral part of premillennial dispensationalism and which is now an area in which the revisionist dispensationalists have given ground in order to appeal to covenant theologians.

VIII. The Prospects for Progressive Dispensationalism

1. The infiltration of seminaries.

Several seminaries, which once stood forthrightly for traditional dispensational distinctions, have a certain number of faculty espousing the progressive position. Ernest Pickering rightly warns that the dissemination of deviant dispensational doctrines is "not compatible with historic dispensationalism. They move toward covenant theology which identifies the Church with Israel. It would not be surprising to see more and more former dispensationalists embracing the covenant system as some already have" (*Dispensations*, 15).

It is sad to observe what has occurred at Dallas Theological Seminary, the stronghold of dispensationalism, where many of the instructors here at FBBC&TS have studied. While a number of traditional dispensationalists still teach at DTS, their system has not just been modified but totally changed by Bock, Blaising and their followers. And yet, Donald Campbell, in a letter of May 28, 1992, to the alumni, tries to assure the graduates of DTS that all the faculty "are dispensationalists as defined by our Doctrinal Statement." But the progressives do not agree, it seems, with this aspect of the doctrinal statement, which they have signed: "The church which is the body and bride of Christ, which began at Pentecost...is completely distinct from Israel." (CATALOG 1995-1996, 140, italics added). Sadly, there is no sounding of an alarm over a method of biblical interpretation which, according to a former faculty member there, "shakes the very foundation of dispensational hermeneutics, which includes a consistent literalistic interpretation of the Old Testament" (Waltke in *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church*, 348). The new president of Dallas Theological Seminary, Chuck Swindoll, has not helped matters at all. In an interview in *Christianity Today* prior to his stepping into the presidency, he announced that he would no longer emphasize dispensationalism. "I think

dispensations is a scare word. I'm not sure we're going to make dispensationalism a part of our marquis as we talk about our school." When asked whether he thought the term dispensationalism would disappear, Swindoll replied, "It may and perhaps it should." (Oct. 25, 1993, 14, italics in the original). The very distinctive that has made Dallas Theological Seminary such a unique school is now de-emphasized. Who would have thought that Dallas Theological Seminary would ever downplay the system of theology that has made it distinct while at the same time giving encouragement to a group of scholars who take the school toward covenant theology?

Primarily through men trained at Dallas Theological Seminary other schools have adopted this radical departure from traditional dispensationalism. At these institutions whole generations of pastors will be moved away from literal interpretation toward confusing complementary hermeneutics. The students will be exposed to de-emphasis of church age truth and an unclear eschatological framework. Dispensational distinctions are giving way to an unwarranted and unnecessary accommodation with amillennialism.

As an example, in these schools where progressive dispensationalism has taken root, classic dispensationalists like Walvoord are charged with using "a 'hyperliteral' approach to apocalyptic imagery" (Turner, *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church*, 227). Walvoord's description of a literal New Jerusalem in Revelation 21-22 is countered by Turner with the observation that the gates of the city could not possibly be made from one pearl, neither could the streets be made of gold. "The absence of oysters large enough to produce such pearls and the absence of sufficient gold to pave such a city (viewed as literally 1380 miles square and high) is viewed as sufficient reason not to take these images fully literal!" (Ibid.).

2. The ignoring by laymen.

It must be said to the credit of traditional dispensationalism that in its simplicity it is understood by lay people and unlocks the Scriptures for them. Who knows how many millions of American believers have been blessed by the helpful notes of the Scofield Bible. In contrast to Ryrie's clear and concise writings, the progressive dispensationalists write in such a scholarly and technical style that their books are difficult to read and thus will only reach a limited group of scholars. One can appreciate Thomas Ice's frustration when he says that *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* is "difficult [to] read because of its erudite technical style. . . It is sometimes hard to get a grip on what is precisely being said, even after reading a passage several times" ("A Critical Examination of 'Progressive Dispensationalism,'" *Biblical Perspectives*, Vol. V, No. 6, November-December, 1992, 1).

3. The surrender to covenant theology.

One wonders whether the revisionists really espouse a modified dispensationalism or whether they are not closer to a modified form of covenant theology. Thomas Ice's warning is well-placed that "these. . . men are in the process of destroying dispensationalism" (Ibid, 1). Eventually much of eschatology will give way to a vague anticipation of the future. According to Bock, progressive dispensationalism is "less land-centered and less future-centered" (*Christianity Today*, March 9, 1992, 50). The future blessings that are predicted for Israel in the millennial kingdom are suddenly reinterpreted. According to Carl Hoch, the privileges of ethnic Israel "were restricted to Israel before the death of Christ and the creation of the Church" (Blaising and Bock, eds., *Dispensationalism, etc.*, 125). It is difficult to see why there is a need for a Millennium. Revisionist dispensationalism, with its de-emphasis on the distinctiveness of the church and the uniqueness of the Millennium has not simply made slight corrections in dispensational theology but significant changes, so significant that it is doubtful whether they can be considered dispensationalists at all as they are more and more warmly embraced by their covenant friends. No wonder Walter E. Elwell concludes, "The newer dispensationalism looks so much like nondispensationalist premillennialism that one struggles to see any real difference" ("Dispensationalism of the Third Kind," *Christianity Today*, September 12, 1994, 28). Ron Clutter reports on the general sentiment of the 1987 meeting of the Dispensational Study Group, chaired by Craig Blaising. There was common agreement that moderate dispensationalists and moderate covenant theologians are closer to each other than either to classic dispensationalists or classic covenant theologians. "It seems both are moving toward each other in rapprochement" ("Dispensational Study Group discussion," *Grace Theological Journal*, Vol. 10 No. 2, Fall 1989, 161).

It is true that each generation of theologians needs to apply biblical truth to the people of the day. However, in so doing they dare not surrender major areas of doctrine which the progressive dispensationalists are in danger of doing. The biblical injunction to rightly divide the Word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15) is important in the area of dispensational theology and especially in light of progressive dispensationalism which appears to be rapidly moving toward covenant theology. May God grant us His discernment in these difficult and challenging times.

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