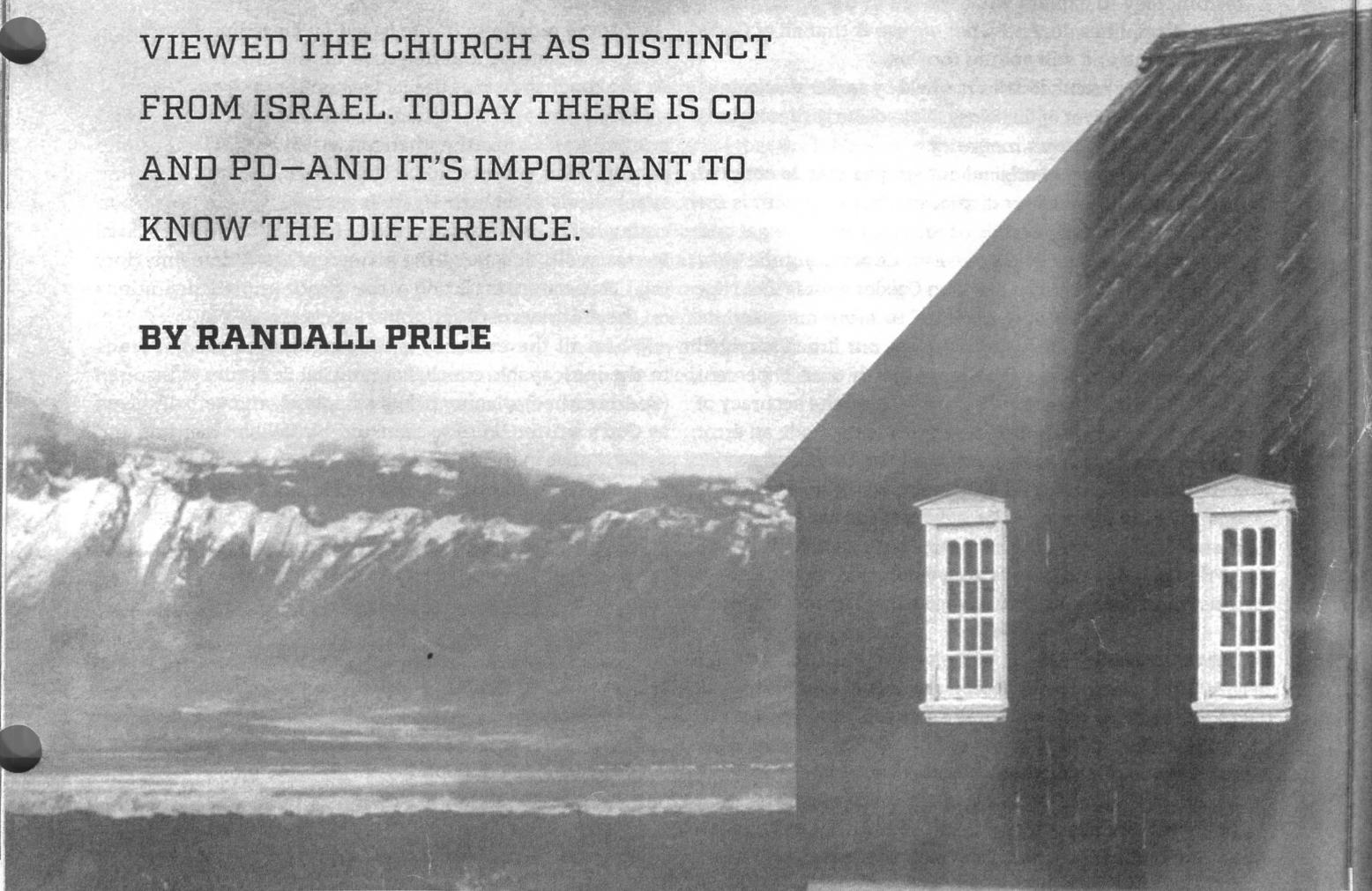


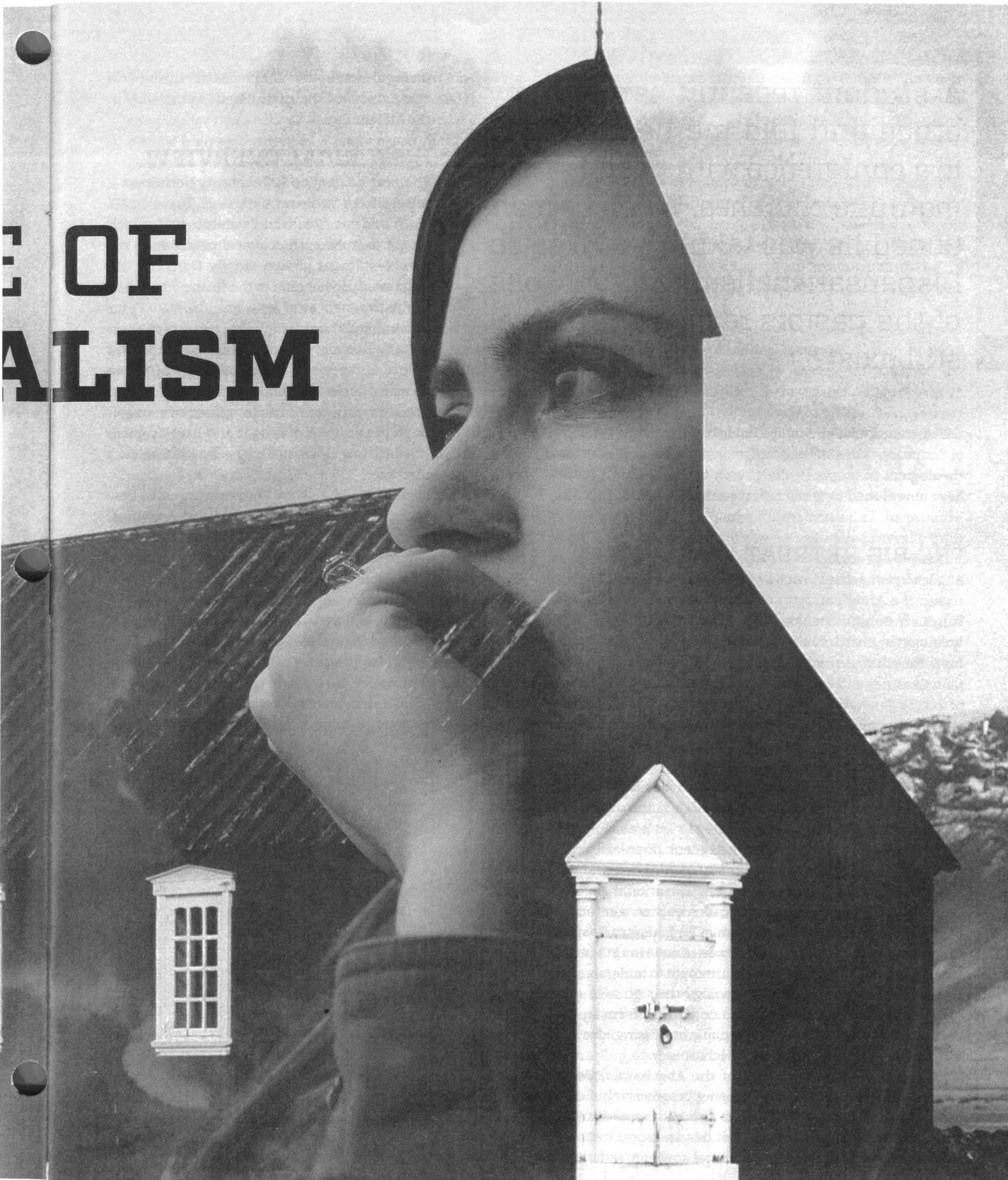
THE CHANGING FACE DISPENSATIONAL

YEARS AGO, A DISPENSATIONALIST WAS SOMEONE WHO CONSISTENTLY VIEWED THE CHURCH AS DISTINCT FROM ISRAEL. TODAY THERE IS CD AND PD—AND IT'S IMPORTANT TO KNOW THE DIFFERENCE.

BY RANDALL PRICE



E OF ALISM





A student recently came to my office and told me he had been to a conference with pastors from mainline churches. When he mentioned he was taking a course on Dispensationalism from me, one of the pastors replied, “Does that still exist?”

Dispensationalism,* which holds to a literal interpretation of Scripture, is one of the most maligned and misunderstood theological concepts in the church today. Many Christians have abandoned it, while others seek to redefine it.

THE BIG RETREAT

Anglican evangelicals, such as popular theologian N. T. Wright, regard the American form of Dispensationalism (what they call “Left Behind theology”) as “bizarre” and contend it is unknown in British circles. However, long before Wright made his observation, American Reformed* theologians—such as John Gerstner and R. C. Sproul, who have shaped the thinking of today’s generation—had labeled Dispensationalism heresy.¹

The Emergent Church* has discarded Dispensationalism altogether as an obstacle to inclusiveness. And the modern church, appealing to millennials who largely steer clear of eschatology* (the study of future things), has little room for the broader teaching of futurism, much less the distinctions of Dispensationalism.

These trends, coupled with the recent popularity of Reformed teaching, have caused many seminaries and Bible colleges to retreat from defending Dispensational Theology.

In addition, more than two decades earlier, a reformulation of Classical Dispensationalism* (CD) had already spread throughout dispensational institutions. Known as Progressive Dispensationalism* (PD), this view attempts to understand the core tenets of Dispensational Theology through a so-called complementary interpretation,† a confusing term in itself because it seeks to explain the equally confusing idea of an “already/not yet” and “both/and” eschatology.

PD’s central tenet teaches that the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenants are already being progressively fulfilled today and will also be fulfilled in the Millennial Kingdom. Thus PD’s concept of futurism includes an aspect of present fulfillment in the church for the biblical covenants made with

national Israel, while CD holds that the biblical covenants find their fulfillment exclusively in the Millennium.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The first half of the 20th century witnessed a retreat from futurism with C. H. Dodd (1884–1973) and his “Realized Eschatology,”* which taught that the eschatological passages in the New Testament (drawn largely from the Old Testament) do not refer to the future but, rather, to the experiences of Jesus and the New Testament church.²

Many liberals, who preferred the principles of love and peace to the expectation of future apocalyptic destruction, embraced Dodd’s position. His view continues to influence evangeli-

cals today through the writings of Wright and his “Kingdom Now” theology,* which largely characterizes the 21st-century “millennial” churches.

A different form of Kingdom Now Theology that also sees some or all Bible prophecies as fulfilled in historic events of the past is Preterism.* Once the provenance of liberal scholars, Preterism is now advanced by the teachings of conservative Christians such as radio “Bible Answer Man” Hank Hanegraaff and the late R. C. Sproul.³

Another evangelical, historic premillennialist,* Gordon E. Ladd, promoted Oscar Cullman’s “Inaugurated Eschatology,”* a view that taught the promises of the Kingdom Age were initially being realized in the Church Age.⁴ Many well-known, evangelical, premillennial scholars, such as D. A. Carson, have promoted this view, which forms the substance of Progressive Dispensationalism. It retains the CD distinctive concerning the future Kingdom, but also embraces a spiritual fulfillment of those promises within the Church Age.

PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM

Progressive Dispensationalism debuted in the 1990s as developed and defended in the works of evangelical scholars Craig A. Blaising (Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary), Darrell L. Bock (Dallas Theological Seminary), and the late Robert L. Saucy (Talbot Seminary).

These authors claim their view simply revises the core tenets of Dispensationalism. But PD’s inclusion of tenets from opposing systems of interpretation obscures CD’s distinctives and makes possible a progression toward the next inevitable position: Amillennialism* or Postmillennialism.*

Evangelical theologian Walter A. Elwell observed, “The newer dispensationalism looks so much like non-dispensational pre-millennialism that one struggles to see any real difference.”⁵

Postmillennialist Keith Mathison stated,



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In my opinion . . . progressive dispensationalists have moved closer to Reformed theology on a number of doctrines. They now acknowledge that the kingdom has been inaugurated and that there is a present as well as a future aspect of the kingdom. They have also recognized the two-peoples-of-God theory* to be unbiblical, which, ironically, brings us to the negative side of progressive dispensationalism. If the defining doctrine of dispensationalism is the two-peoples-of-God theory, then to reject that theory is to reject dispensationalism itself.⁶

CD VS. PD

Classical Dispensationalism has three essential distinctives:

1. It makes a clear distinction between Israel and the church in God's purposes.
2. It employs a consistent, literal hermeneutic* (method of interpretation), especially when it comes to the prophetic Scripture.
3. It maintains a doxological focus that sees the ultimate purpose of God as bringing glory to Himself.⁷

Let's look at these three distinctives in greater detail.

1. Israel and the Church.

The one who fails to distinguish Israel and the church consistently will inevitably not hold to dispensational distinctions; and one who does will. Progressive dispensationalists seem to be blurring this distinction by saying that the concept is not in the same class as what is conveyed by the concepts of Gentiles, Israel, and Jews.⁸

Progressive dispensationalists maintain that the "one new man" of Ephesians 2:11–22 refers to the church as a continuation of believing Israelites in the Old Testament. Therefore, believing Jews and Gentiles constitute the "one people of God."

This concept may be true on a redemptive level, but Gentiles and Jews are distinct historic people groups with distinct callings and promises within the biblical covenants. PD correctly sees the church as consisting of both the believing remnant of national Israel and the believing remnant of Gentiles, but it incorrectly views this unity as an "initial fulfillment" of the New Covenant, which God specifically made with Israel:

Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. . . . I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. . . . For they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more (Jer. 31:31, 33–34).

The church's participation in the New Covenant is a present, partial guarantee of the future, full realization of the promise in the Millennial Kingdom. It cannot be fulfilled literally until the Lord forgives the sins of the entire remnant of Israel and Judah, "from the least of them to the greatest of them" (a universal expression).

The apostle Paul said the present believing remnant of Jewish people exemplifies the future, full inclusion of national Israel. The Gentile nations are included through the spiritual promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:3):

At this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace. Now if [Israel's] fall is riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness! For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, . . . that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved (Rom. 11:5, 12, 25–26).

This text reveals the New Covenant cannot find initial fulfillment until the Second Advent of Messiah since Israel now remains blinded during the Church Age.

2. Literal Hermeneutic. Dispensationalism uses a consistent, literal method of interpreting Scripture. It takes the biblical text at face value, without imposing on it a theological interpretation foreign to the text. However, PD's "complementary hermeneutic" redefines the understanding of the Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament.

It argues that Christ currently occupies King David's throne in heaven. But the normal reading of the Old Testament understands David's throne to be an earthly one promised to the Davidic dynasty in national Israel, even

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under the New Covenant (Jer. 33:17–22). It also views Christ as David’s descendant reigning in Israel as a Messianic promise to be fulfilled in the Millennial Kingdom (1 Chr. 17:14; cf. Ezek. 37:25).

Classical dispensationalists argue that the Bible never says David’s throne is in heaven during the Church Age. Instead, it specifies Christ will rule over “the house of Jacob”: “He [Jesus] will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever” (Lk. 1:32–33). While PD still views Christ’s reign as a future reality (both/and), it changes the text’s plain meaning to accommodate its theology that the Kingdom’s initial fulfillment has already begun.

PD contradicts the fact the apostle Peter tied the Messiah’s return to set up His earthly Kingdom to Israel’s national repentance (Acts 3:19–21). How could the Kingdom be inaugurated in the Church Age if national Israel remains under divine discipline and its national repentance will take place only at the end of the Tribulation? (See Matthew 24:29–30 and Luke 21:28.) Likewise, if Messiah’s reign on David’s earthly throne depends on Israel’s repentance, then Messiah cannot be sitting now on the throne of David.

PD confuses this distinction. One of PD’s formulators conceded the fact in a theological debate with an amillennial theologian. He said the term *Israel* is symbolic. Later, I asked him what he meant by that statement. He simply replied, without explanation, “It is both/and.”

In other words, PD teaches Israel both symbolizes the church and literally refers to national Israel as distinct from the church. PD’s “complementary” hermeneutic permits its adherents to call their view Dispensationalism, while embracing views from an opposing theological system whose core tenets spiritualize Israel.

3. Glory to God. Dispensationalism focuses on God’s glory as the ultimate purpose for His divine plan. Progressive Dispensationalism’s rejection of this doxological purpose reveals the extent to which its system functions more like Reformed Theology than Dispensationalism.

PD, like Reformed (Covenant) Theology, sees humanity’s redemption as the goal of “salvation history.” CD sees humanity’s salvation as a means to an end—God’s glory—not the end itself. As Ryrie stated, “Scripture is not man-centered as though salvation were the main theme, but it is God-centered because His glory is the center. . . . The Bible is not centered in salvation history . . . but in God Himself.”⁹

Classical Dispensationalism sees God’s purposes with Israel and the church as distinct plans in history designed to bring Him glory only when each purpose is fulfilled (Rom. 11:30–33).

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My concern is for the next generation of progressive dispensationalists who may move beyond the theology of the founders. In his treatise *Theology Adrift: The Early Church Fathers and Their Views of Eschatology*, D. Matthew Allen explains that the eschatological shift in the ancient church from Premillennialism to Amillennialism began when the church lost its understanding of Israel as a uniquely chosen people of God with specific promises from God yet to be fulfilled.¹⁰

Hopefully, recognizing how redefinition has occurred may aid this generation of Bible students against further redefining terms and encourage them to rethink how perceived progress may in fact be a retreat from established truths. ★

CAUTIONARY NOTE

I want to caution those who hold to Classical Dispensationalism against overstatement in their critique of progressive dispensationalists, who may represent the dominant view of evangelical churches and seminaries today. Most advocates of PD hold to a pretribulational Rapture and believe in Messiah’s Second Coming to establish His Millennial Kingdom for Israel and the nations. They are also among the leading defenders of the evangelical faith and strong supporters of the Jewish people and the State of Israel.

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ENDNOTES

- * See Glossary on page 19.
- 1 John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991), 68.
- 2 C. H. Dodd, “The Kingdom of God Has Come,” *Expository Times* 48, no. 3 (1936) and H. G. Wood, *The Kingdom of God and History* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1938).
- 3 R. C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus: When Did Jesus Say He Would Return?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998). Hank Hanegraaff, *The Apocalypse Code: Find Out What the Bible Really Says About the End Times and Why It Matters Today* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007).
- 4 Ladd taught the “already/not yet” view in his essential writings on eschatology: *Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of God* (1952); *Jesus and the Kingdom* (1964); *A Theology of the New Testament* (1974); *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (1977); *The Last Things* (1978); *The Blessed Hope* (1990); *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (1990); and his most influential book, *The Presence of the Future* (1996).
- 5 Walter A. Elwell, “Sidebar: Dispensationalisms of the Third Kind,” *Christianity Today*, September 12, 1994, 28.
- 6 Keith A. Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?* (n.p.: P&R Publishing, 2012), Appendix A, 135.
- 7 These are the three *sine qua nons* given by Charles C. Ryrie. See Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2007), 39–40. I also am indebted to H. Wayne House for many of the contrasts between CD and PD found in his paper “Danger of Progressive Dispensationalism to Pre-Millennial Theology: Reflections of a Pre-Progressive Dispensationalist,” Pre-Trib Research Center, December 2003 <tinyurl.com/yau2l2nn>.
- 8 Ryrie, 39.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 40.
- 10 D. Matthew Allen, *Theology Adrift: The Early Church Fathers and Their Views of Eschatology*, Bible.org, May 25, 2004 <tinyurl.com/yatr7tbu>.



Randall Price

is a university professor, author and coauthor of 30 books, and world-renowned archaeologist. He is also the founder and president of World of the Bible Ministries (worldofthebible.com) and has taken more than 100 trips to Israel.

GLOSSARY

Amillennialism (No Millennium) rejects Christ's literal 1,000-year reign on Earth; spiritualizes Revelation 20 to mean His reign in heaven with Christians; and claims Christ's Second Coming is accompanied by a general resurrection and judgment of all people, followed by the eternal state.

Covenant Theology views God's relationship with mankind through a Covenant of Works and Covenant of Grace. (Some add a Covenant of Redemption.) Most Reformed theologians hold this position. Old Testament prophecies are interpreted figuratively, not literally, and prophecies concerning Israel's future are seen as fulfilled in the church. Thus the church replaces Israel as the people of God.

Dispensationalism (Classical Dispensationalism) uses a literal-grammatical-historical interpretation of Scripture; distinguishes between Israel and the church; and places the Rapture before the seven-year Tribulation, which is followed by Christ's return to establish the Millennial Kingdom, which merges into the eternal state at the end of 1,000 years. The Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenants are fulfilled in the Millennium. This is the position of The Friends of Israel.

Emergent Church is a postmodern, subjective, relative, and feeling-oriented movement that is continually changing to meet modern spiritual needs. It possesses no unified theological position and denies the existence of absolute biblical truth. Its hallmarks include mysticism, ecumenical inclusion, and relativism.

Eschatology is the study of last things (Bible prophecy) and reveals the outworking of God's sovereign plan and purposes in history.

Hermeneutics is the science and art of Bible interpretation. It refers to the principles, rules, and methods used in studying Scripture.

Historic Premillennialism maintains Christ will return to establish His Millennial Kingdom on Earth after the Tribulation, and that is when He will rapture His church. Thus it is posttributational Premillennialism. It makes no distinction between Israel and the church.

Inaugurated Eschatology employs the "already/not yet" philosophy, claiming God's Kingdom began at Christ's First Coming but will be fully consummated at His Second Coming. The church today supposedly has access to the Kingdom promises. This view blurs the distinction between Israel and the church and leads into Progressive Dispensationalism.

Kingdom Now Theology believes the church must reestablish God's rule on Earth before Christ's return; denies the Rapture; and spiritualizes future promises to Israel, seeing them fulfilled in the church. Kingdom Now Theology is filled with unbiblical, false teachings.

Millennial Kingdom is Christ's literal reign on Earth for 1,000 years after His Second Coming (Rev. 20:1-7).

Postmillennialism is a 19th-century teaching that claims preaching the gospel will Christianize the world and that Christ will return after a time of peace called the Millennium.

Postmodernism is a 20th-century, Western-society movement that radically reappraises assumptions about culture, personal identity, history, and religion. It emphasizes diversity in worldviews and the inability to know absolute truth.

Premillennialism (Dispensational Premillennialism) maintains Christ will return to establish His Millennial Kingdom on Earth after the Tribulation. It holds to a Pretribulation Rapture and clearly distinguishes between Israel and the church. This is the position of The Friends of Israel.

Preterism claims the book of Revelation communicated how God would deliver Christians from the Roman Empire and predicted Jerusalem's fall in AD 70 when the Romans destroyed the city. It sees no future for national Israel.

Progressive Dispensationalism embraces the "already/not yet" view that Jesus is ruling spiritually in heaven on David's throne but that He will reign in a future 1,000-year Kingdom on Earth at His Second Coming.

Rapture is Christ's imminent return for His church prior to the seven-year Tribulation.

Realized Eschatology claims all New Testament prophecy was fulfilled during Christ's ministry on Earth; and when Jesus said, "Repent; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt. 4:17), He meant His Kingdom was present and not future.

Reformed Theology originated with the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century and holds strongly to the sovereignty of God and salvation by grace. Its beliefs are stated in the Westminster Confession. Most Reformed theologians interpret the Old Testament prophecies figuratively, not literally, and see prophecies concerning Israel's future as fulfilled in the church; so the church replaces Israel as the people of God.

Replacement Theology (Supersessionism) teaches that the church has replaced Israel and prophecies made to Israel are being fulfilled in the church today. Prophecies made specifically to Israel in the Old Testament are spiritualized or allegorized and referred to as blessings to Christ's church. This is not the position of The Friends of Israel.

Tribulation/Great Tribulation is a future seven-year period called "Jacob's trouble" (Jer. 30:7). It begins when the Antichrist confirms a covenant with many in Israel (Dan. 9:27) and God pours out His judgment on the entire ungodly world and brings Israel to national repentance and reconciliation (Rev. 6-19).

Two-peoples-of-God Theory is a defining aspect of Dispensationalism that views Israel and the church as separate entities with distinct promises.