

PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM: AN OVERVIEW AND PERSONAL ANALYSIS¹

by
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INTRODUCTION

Keeping abreast of the modifications that occur within theological disciplines is a formidable task. Coming to understand completely all of the nuances and details of theological constructs that diverge from one's own is even more challenging. Further, it is difficult if not impossible to represent the views of others fairly and accurately. Often, such a task requires picturing a movement or theological construct as monolithic when in reality it has multiple facets and significant variation even among its proponents. Perhaps the gravest danger in summarizing and analyzing opposing viewpoints is not functional but attitudinal. The penchant for fallen humanity to become rancorous, even among the redeemed, is so very basic to our humanness that it is difficult to overcome apart from personal submission to the work of the Holy Spirit. Nonetheless, critical, analytical evaluations are often necessary and usually beneficial, despite the potential pitfalls.

An attempt is made here to survey and analyze progressive dispensationalism from the perspective of a more traditional dispensational approach. The survey, to some extent, is abbreviated and superficial. The analysis is personal; it is the author's alone. The engagement of numerous citations is employed in a desire to represent positions as fairly and accurately as possible. Special care was taken not to cull

¹This material was first presented in outline form at the Faculty In-service of Central Baptist Theological Seminary of Minneapolis, August 22–23, 1996. Subsequently, it was delivered with some revision and updating at the Bible Faculty Leadership Summit, Faith Baptist Bible College and Seminary, Ankeny, IA, July 31–August 2, 1997, and at the Ekklesia Consortium, Huron Baptist Church, Flat Rock, MI, July 28–29, 2003. This published form is presented in honor of Dr. Rolland D. McCune, professor, mentor, coworker, and friend, in deepest gratitude for his faithful teaching, unfailing encouragement, and unmerited support. Though all of my professors have had worthwhile and lasting impact on my life and teaching, none has excelled his.

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citations in such a way as to distort the meaning or intent of the authors cited. Any misrepresentation or inaccuracy is unintentional. Any perception or hint of malice is regrettable. The desire is to be both accurate and affable. On the other hand, the topic is important, the disagreement is substantial, and the implications are extensive. Progressive dispensationalism has had great impact on the theological landscape of America, and that impact is a matter of concern to many, not because the disagreement is personal, but because it is theological, and theology matters.

THE BIRTH OF PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM

The roots of progressive dispensationalism as a movement can be traced to the early 1970s if not earlier. The movement was born in the spirit of evangelical ecumenicity and theological rapprochement. A desire was growing, among some dispensationalists, to find amicable, middle ground in the old theological skirmishes between dispensationalists and covenant theologians. With this goal in mind, the dispensationalists who sought rapprochement began to emphasize the refinements that occurred within dispensationalism over time. Their intent was to demonstrate that dispensationalism had been and continued to be a fluid, non-static approach to Bible interpretation. By this means, proponents for change within dispensationalism sought to show that dispensationalism could, in fact, change. At the same time, these dispensationalists began to deconstruct or deemphasize those tenets of dispensationalism that were asserted to be distinctive to dispensationalism. The intent was to find more common ground with other approaches to Bible interpretation, particularly with that of covenant theology. By this means, proponents for moderation in the debate between dispensationalism and covenant theology sought to show that dispensationalism and dispensationalists could be moderate.

The Pursuit of Essential Unity

The overarching desire for essential unity and theological rapprochement was an early ensign of the fledgling movement that eventually would be labeled “progressive dispensationalism.” Kenneth Barker, an avowed modified dispensationalist, in his presidential address at the 29 December 1981 meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, made clear his desire toward these ends.

In my presidential letter to the members of the Evangelical Theological Society (dated January 15, 1981) I wrote that “I firmly believe in a truly evangelical ecumenicity and in projects and organizations that foster that ecumenicity, such as ETS.” One of the purposes of this address is to further such evangelical ecumenicity by demonstrating that we are closer in our theological positions than many realize....

Another purpose of this paper, then, is to promote an irenic spirit

and thus a greater sense of true brotherhood in Christ. I have been heartened by what Radmacher calls the “growing rapprochement that has been taking place between covenant and dispensational theologians of orthodox persuasion over the last decade or so.”... Certainly dialogue must continue between the two theological camps, for it can only result in greater understanding, which in turn will advance the cause of conciliation. I would like to think that this message also moves in that direction. Is this not as it should be in the body of Christ? And are we not united on the issues that matter most?³

A decade later, after the label “progressive dispensationalism” had been adopted by the leaders of the movement, the original goals remained. In a seminal book designed to serve as a catalyst and forum for discussion between progressive dispensationalists and covenant theologians, Darrell Bock and Craig Blaising concluded,

One of the tragedies of the current Christian evangelical scene is the divisive tendencies present in many strands of the community. When the subtradition is more crucial than the Christian tradition, we fragment the unity to which God has called us and for which the Lord intercedes (John 17).... This is not to deny the value of subtraditions or their contribution to the whole body of Christ, but it is to say that the task before the Christian community to reflect the love of Christ and evangelize the world is so vast that no subtradition can do it all by itself.... What we share with our responders in this book is an honest desire for dialogue and a pursuit of truth, but not at the expense of a fundamental unity that we know that God has given to us.⁴

Robert Saucy, called by some “the father of progressive dispensationalism,” decisively espoused the fundamental goal of finding theological middle ground. In his book on progressive dispensationalism, subtitled *The Interface Between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Theology*, Saucy asserted that there is, in fact, “a mediating position between non-dispensationalism and traditional dispensationalism that provides a better understanding of Scripture.”⁵ In his view, Saucy was advancing such a position.

³Kenneth Barker, “False Dichotomies Between the Testaments,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25 (March 1982): p. 3; also citing E. D. Radmacher, “The Current Status of Dispensationalism and Its Eschatology,” in *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology*, ed. K. S. Kantzer and S. N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), p. 163.

⁴Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, “Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: Assessment and Dialogue,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church: The Search for Definition*, ed. Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), pp. 385–86.

⁵Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), p. 27.

The Dialogue with Covenant Theology

Dialogue was forwarded as a primary means of attaining the goal of rapprochement between these divergent schools of Bible interpretation. The desire was to discuss, amicably, key texts and concepts that seemed to be in tension between the two interpretational approaches. One of the three purposes of the book *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* was “to foster genuine dialogue with nondispensational thinkers regarding major biblical themes tied to the plan of God.”⁶ It was Blaising’s and Bock’s view that

dispensational theology should be a dialogic phenomena [*sic*] inclusive to the extent of all who are in Christ. It is aided by an inclusive hermeneutic that is reflected upon for improvement in its deployment. It is in fact a hermeneutic that is aware of the communal and dialogic nature of understanding. . . . This work can function as a catalyst to a greater, more inclusive theological dialogue on the history of redemption.⁷

Analysis: Rapprochement, Shifting Paradigms, and Departure

Insofar as rapprochement is concerned, progressive dispensationalism does seem to be achieving the goal of creating greater harmony between progressive dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists. Of course the question is: at what cost? The creation of harmony by finding middle ground assumes that the final “ground” is, in fact, in the “middle”; that is to say, movement should be seen on the part of both parties involved in the discourse. There is concern as to whether or not such bilateral change is occurring. It seems obvious that the proponents of progressive dispensationalism are not only fundamentally prone, but also tangibly exercised toward positional compromise. It could be argued that the proponents of covenant theology seem far less prone or exercised. The paradigm shift appears to be significantly lopsided.

The degree to which progressive dispensationalism makes systemic concession to the approach of covenant theology determines the degree of tension that is created with traditional forms of dispensationalism. The further that proponents of progressive dispensationalism move toward harmony and unity with their non-dispensational friends, the greater the disjunction with their more traditional dispensational brethren. In their haste to assuage their former antagonists, it appears that progressive dispensational scholars have readily detached themselves from their traditional roots. This disassociation has not gone

⁶Blaising and Bock, *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, back cover.

⁷Blaising and Bock, “Assessment and Dialogue,” pp. 384–85.

unnoticed even by non-dispensationalists. In his response to the moderated views of progressive dispensational authors, Bruce Waltke observes, “significantly, these younger dispensationalists cite older dispensationalists mostly to distance themselves from them.”⁸ Walter Elwell, in his evaluation of the situation, makes a similar observation.

Saucy...goes out of [his] way to avoid quoting the dispensationalist “old guard,” while quoting at length from standard New Testament scholars. In 96 exhaustive footnotes, dispensational heavyweights Lewis Sperry Chafer and John Walvoord do not appear once, whereas Ridderbos, Ladd, Perrin, Cranfield, Barrett, and even O. T. Allis are extensively—and favorably—quoted.⁹

Beyond the question of the apparent unevenness of movement in the course of this dialogue and the growing distance between progressive dispensationalism and earlier forms of the tradition, other more troubling concerns are apparent. At what point, for example, does “development” become “departure”? Does one best arrive at the truth of Scripture by means of dialogue in quest of middle ground? Should the pursuit of truth be restricted by the expense of unity, or should degrees of unity be expendable for the sake of truth? A close reading of John 17 seems to demonstrate that God’s Word and its truth is the essential ingredient of unity. The closer we draw to biblical truth, the more united we become, not *vice versa*. Certainly truth should be spoken in love. Animosity has no place in our treatment of brothers in Christ with whom we might disagree on the finer points of theology and Bible interpretation. Nonetheless, truth is a non-expendable and non-negotiable commodity.¹⁰

⁸Bruce Waltke, “A Response,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church: The Search for Definition*, ed. Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), p. 350.

⁹Walter A. Elwell, “Dispensationalisms of the Third Kind,” review of *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, by Robert L. Saucy, *Christianity Today*, 12 September 1994, p. 28.

¹⁰Later in their conclusion, Blaising and Bock return to the themes of “truth” and “unity.” They say, “Commitment to unity does not mean that the church is absolved of its responsibility to pursue and believe the truth. But dialogue on disagreements should be pursued with a sense of humility, recognizing that none of us and none of our traditions is infallible.” There is no disagreement with that statement, in so far as it goes. However, the further assertion that “dialogue must move across traditions, not just within them, lest we deny by our practice the unity into which God has placed us in Christ” is opened to debate, particularly if the ultimate goal is theological middle ground (“Assessment and Dialogue,” p. 388).

THE PRESUPPOSITIONS OF PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM

In the early history of progressive dispensationalism, it was suggested that the ensuing debate in the dialogue between dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists should be conducted at the level of individual biblical texts.¹¹ It could be argued that the growing distance between the proponents of progressive dispensationalism and their more traditionally inclined dispensational brethren does not lie fundamentally at the level of individual texts, but rather at the level of the presuppositions that are brought to bear on interpreting those texts. The chief issue seems to center on hermeneutical preunderstandings and methodology. In progressive dispensationalism, those presuppositions and interpretational approaches have undergone significant change.

An Inclusive Hermeneutical Method

One of the changes occurring in dispensationalism, a change born out of the rise of progressive dispensationalism, is that of hermeneutical method. It is asserted by the proponents of progressive dispensationalism that the hermeneutical playing field has been leveled. In their view, the debate between a "literal" versus "spiritual" approach to Bible interpretation is obsolete.

Grammatical-Historical Interpretation

Saucy says that the non-dispensationalists' theological system "is the result of their interpretation of the New Testament using the same grammatico-historical hermeneutic as that of dispensationalists."¹² According to Saucy, "the basic hermeneutical procedure...is essentially the same for both dispensational and nondispensational scholars. Both affirm a historical-grammatical hermeneutic."¹³ Craig Blaising concurs:

Evangelicals today, including dispensationalists, affirm historical grammatical interpretation as the proper hermeneutical method.... As evangelicals have worked together exploring these developments, the old divisions of spiritual versus literal interpretation have been left behind.... The issues are more complex, but the evangelical community is working inclusively on these matters. It is a matter not of an exclusive hermeneutic but of a skillful application of a method we all profess.... There is no

¹¹David L. Turner, "The Continuity of Scripture and Eschatology: Key Hermeneutical Issues" *Grace Theological Journal* 6 (Fall 1986): pp. 275–87.

¹²Saucy, *Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, p. 20.

¹³*Ibid.*, pp. 29–30.

exclusive hermeneutic here.¹⁴

The Sophistication of Hermeneutical Methodology

The proponents of dispensationalism have long been reviled as unscholarly and their hermeneutical method frequently deemed unsophisticated. In the late 1950s, covenant theologian George E. Ladd analyzed Alva J. McClain's dispensational approach to kingdom studies as follows:

McClain, like most dispensationalists, has lost contact with the world of theological thought. Dispensationalism has never thrived upon dialogue with other theological points of view; it flourishes only in the hothouse of its own exclusive system. Most of the literature, exegetical and theological, cited to give support to his interpretation is about two generations old. Alford, Lange, H. A. W. Meyer, Ellicot, and Godet are his chief New Testament authorities. Almost no modern literature on the kingdom of God is used. Certainly a theology designed to meet the needs of the twentieth century should be relevant to the issues of the hour.¹⁵

Thirty years later, Vern Poythress chided classical dispensationalists for their Baconian inductivism, their plain-meaning approach to Scripture, and their flat interpretation of the text, not to mention their separatism and prejudicial presuppositionalism. Of Darby and Scofield he said,

It must be remembered that their strong point was in logical harmony and contemporary application rather than in grammatical-historical interpretation. Darby's negative attitude to the institutional church virtually cut him off from the fruits of scholarly reflection and interpretation in previous generations of church history.... The attempts at interpretation within classic dispensationalism are often still too dominated by the presupposition and mind-set of the overall system.... Grammatical-historical interpretation remains a weak point in classic dispensationalism.¹⁶

That which has brought about the leveling of the hermeneutical

¹⁴Craig Blaising, "Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition," in *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church: The Search for Definition*, ed. Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), pp. 32, 34.

¹⁵George E. Ladd, review of *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, by Alva J. McClain, *Christianity Today* 12 October 1959, p. 40.

¹⁶Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), p. 57. Blaising forwards a similar evaluation of the hermeneutical method of traditional dispensationalism ("Search for Definition," pp. 18–19). Of course, Poythress's criticism is an oblique assertion that non-dispensational covenant theology and the newer, more sophisticated hermeneutical approach is free of presuppositional prejudice and systemic circularism. That assertion is highly debatable.

playing field, according to proponents of progressive dispensationalism, is the growing scholarly sophistication of hermeneutical methodology in contrast to the simplistic approach of previous dispensationalists. Most notable, in their view, are the advancements in literary interpretation.

Hermeneutics has become much more complex today than when Charles Ryrie affirmed literal interpretation as the “clear, plain, normal” method of interpretation.... Even at the time this was published, evangelical biblical scholars were beginning to move toward a more consistent grammatical-historical interpretation, but it was a grammatical-historical interpretation which was developing in sophistication beyond that which was predicted by classical dispensationalists or even early revised dispensationalists.... Literary interpretation has developed so that some things which earlier interpreters thought they “clearly” saw in Scripture, are not “clearly” seen today at all. This raises a question both about the meaning of “literal” interpretation and the claim that its consistent practice is the essence of dispensationalism.... Traditional interpretation must always be tested by ongoing historical-literary interpretation as that interpretation develops in its understanding, methods, and procedures.¹⁷

The Hermeneutic of Inaugurated Eschatology

The method that has most influenced progressive dispensationalism is the hermeneutic of inaugurated eschatology. This approach advocates that Christ, with his first advent, inaugurated the kingdom of God, though some aspects of that kingdom remain to be fulfilled in

¹⁷Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), p. 36. Because it adopted more compliant and more agreeable hermeneutical theories, progressive dispensationalism was, early on, touted by non-dispensationalists as a new breach into scholarship on the part of dispensational theologians. Walter Elwell evaluated this new form of dispensationalism as follows: “Saucy, Blaising, and Bock are thoroughly conversant with the writings of the major biblical scholars of today.... Saucy’s is as good a summary on the kingdom as one will find and is in the ‘already/not-yet’ mold of Werner Kummel” (Elwell, “Dispensationalisms of the Third Kind,” p. 28). Gerry Breshers, in his analysis of the book *Progressive Dispensationalism*, wrote: “Finally—a coherent statement of current dispensational thinking which leaves the zealous mistakes of Scofield and the Allis-Ladd-Walvoord wars far behind. It presents hermeneutics grounded in authorial intent rather than naive literalism” (Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, pre-title page). James McHann seemed to concur: “This is the most scholarly and insightful work yet in print on dispensational theology” (Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, pre-title page). According to Craig Blomberg, “Blaising and Bock have produced the most important advance in dispensationalist theology since Ryrie’s *Dispensationalism Today* nearly thirty years ago. Progressive dispensationalism has now positioned its movement within the mainstream of biblical scholarship, as it offers a defensible exegesis of each of the Scriptures it treats” (Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, back dust-jacket). Of course, these kinds of accolades, together with the criticisms of men like Ladd and Poythress, beg the question of the true definition of “scholarship.”

the future.

The History of This Hermeneutic¹⁸

In reaction to Johannes Weiss's and Albert Schweitzer's view that the kingdom of God was wholly apocalyptic and eschatological (Consistent Eschatology), and C. H. Dodd's counter-claim that the kingdom would find fulfillment not at the end of history but within history (Realized Eschatology), the proponents of inaugurated eschatology suggested a "both/and" rather than an "either/or" understanding of kingdom fulfillment. They proposed that, although first century Jews viewed the kingdom as futuristic and eschatological in culmination of earth history, Jesus came announcing that the eschaton, the future, had invaded history, the present. If the eschaton had, indeed, dawned with the first advent of Christ, then the kingdom could now be viewed both in its present ("already") and its future ("not yet") aspects. The New Testament should be interpreted with a view that the kingdom has already arrived in a new, formerly hidden form, even though some kingdom fulfillment awaits future realization.

Recent American Proponents of This Hermeneutic

Within historic premillennialism. By the early 1950s George E. Ladd had embarked on a journey from his roots in dispensationalism to what came to be called historic, classical, or covenant premillennialism. The hermeneutic that he had embraced was that of inaugurated eschatology. Over the course of time, Ladd became the chief spokesman for this view and was highly instrumental in popularizing it.¹⁹

Within amillennialism. The hermeneutic of inaugurated eschatology has also been embraced by some theologians within amillennialism. Anthony Hoekema, in his book *The Bible and the Future*, presented amillennialism from the viewpoint of inaugurated eschatology: "There are three major positions in the study of last things, each with a different perspective on the coming of the kingdom of God: The kingdom is either here in the present, in the future, or in both present and future. The last-named position, the thesis of this book, is

¹⁸For an overview of the development of hermeneutical approaches to eschatology see G. Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), pp. 17–41. Note also Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 17, n. 5, where Florovsky is credited with first suggesting the term "inaugurated eschatology." For an exhaustive examination and history of the various hermeneutical approaches to eschatology, particularly as they relate to the kingdom of God, see Mark Saucy, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus in 20th Century Theology* (Dallas: Word, 1997).

¹⁹See Mark Saucy, *Kingdom of God*, p. 187, n. 104, for an overview of Ladd's developing viewpoint and published works.

best explained by recognizing a distinction between the ‘already’—the present state of the kingdom as inaugurated by Christ—and the ‘not yet’—the final establishment of the kingdom at Christ’s second coming.²⁰ Part I of the book is entitled “Inaugurated Eschatology,” and in his first paragraph Hoekema states unequivocally that “full-orbed biblical eschatology must include both what we might call ‘inaugurated’ and ‘future’ eschatology.”²¹

Within dispensationalism. It is not insignificant that the proponents of progressive dispensationalism have embraced the hermeneutical approach of inaugurated eschatology. In fact, it is this specific feature of progressive dispensationalism that gives impetus to the movement’s divergence from more traditional views within dispensationalism. Bruce Waltke, who like George Ladd left dispensationalism and embraced inaugurated eschatology, responds to the book *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: A Search for Definition* with this observation: “This book signals a significant restructuring of dispensationalism within the frame-work of inaugurated eschatology.... Reconstructed dispensationalism essentially believes that Christ inaugurated the fulfillment of Israel’s covenants and promises and that the church actualizes them. It denies that the church is a parenthesis within God’s program for Israel.”²²

Of course, those within progressive dispensationalism have no reason to deny the fact or equivocate on the issue of their adoption of inaugurated eschatology. They believe it to be the best approach to Bible interpretation, particularly to interpreting the New Testament.

Kenneth Barker says,

I am a moderate dispensationalist: (1) I see no need to speak of more than two major dispensations—the old covenant era and the new covenant era; (2) I believe that several passages that other dispensationalists relegate solely to the future received a literal fulfillment in the NT period or are receiving such a fulfillment in the continuing Church age—in addition to a final, complete fulfillment in the future in the case of some of those passages; (3) I prefer to think in terms of an inaugurated eschatology rather than an exclusively futurist eschatology.²³

Robert Saucy says,

The historical plan of God, therefore, is one unified plan. Contrary to traditional dispensationalism, it does not entail separate programs for the

²⁰Hoekema, *Bible and the Future*, front dust jacket.

²¹Ibid., p. 1.

²²Waltke, “A Response,” p. 347.

²³Barker, “False Dichotomies,” p. 4.

church and Israel that are somehow ultimately unified only in the display of God's glory or in eternity. The present age is not a historical parenthesis unrelated to the history that precedes and follows it; rather, it is an integrated phase in the development of the mediatorial kingdom. *It is the beginning of the fulfillment of the eschatological promises.* Thus the church today has its place and function in the same mediatorial messianic kingdom program that Israel was called to serve.²⁴

Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock say,

The biblical characteristic of viewing events from a variety of perspectives shows us that one can make points from a "both-and" perspective without denying either side of the present-future relationship. It is possible to get fulfillment "now" in some texts, while noting that "not yet" fulfillment exists in other passages. In fact, in some texts fulfillment can be initial or partial, as opposed to being final and total. As a result, one can speak of *inaugurated* eschatology without denying either what the Old Testament indicates about a future, earthly kingdom or what the New Testament asserts about the arrival of the kingdom as part of fulfillment in the first coming of Jesus.²⁵

New Testament Priority in the Progress of Revelation

Another feature of progressive dispensationalism is its affinity for New Testament priority in the interpretation of the canon. The question, though oversimplified, might be framed as follows: does the progress of biblical revelation imply that the New Testament simply builds upon, corroborates, supplements, and clarifies the univocal meaning of Old Testament Scriptures, or does it imply that the New Testament revises, reinterprets, or resignifies Old Testament meaning? In the later view, where meaning supposedly differs between the New and the Old Testaments, the New Testament must take precedence over the Old. Certainly a great deal of debate has centered on this question and its ramifications. However, it is apparent that progressive dispensationalism has favored the view of New Testament priority in canonical interpretation.

Within Non-dispensationalism

There is nothing new about this viewpoint or this debate. Inaugurated eschatology has long been wedded to New Testament priority. In George Ladd's review of Alva McClain's *Greatness of the Kingdom*, Ladd scolds McClain for McClain's failure to prioritize the New Testament.

²⁴Saucy, *Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, p. 28 (emphasis added).

²⁵Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, pp. 97–98.

McClain achieves this [no present/only future kingdom] structure not from an inductive exegesis of the New Testament but from the Old Testament. The prophets picture an earthly Kingdom with Israel as the favored nation under a Davidic King. This Old Testament concept McClain takes as the basic idea of the Kingdom, and the New Testament data are interpreted in light of the Old Testament pattern. This brings us to the fundamental dispensational hermeneutic in contrast with that of classical theology. Classical theology recognizes progressive revelation and insists that the final meaning of the Old Testament is to be discovered as it is reinterpreted by the New Testament....

We must conclude that dispensationalism can be no substitute for classic theology because its false hermeneutic prohibits it from recognizing the true character of the kingdom of God as set forth in the New Testament. Dispensationalism is an Old Testament theology which is unable to fit New Testament theology into its system.²⁶

Bruce Waltke, who seems practically to extend New Testament priority to its limit, makes the position explicit: "If there is any tension in one's interpretation between the Old Testament and the New, priority must be given to the New."²⁷ In the New Testament, according to Waltke, the transitory images of the old dispensation are resignified to refer to the spiritual realities of the new, present age.²⁸

Within Dispensationalism

What is new is the growing espousal of some degree of New Testament priority within the framework of dispensationalism. Saucy, agreeing in principle though not necessarily in extent with Ladd and Waltke, has the unenviable task of defending adherence to the original meaning of most Old Testament predictive prophecy at the same time that he asserts the possibility of New Testament reinterpretation of some Old Testament predictive prophecy: "Recognizing that the Old Testament prophecies speak of eschatological times and events,...these eschatological elements should be understood in their Old Testament meaning *unless later revelation indicates a reinterpretation.*"²⁹ Saucy elaborates, "The lack of detail about the Old Testament prophecies in the New Testament does not necessarily mean that they are invalid or superseded.... We should consider the prophecies valid *unless there is*

²⁶Ladd, review of *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, pp. 38, 40.

²⁷Waltke, "A Response," p. 353. For an extended argumentation of this point see his article "Kingdom Promises as Spiritual," in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments: Essays in Honor of S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988).

²⁸Waltke, "A Response," p. 353.

²⁹Saucy, *Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, p. 30 (emphasis added).

explicit teaching to the contrary... These promises retain their Old Testament meaning *unless otherwise stated.*"³⁰

Blaising and Bock also recognize the principle of New Testament priority and value its impact on biblical interpretation.

Whether or not certain features of the eschatological kingdom (whether spiritual or political) will be enacted or revealed prior to the full establishment of that kingdom is not to be determined by reasoning from full-orbed descriptions of Old Testament prophets alone. Rather, it is a matter of the Father's will for this and any intervening dispensation, a matter which is discerned through New Testament revelation. The New Testament clarifies how the kingdom predicted by the Old Testament prophets is being revealed today.³¹

Typological Interpretation of Prophecy

Inseparably bound to the question of New Testament priority is the issue of interpreting predictive prophecy in the Bible. Here, again, progressive dispensationalism diverges from more traditional forms of the method. The question might be stated as follows: should Old Testament predictive prophecy, by presupposition, be interpreted in accordance with, and only in accordance with, a literal, grammatical, historical, and contextual evaluation of the Old Testament prophetic text itself (expecting, then, a literal, future fulfillment of the Old Testament prediction), or is it acceptable if not better to presuppose that the New Testament might reinterpret, resignify, or expand Old Testament predictions (resulting in a meaning and/or fulfillment different than the exclusively literal signification of the Old Testament prediction)? In the end, in contrast to traditional forms of dispensationalism, many interpreters end up with a dual hermeneutic when it comes to predictive prophecy. These interpreters believe that some Old Testament prophetic predictions do involve singular, literal interpretation and fulfillment (a fact impossible to deny), while other Old Testament prophecies may or should be interpreted in a non-literalistic fashion.

Within Non-dispensationalism

Among non-dispensationalists, a dual hermeneutic has long been espoused in interpreting Old Testament predictive prophecy. Vern Poythress, in his evaluation of dispensationalism, makes this hermeneutical bifurcation explicit. Beginning with the perspective of the Old Testament prophets themselves, Poythress says,

In the near future, the organized political and social community of Israel

³⁰Ibid., p. 35 (emphasis added).

³¹Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, p. 54.

continues in more or less a straight line. Predictions, even when they use symbolic and allusive language, can expect to find fulfillment on the symbolic level on which Israel then exists [i.e., on the level of a literal, historical, socio-political, earthly kingdom]. But fulfillment in the “latter days” (eschatological fulfillment in the broad sense of eschatology) is a different matter. There the symbol is superseded by the reality, and hence straight-line reckoning about fulfillments is no longer possible. Pre-eschatological prophetic fulfillments have a hermeneutically different character than do eschatological fulfillments.³²

Bruce Waltke similarly holds to a dual method of interpreting Old Testament predictive prophecy. In his response to the new dispensationalism he says, “I argued in ‘Kingdom Promises as Spiritual’ that prophecies finding fulfillment up to the ascension of Christ, such as his birth in Bethlehem, will have an earthly, visible fulfillment, and those pertaining to the church formed with the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost from Christ’s heavenly Davidic throne will have an invisible, spiritual fulfillment.”³³ This dual hermeneutic arises directly out of a theological, interpretational proclivity for New Testament priority. As Carnell states in his evaluation of dispensationalism, “the degree to which prophecy is typical or literal is decided by the theology of the New Testament.”³⁴ This stance is in essential if not in full agreement, then, with Ladd as cited above, who sees the dual interpretation of Old Testament prophecy based on New Testament priority as the fundamental hermeneutical distinction between dispensationalism and non-dispensational theology.

Within Dispensationalism

It is not surprising to find a dual approach to interpreting Old Testament predictive prophecy among non-dispensationalists. This hermeneutical method has long been espoused in covenant theology. Now, to some degree, this approach has been imported into dispensationalism by those who label themselves progressive dispensationalists. Blaising and Bock, in discussing the New Testament’s use of the Old Testament, state that Old Testament prophecy may “not always [be] a matter of exclusively direct prophetic texts, where the Old Testament passage refers only to one event or person in one setting.... Such prophecy [may be] both prophetic and typological.”³⁵ They conclude,

³²Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, pp. 104–5.

³³Waltke, “A Response,” p. 355.

³⁴E. J. Carnell, *The Case for Orthodox Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959), p. 55.

³⁵Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, p. 102. In further analyzing

Given the variety of possible ways the Old Testament can be cited within the New, the relationship between the Testaments on given themes must be handled on a case-by-case basis. Rules that apply in every case before each text is examined preempt the discussion and ignore the variety of possibilities.³⁶ In this area, one size does not fit all cases....

Old Testament prophecy, Blaising and Bock make the following identifications. There are “exclusively direct prophetic” texts which are, apparently, non-typological in nature and fulfillment, i.e., more singularly literalistic in their prediction and their outcome. This kind of prophecy, in their words “refers only to one event or person in one setting.” This type of prophecy seems to accord with what Poythress calls “straight line” prophecy, or Waltke’s “literal” fulfillment. In the ensuing paragraph (p. 102), Blaising and Bock forward an example of such a non-typological, “directly prophetic” prophecy. The example is Daniel 7:14, where the Son of Man returns to the earth in judgment. They assert that this kind of “directly prophetic” prophecy will find fulfillment in one referent at one time, explicitly and singularly as predicted. Such a “directly prophetic” prophecy is distinguishable from a “typological” prophecy, which presumably may find fulfillment in more than one event, person, or setting. As has been noted, they suggest that some “prophecy” can be “both prophetic and typological.” It is significant that their discussion mixes explicit, literary, prophetic predictions together with more oblique, non-predictive, promissory, analogical, and typological Old Testament forms under the rubric of “prophecy.” This admixture of explicit Old Testament prophetic predictions with other Old Testament literary forms, and the ensuing definitive interpretational cross-analysis of these forms greatly confuses the issue of the literal versus non-literal interpretation of explicit, Old Testament prophetic predictions. In other words, the fact that there may be types and analogies in the Bible (e.g., Davidic kingship as typical of messianic kingship, or the Sabbath ‘rest’ as analogical with the Christian ‘rest’)—types and analogies that can and should be interpreted as typological and analogical—that fact alone does not prove that *predictive prophecy* can or should be interpreted in a non-literalistic manner. In any case, it seems obvious that Blaising and Bock espouse more than one method of interpreting prophecy, including explicit, predictive prophecy. In their view, some explicit predictive prophecies may be “directly” and only “directly” fulfilled, while other explicit predictive prophecies may also be “typologically” fulfilled. The determining factor is the New Testament.

³⁶In other words, the more historic hermeneutical assumption by dispensationalists that all Old Testament predictive prophecy will be fulfilled in a singular, exclusively literalistic way is too restrictive a view for Blaising and Bock. Such a perspective does not allow for fuller, more expansive, non-literalistic fulfillments (or pre-fulfillments) as assumed or even demanded by their approach, along with the approach of many interpreters who read the New Testament with these broader hermeneutical presuppositions. According to progressive dispensationalism, there are no hermeneutical pre-understandings or “rules” that should be brought to bear on every New Testament citation of Old Testament predictive prophecy, especially not the rule of singular, literalistic interpretation. This stance within progressive dispensationalism creates its own set of problems for the progressivist construct. The assertion that no presupposed, universally applied rules should be brought to bear on every New Testament citation of Old Testament predictions is, itself, a presupposed, universally applied rule. Further, in their assertion that the rule of singular, literalistic interpretation of all Old Testament predictive prophecy is invalid, they have created a rule that New Testament citations of predictive prophecy may indeed be interpreted by some other means. The hermeneutical approach of progressive dispensationalism should certainly not be viewed as a more textually objective, less presuppositional approach to Bible interpretation than that of traditional forms of dispensationalism. Progressive

Fulfillment can be “already-not yet,” that is, partial and then full. To sort out whether fulfillment is inaugurated, realized, or still anticipated, one must study each passage with sensitivity to the various aspects that contribute to the textual message: historical, grammatical, literary, and theological. Each passage should be allowed to speak on its own terms and should be studied with sensitivity to the various angles from which the text can be read.³⁷

Blaising and Bock summarize the various approaches to Bible interpretation:

The final issue on the table is hermeneutical. The issue is not a distinct hermeneutic but debate about *how to apply the hermeneutic that we share*. The question most simply put is, How does “new” revelation impact “old” revelation and expression? There are three approaches to this question.

First, does new revelation *repeat* old revelation or add to it in such a way that the original revelation is not affected at all? This appears to be the answer of older dispensationalism.... One defines Old Testament terms that reappear in the New Testament simply by going back to the Old Testament and looking for the “literal” meaning.

Second, does the New Testament *unveil* “unconscious symbolism”? Waltke believes that Old Testament revelation is resignified by New Testament revelation, and the effect is a change in its interpretation.

Third, does the New Testament *complement* Old Testament revelation? According to this approach, 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.³⁸

dispensationalism simply has different presuppositions, not fewer presuppositions. The question is whether or not their hermeneutical presuppositions are better, more accurate, and more defensible.

³⁷Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, p. 104. By “on their own terms,” it appears that Blaising and Bock mean that the Old Testament text is to be interpreted exclusively on Old Testament terms and the New Testament use of an Old Testament text is to be interpreted exclusively on New Testament terms. In this view, even when dealing with Old Testament predictive prophecy, the interpreter should not impose the literal, historical, grammatical, contextual Old Testament meaning of the prophetic text on the interpretation of the New Testament citation. The New Testament citation should be analyzed “on its own terms,” thus allowing for alteration, resignification, expansion, etc.

³⁸Blaising and Bock, “Assessment and Dialogue,” pp. 392–93. Still open to debate is the question as to whether or not the progressivist system will, in fact, allow for all, currently unfulfilled Old Testament predictive prophecies to find ultimate, literal fulfillment in the eschaton. Given the manner in which progressive dispensationalism permanently unites and equalizes Israel and the church in the eschaton (see the following discussion), it is highly doubtful that progressive dispensationalism will be able to

The third position is the position of progressive dispensationalism. Although the issues are highly complex and are only superficially treated here, there can be no doubt that progressive dispensationalism employs a hermeneutic distinct from that of traditional forms of dispensationalism. Progressive dispensationalism abandons a singular, literalistic approach to interpreting all Old Testament predictive prophecy and engages a construct which allows for an alternate method of interpreting some Old Testament predictions.

Analysis: Inclusive Hermeneutics, Inaugurated Eschatology, New Testament Priority, and Typological Interpretation

Do we all—dispensationalists, non-dispensationalists, and progressive dispensationalists—share a common hermeneutic? It is possible that the *mechanics* of historical-grammatical interpretation might be shared by those who adhere to these various approaches in Bible interpretation. However, the *presuppositions* which are brought to bear on those mechanics remain significantly different. Though non-dispensationalists and progressive dispensationalists may share the presuppositional construct of inaugurated eschatology, those who hold to traditional forms of dispensationalism do not accept this approach. Inaugurated eschatology has been imported into dispensationalism by progressive dispensationalists. Though non-dispensationalists and progressive dispensationalists may share, to some degree, the model of New Testament priority and the non-literal or typological interpretation of some predictive prophecies, those who adhere to traditional forms of dispensationalism do not accept these tenets. New Testament priority and the non-literalistic interpretation of predictive prophecy has been imported into dispensationalism by progressive dispensationalists.

Certainly any hermeneutical construct should be opened to critical evaluation, credible updating, and further refinement, not only methodologically but also presuppositionally. That openness should characterize traditional dispensationalism, conventional covenantism, and progressive dispensationalism. But honest openness does not *necessarily* mean that all interpreters must seek and find middle hermeneutical ground, much less conform to the trends of current theory or the conventions of alleged scholarship. Highly sophisticated hermeneutical methods that place informed and accurate Bible interpretation solely in the hands of current literary scholars seem, themselves, open to suspicion as a point of view; and of course, the very definition of

integrate, consistently and literally, many Old Testament predictions that await fulfillment for national Israel in the future. This question merits close attention in the ongoing analysis of the movement.

“scholarship” may be prejudicially skewed by those who favor one position above another. There is still much room for debate on these hermeneutical issues.

Did Christ inaugurate a new, resigified, or expanded form of the Old Testament prophetic kingdom at his first advent? Can or should New Testament citations of Old Testament predictive prophecy be studied on their own terms, independently of Old Testament contexts and content? Can or does the New Testament suggest meanings to Old Testament predictions which are different than the Old Testament meanings themselves? Can or should *some* predictive prophecy be interpreted by a method different from that which governs *other* predictive prophecy? Though there may be much in common between non-dispensationalists and progressive dispensationalists in answer to these hermeneutical questions, there is little if any commonality with traditional forms of dispensationalism. The hermeneutical issue is not dead, if progressive dispensationalists still care to dialogue with their non-progressivist, dispensationalist brethren.

THE SOTERIOLOGY AND ESCHATOLOGY OF PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM

Progressive dispensationalism also seems to differ from traditional forms of dispensationalism in some of the details of soteriology. Two particular areas of emphasis are noteworthy. One is the view of progressive dispensationalism with regard to redemptive history. The second is the view of progressive dispensationalism with reference to holistic redemption. The positions set forward by the proponents of progressive dispensationalism in these areas have substantial impact upon their understanding of eschatology. The theological corollaries that attend this approach to Bible interpretation are far-reaching when compared to more traditional views within dispensationalism.

Salvation History and the Single People of God

Progressive dispensationalism focuses intensely on the singular nature of salvation history.³⁹ This focus leads those within the movement to make much of the continuity between Israel and the church, particularly in the present and the future. Saucy says, “The changes in dispensationalism have been largely in the direction of a greater

³⁹In tandem with this emphasis, much could be said about the old debate between dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists concerning the purpose of God in history (i.e., a doxological vs. soteriological purpose). Although this debate has essentially been pronounced dead by those who adhere to progressive dispensationalism, a case could be made that there is still some substantial room for differing on this point.

continuity within God's program of historical salvation."⁴⁰ Saucy attributes this change to "the rise of the discipline of biblical theology...[which] has contributed to a greater appreciation of the development within the historical redemptive plan."⁴¹ In Saucy's words, progressive dispensationalism places a "greater emphasis on the progressive working of God throughout salvation history."⁴² Blaising and Bock lay the groundwork for their view of God's present and future dealings with Israel and the church by tying their position securely to the theological framework of salvation history.

Salvation history or history of redemption are terms used by theologians today to refer to the history of God's interventions on behalf of His people to deliver or save them.... Salvation history specifically refers to the history of God's relationships with human beings as recorded in the Bible. It is one of the major categories of biblical theology.... To understand the theology of the Bible, a person needs to recognize and grasp this structure of salvation history.⁴³

Along with their emphasis on the history of redemption, proponents of progressive dispensationalism also focus on the soteriological work of Christ as the "climax of salvation history."⁴⁴ In this way, progressive dispensationalism begins to distance itself from the traditional dispensational emphasis on the distinctive relationships of Israel and the church in the present and future plan of God. Progressive dispensationalism proceeds, rather, to blend Israel and the church as the single, unified people of God under the new covenant.

[Christ] fulfills the promises of the old dispensation. He inaugurates the present dispensation, that of the eschatological Spirit, through his atonement, resurrection, and enthronement. He is the one who will come to complete the restoration of all things. The dispensationalism of this book distinguishes itself from the immediately preceding dispensationalism and Scofieldism by the fact that instead of being anthropologically centered on two peoples, it is Christologically centered [on one people]. The movement from the past to the present and then to future dispensations is not due to a plan for two different kinds of people but rather is due to the history of Christ's fulfilling the plan of holistic redemption in progressive phases (dispensations). The previous dispensation anticipated and then witnessed him. After his ascension to the Father's right hand, Christ inaugurated the present dispensation of his

⁴⁰Saucy, *Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, p. 9.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁴³Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, p. 112.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

earnest, the gift of the Holy Spirit. The future dispensation is the dispensation of his return and consummative rule.⁴⁵

Holistic Redemption

Having established these three premises, (1) the history of redemption as a fundamental theological construct, (2) the death, burial, and enthronement of Christ as the climax of salvation history, and (3) the baptism of the Holy Spirit as the universal bond of all believers (Jew and Gentile) under the new covenant, the proponents of progressive dispensationalism assert that this redemptive, climactic, Spirit-endowed union in Christ becomes God's template of soteriology not only in the age of the church, but also in all of the ensuing eras: the Tribulation, the millennial kingdom, and the eternal state. In other words, once redemptive history has climaxed in Christ, the redemptive structures never again change in kind. From the time of the church on through the Millennium and into the eternal state, there is one saving work of Christ, one new covenant ministry of the Spirit, and one unified, redeemed people of God.⁴⁶

First, progressive dispensationalism specifically links the era of the church and the ensuing millennial age in redemptive status. In summarizing their book, Blaising and Bock say,

In the new dispensation that emerged through the Christ event [i.e., the present church age], Ware, Bock, Hoch, Saucy, and Burns all speak of the *new* state of things in which Gentiles are included with equal standing alongside the remnant of Israel. Both receive blessings from the inaugurated new covenant, blessings that are emphasized as *new* in biblical theology, being differentiated as an advance over the old covenant.... These studies [also] uniformly assert that the New Testament teaches a

⁴⁵Blaising and Bock, "Assessment and Dialogue," pp. 382–83.

⁴⁶Dispensationalists in general, contrary to the assertion of some, have long held that salvation is received by the same means and agency in every dispensation, i.e., by God's grace through the recipient's faith in the revelation of God (See R. Beacham, "Faith, Saved By," in *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, ed. Mal Couch, [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996], pp. 115–17). In that sense, the singular or contiguous nature of the salvation of mankind throughout history is not at issue here. Traditional forms of dispensationalism, however, also espouse significant discontinuity in God's soteriological work by distinguishing the *benefits* and the *outworking* of salvation in various eras. Of import to this discussion is the baptism of the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ. Dispensationalism prior to progressivism viewed the baptism of the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ as unique to the church age, beginning with the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost and concluding with the resurrection and Rapture of all church age saints before the Tribulation period. According to traditional forms of dispensationalism, those who come to faith after the Rapture of the church will no longer be baptized by the Spirit into the body of Christ, even though they are saved by grace through faith. Progressive dispensationalism abandons this distinction.

strong continuity between the present dispensation of the church and the future [millennial] dispensation in which all things in heaven and earth will be united in Christ.... We can see in this [present] dispensation the basis for the integration of all the covenants in the redemption inaugurated in this dispensation and fulfilled in the future.⁴⁷

Having equated the redemptive status of those believers in the era of the church with those believers in the era of the Millennium, progressive dispensationalism proceeds to link (if not unite) the millennial age with the eternal state in terms of unified redemption.

This new dispensationalism sees a greater continuity between the Millennium and the eternal kingdom than was the case in some forms of essentialist dispensationalism. Turner notes that the difference between the Millennium and the new earth is one of degree, not kind. The transition from the former to the latter is not the change from the material to the spiritual, the substantial to the ethereal, but the completion of the redemption (not annihilation) of the whole created order. The continuity is such that Barker, for example, sees them together as one dispensation.⁴⁸

The Corollaries of These Tenets

The corollaries of these tenets of progressive dispensationalism are significant in their distinction from previous dispensational positions. According to the theological construct of progressive dispensationalism, all believers are united through the new covenant baptism of the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ, from the time of Pentecost on past the Rapture of the church into the tribulational period, the millennial age, and the eternal state.⁴⁹

⁴⁷Blaising and Bock, "Assessment and Dialogue," pp. 380–82.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 383.

⁴⁹The question of the timing of the Rapture is, to some extent, left opened for discussion in progressive dispensationalism. Blaising and Bock, in an endnote regarding 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5, say, "Dispensationalists have traditionally advocated pretribulationism.... The deliverance at the *inception* of the Day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5...would appear to be pretribulational" (*Progressive Dispensationalism*, p. 317, n. 15). Later, in a brief synopsis of the views of progressive dispensationalism, Bock suggests that, according to the new dispensationalism, "looking for the 'blessed hope' of Christ's return is still a motivating feature for the believer's walk with God, but some would be less confident about the ability to lay out a detailed scenario for its contemporary fulfillment" (Darrell Bock, "Charting Dispensationalism," *Christianity Today*, 12 September 1994, p. 29). In fact, it is rather common in this movement to minimize the interpreter's ability to correlate prophetic texts sufficiently enough to construe any structured, eschatological schematic of end-time events with which the interpreter can be very confident.

The Baptism of the Spirit into the Body of Christ Is Not Temporally Unique

In the view of progressive dispensationalism, the Holy Spirit's ministry of baptism into the body of Christ is not unique to the present dispensation. Robert Saucy says,

The baptism with the Spirit is therefore not some unique ministry only for the people of the present church age, from Pentecost to the Rapture, but rather is the sharing by members of the church in the Spirit's ministry of the new covenant. The baptism is at the heart of the messianic salvation that has already begun in the revelation of the mysteries that pertain to present-day believers.⁵⁰

When we consider the primary truths of the body figure, it is evident that they are vitally related to the spiritual truths of the new covenant. The vital union of Christ and his people comes through the indwelling Spirit. The indwelling Spirit likewise forms the members of the body into a union with one another.... If this view of what the body metaphor is teaching is correct—namely, that it is fundamentally an elaboration of new covenant realities—then it is difficult to conclude that these same realities belong only to believers living during this church age. Surely the continuation of the new covenant salvation means that other believers will be indwelt by the Spirit. Since, as we saw earlier, the indwelling Spirit involves also the indwelling Christ, it must be concluded that all new covenant believers will be “in Christ” and vitally sharing his life.⁵¹

Blaising and Bock concur. In their view, the new, internalization of the Holy Spirit through new covenant, Spirit baptism and indwelling as inaugurated in the church, will be common to all saints of all ensuing dispensations. This ministry is not exclusive to the current era.

Progressive dispensationalism advocates a *holistic and unified* view of eternal salvation. God will save humankind in its ethnic and national plurality. But, He will bless it with the same salvation given to all without distinction; the same, not only in justification and regeneration, but also in sanctification by the indwelling Holy Spirit. These blessings will come to all without distinction through Jesus Christ, the King of Israel and of all the nations of redeemed humanity.⁵²

The Church Itself Is Not Soteriologically Unique in Kind

Because the new covenant, baptizing ministry of the Holy Spirit is common to all saints from Pentecost on, the church itself is not different in kind from the future people of God in the view of progressive

⁵⁰Saucy, *Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, p. 183.

⁵¹Ibid., pp. 185–86.

⁵²Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, pp. 47–48.

dispensationalism.

There is a significant change taking place in dispensationalism today.... This is what we have called progressive dispensationalism.... Its major distinctive is found in its conception of the progressive accomplishment and revelation of a holistic and unified redemption.⁵³

While the New Testament proclaims the relationship between Christ and the church...as a revelation of the eschatological kingdom, it also predicts the future coming of that kingdom in all its fullness.... The spiritual blessings which were displayed in the previous dispensation in the life of the eschatological community, the church, will be extended in this [future] stage of the kingdom through national and political dimensions of human life as well.⁵⁴

Progressive dispensationalists believe that the church is a vital part of *this very same plan of redemption*. The appearance of the church does not signal a secondary redemption plan, either to be fulfilled in heaven apart from the new earth or in an elite class of Jews and Gentiles who are forever distinguished from the rest of redeemed humanity. Instead, the church today is a revelation of spiritual blessings which *all the redeemed* will share in spite of their ethnic and national differences.⁵⁵

One of the striking differences between progressive and earlier dispensationalists, is that progressives do not view the church as an anthropological category in the same class as terms like Israel, Gentile nations, Jews, and Gentile people. The church is neither a separate race of humanity...nor a competing nation,...nor is it a group of angelic-like humans destined for the heavens in contrast to the rest of redeemed humanity on the earth. The church is precisely redeemed humanity itself.⁵⁶

In this view, then, resurrected and glorified Old Testament saints, resurrected and glorified saints from the present dispensation, and resurrected and glorified tribulational saints will live together among the nations of non-glorified humanity (both the regenerate and unregenerate), and will experience the fulfillment of the earthly and spiritual blessings of the biblical covenants during the millennial kingdom. All of the redeemed, both glorified and non-glorified, will be united in the

⁵³Ibid., p. 56.

⁵⁴Ibid., pp. 281–83.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 47.

⁵⁶Ibid., pp. 49–50. In conjunction with their view that the church is not distinct in kind in this dispensation, those who hold to progressive dispensationalism also generally understand the term “mystery,” as it relates to Jewish/Gentile unity in the church, not to refer to truth that was unrevealed in the Old Testament and only later made known in the New. Rather, in their view this “mystery” involved truth that was previously revealed, but only later actualized or accomplished. See especially Saucy, *Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, pp. 143–73.

body of Christ through the new covenant baptism of the Holy Spirit as a single people of God. In the case of the Jews, Old Testament Jewish believers and Jewish believers of the present age, having been glorified through resurrection, will live among mortal, non-glorified, national Israelites who survive the Tribulation, and will receive the national, physical, and spiritual blessings of the covenants promised to Israel. In fact, all believers of all national, ethnic descent and historic eras will be equal in their experience of these blessings.

According to Blaising and Bock,

Ephesians 2 is clear that the barrier between Jew and Gentile is removed for all time. This is one of the transdispensational features of Christ's work. Millennial saints will be Christians, and their identity in Christ will transcend their racial distinctions, just as it should be in the current era of the church.⁵⁷

The prophetic promises envision Christ ruling forever over the nations of the redeemed. The church is not another "people-group" in that picture. Those Jews and Gentiles who compose the church prior to Christ's coming join the redeemed Jews and Gentiles of earlier dispensations to share equally in resurrection glory. Those who during their dispensation had certain blessings only in promise [OT saints] or in an inaugurated form [the church] will all be brought to the same level of complete fulfillment when they are raised together from the dead. Redeemed Jews and Gentiles will share equally in the completed blessings of the Spirit.

We can illustrate this progressive dispensational view of the church in the case of Jewish Christians. A Jew who becomes a Christian today does not lose his or her relationship to Israel's future promises. Jewish Christians will join the Old Testament remnant of faith in the inheritance of Israel. Gentile Christians will be joined by saved Gentiles of earlier dispensations. All together, Jews and Gentiles, will share the same blessings of the Spirit, as testified to by the relationship of Jew and Gentile in the church of this dispensation. The result will be that all peoples will be reconciled in peace, their ethnic and national differences being no cause for hostility. Earlier forms of dispensationalism, for all their emphasis on the future for Israel, excluded Jewish Christians from that future, postulating the church as a different people-group from Israel and Gentiles.⁵⁸

⁵⁷Blaising and Bock, "Assessment and Dialogue," p. 387.

⁵⁸Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, p. 50. For Blaising's and Bock's view that non-glorified humans in mortal bodies, both regenerate and unregenerate, will indeed inhabit this millennial kingdom see pp. 272–76. That those who are redeemed among these mortal, millennial kingdom citizens will partake of the very same spiritual blessings in kind with those enjoyed by the present church, see pp. 281–83.

**Analysis: Salvation History, Holistic Redemption,
the Single People of God, and the Eschaton**

Progressive dispensationalism, in its view of salvation history, holistic redemption, and the single people of God, has moved significantly away from the position of traditional forms of dispensationalism and much closer to the position of covenant premillennialism with regard to the nature and makeup of the church. If, as Blaising and Bock say, “the category *church* refers to union by the Holy Spirit to Christ through which his fullness of life and righteousness manifests itself in the new humanity,”⁵⁹ and if the new covenant baptism of the Holy Spirit into union with Christ continues beyond the Rapture into the Tribulation, Millennium, and eternal state, then the “church” as a category is certainly not unique to this present dispensation. The only thing that makes the “church” distinct in this era, according to progressive dispensationalism, is the *extent* of salvation blessings: the present church is unable to receive *all* of the blessing of the covenants since kingdom blessings have only been *inaugurated* with Christ’s first advent.⁶⁰

Certainly, to the proponents of progressive dispensationalism, there is some form of a future for national Israel in the eschaton. In fact, it is that very tenet of the new dispensationalists—God’s future plan for Israel—that, in their view, plants them still in the camp of dispensationalism. However, that future for Israel seems to look much more New Testament-like (i.e., church-like) and much less Old Testament-like (i.e., Israel-like), as it works itself out practically in the eschatological scheme of progressive dispensationalism.

In contrast, according to those who hold more traditional approaches to dispensationalism, God’s future for national Israel will be fulfilled when the mortal, physical Jews who survive the Tribulation and the discriminating judgment of Christ at his Second Advent

⁵⁹Blaising and Bock, “Assessment and Dialogue,” p. 384.

⁶⁰As to this distinction only in extent not kind, Blaising and Bock say, “earlier dispensationalists viewed the church as a completely different kind of redemption from that which had been revealed before or would be revealed in the future. The church then had its own future separate from the redemption promised to Jews and Gentiles in the past and future dispensations. Progressive dispensationalists, however, . . . believe that this grace is precisely *in keeping with* the promises of the Old Testament, particularly the promises of the new covenant. . . . The fact that these blessings have been inaugurated in the church distinguishes the church from Jews and Gentiles of the past dispensation. But, only *some* of those blessings have been inaugurated. Consequently, the church should be distinguished from the next dispensation in which *all* of the blessings will not just be inaugurated, but completely fulfilled (which fulfillment will be granted to the saints of all dispensations through the resurrection of the dead)” (*Progressive Dispensationalism*, p. 49).

demonstrate their repentance and faith by swearing to the terms of the new covenant in ratification of the treaty with their God (Ezek 34:11–31; 37:21–28; Hos 2:14–21; et al.). Those Jewish survivors, in ratifying the new covenant, will experience the restoration of national Israel to all of her former theocratic rights and privileges over the Gentile nations (Mic 4:6–8; cf. Acts 1:6 et al.). Certainly, according to traditional dispensationalism, the resurrected and glorified saints of the Old Testament, the church age, and the Tribulation will experience that restored theocratic kingdom, but they will do so in glorified bodies, ruling and reigning with Christ, not as mortals but as immortal.

There is no doubt that the way in which some earlier dispensationalists framed Israel's future and pictured the outworking of the distinctions between the mortal participants of the millennial kingdom and the glorified participants of the millennial kingdom begged for modification and refinement. There is no doubt that refinement was, and continues to be necessary in other areas of dispensational soteriology and eschatology. On the other hand, if some of the older positions taken by dispensationalists in their presentation of these theological categories seem unsatisfying to some Bible interpreters and theologians, the soteriological and eschatological modifications of progressive dispensationalism seem equally if not more unsatisfying to others.

The newly imported focus on salvation history, holistic redemption, and the single people of God is a foundational shift that, to many, seems incompatible with the superstructure of dispensationalism. The interpretations that derive from these tenets are, to many, greatly skewed. Is God's purpose in history fundamentally soteriological? Was Christ's death a salvatory event that leveled the status and benefits of all believers in all ensuing ages? Was the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost a fulfillment of the new covenant that distinguishes all future believers only in degree not kind? Are believers in the Tribulation and millennial period baptized into Christ's body? To blend all of the saints from Pentecost to the eternal state into one people of God, equal in Christ through the new covenant baptism of the Holy Spirit, creates major interpretational and theological tensions of its own—tensions already found in covenant premillennialism.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that progressive dispensationalism made its theological mark on the twentieth century, and there is growing evidence that its impact will continue to flourish in the twenty-first. However, numerous important questions remain in the minds of some who hold to more historic forms of dispensationalism. Is the goal of the new dispensationalism—unity through rapprochement—both biblically and methodologically sound? Are the presuppositions of progressive dispensationalism truly superior to those of traditional forms

of dispensationalism? Will the adoption of a hermeneutical method similar if not equal to that long held by non-dispensationalists lead to a superior form of dispensationalism? Do the former, fundamental tenets of dispensationalism lead to interpretations of Scripture that are wholly impossible, completely indefensible, and/or thoroughly inadequate understandings of the biblical text? Do the new, fundamental tenets of progressive dispensationalism lead to interpretations that are indubitably superior? Does the proposed single remaining basic tenet of dispensationalism in progressive dispensationalism—the eschatological future of Israel—really distinguish the movement as dispensational, especially when Israel’s future is framed in terms of church-like equality? Will the second and third generation of progressive dispensationalists retain this final, tenuous connection with their dispensational roots? Is the eschatology of progressive dispensationalism truly distinct from that of covenant premillennialism? In fact, does progressive dispensationalism really offer new, medial propositions and interpretations of Scripture different from those posited by non-dispensationalists since the 1950s?

These kinds of questions are not being asked only by more traditional dispensationalists. Progressive dispensationalism, with its new hermeneutical method, its inaugurated eschatology, its emphasis on redemptive history, holistic salvation, and the single redeemed people of God in the present and future ages, displays so much similarity with the position of covenant premillennialism that *non-dispensationalists* also search for uniqueness in this movement. They even conjecture about the viability of progressive dispensationalism’s future. Elwell concludes,

The newer dispensationalism looks so much like nondispensationalist premillennialism that one struggles to see any real difference. One also wonders, in the light of dispensationalism’s acknowledged three-stage development from classical to revised to progressive, if there will be a stage four and what it will look like. Will progressive dispensationalism simply turn into historic premillennialism? That is hard to say. Still, progressive dispensationalism itself is evidence that a pilgrimage is taking place.⁶¹

Bruce Waltke, having made the pilgrimage himself, muses,

This new perestroika within dispensationalism augurs well for the future of dispensational schools, especially for Dallas Theological Seminary, with which most of them (as well as myself) are related as former students and/or faculty members.... Older dispensationalists in that institution, who had no firm pedagogical heritage from historic Christian Doctrine, were convinced that accurate exegesis would bear out their system. These younger dispensationalists, having come under the impact of realized eschatology, especially in renowned universities, know that careful exegesis

⁶¹Elwell, “Dispensationalisms of the Third Kind,” p. 28.

must lead at the least to this restructuring of the historic model. Without that openness, honesty, and careful exegesis, dispensational schools would betray their commitment to inspired Scriptures rightly interpreted above uninspired confessions and would fail to attract bright, young minds and to raise up theologians to lead them....

If the [new Dispensationalism] augurs well for the future of dispensational schools, it does not augur well for the future of dispensationalism. What remains distinctive to dispensationalism pertains to the “not-yet” aspect of the kingdom.... At issue is whether or not God has two “true peoples” (true Israel and the church) and whether true Israel has a future role in redemptive history different from the church.... If ethnic Israel’s role is only its remnant status on a permanent equality with the Gentiles in the one true people of God with no distinctive role in the land beyond the Parousia, then the term *dispensationalism* is misleading and ought to be dropped.⁶²

Modification and refinement can, has, and continues to go forward within more traditional forms of dispensationalism, and does so without jettisoning the basic hermeneutical method and theological construct that lies at the very foundation of the system. The proposals of progressive dispensationalism, on the other hand, change the hermeneutical and theological construct at its very core. It could be argued that in progressive dispensationalism it is not the superstructure that is undergoing renovation. Rather, the building itself has been razed and a new and vastly different foundation laid, one not unlike that formerly fashioned by non-dispensational theologians. The future of the movement is unforeseeable, but the path taken seems already worn, and end of the way appears hardly to be surprising, particularly to those who have walked it before.

⁶²Waltke, “A Response,” pp. 350, 354.