

# **Dangers of Progressive Dispensationalism to Pre-Millennial Theology: Reflections of a Pre-Progressive Dispensationalist<sup>1</sup>**

by H. Wayne House

In my years as a professor of systematic theology at Dallas Theological Seminary I saw the gradual introduction of progressive dispensationalism into the seminary, and into the evangelical community at large. Though I did not agree with this change in the theology of the seminary while there, in fact, this was a position I held before the term “progressive dispensationalism” was coined. I had dabbled with such a view in the late 1970s. At that time I was reading extensively in New Testament works while working on my Doctor of Theology degree at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, and teaching courses at LeTourneau College, in Longview, Texas. The writings of C.H. Dodd and George Ladd were among books that I read, in which various aspects of current progressive dispensationalism were presented. The idea of now/not yet, found in both Dodd and Ladd, and now Progressive Dispensationalism seemed to fit the model of Jesus' and apostolic preaching. The thinking of Richard Longenecker on apostolic exegesis seemed to me to be the proper hermeneutical method in New Testament analysis. The concept of

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<sup>1</sup> The reader should understand that this paper was prepared for oral presentation, and though included on the Pre-Trib CD, should be considered a work in progress and not reflective of a final product for publication. In this edition I am not directly interacting with the works of Bock, Blaising, and Saucy, et al, so will not be citing their specific texts known to most. I hope to do so at a later time. For those who desire to read representative works of progressive dispensationalists, see Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Victor Books, 1993); Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Zondervan, 1993); Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, eds, *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* (Zondervan, 1992). Works representing classical dispensationalism are: Renald E. Showers, *There Really is a Difference* (The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc, 1990, 1991); Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy, *When the Trumpet Sounds* (Harvest House Publishers, 1995); Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (rev & expand. Moody Press, 1966, 1995); Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master, *Issues in Dispensationalism* (Moody, 1994). Works that either present both views, or are non-committal are: Dale S. DeWitt, *Dispensational Theology in America During the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Grace Bible College, 2002).

one salvation, based on the death of Christ and through faith, forming one people of God made sense. I remember discussing these views with Elliott Johnson of Dallas Seminary and Paul Fowler of Reformed Seminary on a plane to an ETS meeting back east. This view seemed to bridge the gap. This suggestion of the continuity of redemption seemed to answer the baseless charge that dispensationalists were advocating another way of justification in the era of the church from what, in fact, Abraham and other Old Testament saints knew. That dispensationalists taught a different gospel was answered.

This four to six year sidestep from traditional dispensationalism was corrected due to a doctoral independent study in hermeneutics with Dr. Elliott Johnson and the study of E.D. Hirsch (at least at the initiation), in which I rejected New Hermeneutics and gave closer attention to the biblical text than I had been giving prior to that. It became apparent to me that it is a hermeneutical and logical fallacy to understand what is similar as being the same. That is, there are similarities throughout the dispensations taught in Scriptures, even ideas which traverse the dispensations, but these do not discount the differences that also exist which distinguish these progressive revelations of God. Moreover, the importance of a natural, and plain sense of the text, in which the text is not forced into a theological grid, I found, became representative of classical dispensationalism, unlike the artificial theological covenants of covenant theological and the partial literalism of progressive dispensationalism with what is called complementary hermeneutics.

Another reason why my intrigue with pre-progressive dispensationalism was short-lived was due to the clear biblical presentation of several peoples of God, equally redeemed by the work of Christ, with different purposes in God's world. Though I was willing to admit that in some sense there was only one people of God redemptively in the

Bible—some people are not saved by works while others by faith--(pre-Mosaic, Mosaic, and post-Mosaic), it appeared to me that the status, responsibilities and destinies of different groups were obfuscated or totally lost within my pre-progressive dispensational scheme.

It has become apparent to me that though progressive dispensationalists who were “bred” on traditional dispensationalism might retain much of the system, younger scholars taught by them will not be so tied to these dispensational components and eventually many will move toward historical premillennialism or, at times, outright amillennialism. This concern of mine has been realized in different ways.

One of my best students, and a research assistant to me at DTS, had told me in the mid-1990s that he had accepted progressive dispensationalism. My next meeting with him at the Dallas Seminary bookstore just two years ago I discovered that he had embraced amillennialism and covenant theology. When I asked him about this he commented to me that it was an easy move to make from progressive dispensationalism to amillennialism.

After he said this, I remembered my thoughts after reading the now/not yet arguments of George Ladd, who built on the thinking of C.H. Dodd in this area. Thinking back on Ladd, I often wondered why he remained a pre-millennialist, albeit a post-tribulational one, relying so heavily on Revelation 20, as he did, which could be explained satisfactorily in other ways if one abandoned the broader hermeneutical dispensational framework. It is my understanding from talking to some, though this has not been confirmed, even a current DTS faculty member no longer holds to pre-millennialism. Since then I have wondered how one could sign each year the doctrinal statement

required of each board member and faculty member<sup>2</sup> and yet argue for progressive dispensationalism, which reads,

We believe that different administrative responsibilities of this character are manifest in the biblical record, that they span the entire history of mankind, and that each ends in the failure of man under the respective test and in an ensuing judgment from God. We believe that three of these dispensations or rules of life are the subject of extended revelation in the Scriptures, viz., the dispensation of the Mosaic Law, the present dispensation of grace, and the future dispensation of the millennial kingdom. We believe that these are distinct and are not to be intermingled or confused, as they are chronologically successive.<sup>3</sup>

The ability to sign this as a progressive dispensationalist puts deconstructionism practiced in the legal arena by liberal federal judges to shame.<sup>4</sup>

Consequent to accepting this invitation to address this year's pre-trib study group, I have come across several examples of why I believe that leaving traditional dispensationalism naturally, if not logically, leads to a rejection of pre-tribulational pre-millennialism, as will be seen from the arguments of some progressive dispensationalists, if not an embracing of covenant theology and amillennialism, that some have done. I in no wise cast aspersion on friends, and others, who have moved to progressive dispensationalism and yet claim to hold to dispensational distinctives, particularly the future of Israel within an earthly kingdom. They seem to believe they may do this and still maintain a literal hermeneutic, but in my opinion this is not possible to do with consistency.

The limitation of space for this paper will not allow me to examine in any depth

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<sup>2</sup> Doctrinal Statement, Dallas Theological Seminary  
<http://www.dts.edu/aboutdts/whatmakesdallasdifferent/missiondoctrinalstatement.aspx>.

<sup>3</sup> Doctrinal Statement, Dallas Theological Seminary,  
<http://www.dts.edu/aboutdts/fulldoctrinalstatement.aspx>.

<sup>4</sup> See my chapter on judicial interpretation in H. Wayne House, ed., "Constitutional Interpretation and the Question of Lawful Authority," *Restoring the Constitution* (Probe, 1987), 193-211.

different aspects of progressive dispensationalism which indicate that, allowing for best intentions on the part of these conservative scholars to interact with the biblical text and dialog with covenant theologians, they have in fact have not progressed dispensationalism toward a better refinement but have in fact created an aberration which is neither truly dispensationalism nor covenant theology. Now I am friends with many of these Christians and believe them to be serious about dealing with the biblical text, but I believe they have ceased to truly be dispensationalists except by using an elastic sense of the word<sup>5</sup>

Unlike my other works that many of you may have read on other topics, this paper is not intended to be a detailed interaction that has scores of footnotes and intricate argumentation; I do not purpose to analyze with exactitude or thoroughness why I believe progressive dispensationalists have erred. In this presentation I only desire to give you my reflections based on having followed this question for a number of years based on knowing many progressive dispensationalists, heard their talks, read their works, and having once myself imbibed at their theological stream.

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<sup>5</sup> I grant though that they may truly believe they are only revising, not changing dispensationalism.

## I. Perspectives of Non-Dispensationalists on Progressive Dispensationalists

In speaking of progressive dispensationalists amillennialist Keith Mathison says,

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.<sup>6</sup>

Mathison then logically moves to the question as to how someone can be a progressive dispensationalist by definition. I take it that he understands progressive dispensationalism to be somewhat like being partially pregnant, as when someone might claim to be a progressive Baptist yet believe in infant baptism and modes of baptism other than immersion. Or a progressive premillennialist who believes in a return of Jesus after the millennial, or in progressive inerrantist, who accepts the gradual accuracy of the biblical text.<sup>7</sup>

He then concludes, “The church suffers far too much when people do not identify what they really believe. For the sake of accuracy, honesty, and understanding, ‘progressive dispensationalists’ should no longer claim to be dispensational.”<sup>8</sup>

In postmillennialist Kenneth Gentry’s evaluation of dispensationalism, he questions even the nomenclature of “dispensationalism” since “[p]rogressive dispensationalism is

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<sup>6</sup>Keith A. Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?*, Appendix A, *Progressive Dispensationalism?*, 135.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 136.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 136-137.

no longer committed to the 'concrete dispensationalizing' of history."<sup>9</sup> In fact Gentry believes that advocates of progressive dispensationalism should abandon the term dispensationalism and use the word "covenantalism" instead since the view "comes close to a more covenantal understanding of development of God's purpose in redemptive history."<sup>10</sup>

David White, former traditional dispensationalist, attributes his reading of Ladd and Gundry, among others, in helping him move from dispensationalism to covenant theology and amillennialism.<sup>11</sup>

Tim Warner, a progressive dispensationalist, believes that the historic premillennial understanding, with its post-tribulational perspective, reflects the thinking of the early church and is the natural position of progressive dispensationalism.<sup>12</sup>

Other examples could be given but these are sufficient to demonstrate that in some instances progressive dispensationalism and other non-traditional dispensational perspectives may have deleterious effect on one's acceptance of dispensationalism. It is another matter, however, to argue that, in fact, progressive dispensationalism necessarily, or logically, produces such results. Could it not be that these afore mentioned reviewers of progressive dispensationalists have not properly understood this new form of dispensationalism, and the idea of "initial fulfillment" of the kingdom (to use Bock's term)?<sup>13</sup> Or is progressive dispensationalism merely a transitional viewpoint as one

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<sup>9</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., "The Progressive Nature of Progressive Dispensationalism," in *Dispensationalism in Transition*, Vol. LX, No. 8 (August, 1995), 2.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> David L. White, *My Shift to Covenant Theology and Amillennialism* (unpublished paper).

<sup>12</sup> Tim Warner, *Progressive Dispensationalism: Introduction*, <http://www.pfrs.org/pd/index.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Darrell Bock, "The Son of God and the Saints' Task: The Hermeneutics of Initial Fulfillment," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150/600 (October-December 1993) 440-457.

moves from dispensationalism to covenant theology with its decidedly non-pre-millennial advocacy.

## II. What Exactly is Dispensationalism?

One of the difficulties in dealing with the the legitimacy of progressive dispensationalism as a form of dispensationalism is the issue of definition. Mathisen makes much of this when he provides a definition by Stanley Toussaint: “Stanley Toussaint defines dispensationalism as the theological system that ‘recognizes various administrations or economies in [the] outworking of God’s plan in history.’”<sup>14</sup> I suspect that Toussaint elsewhere defines dispensationalism in fuller terms, but the point to be made is the importance of giving a definition that truly distinguishes dispensationalism from other systems which share points in common with it. Mathisen continues:

This definition omits anything that is unique to dispensationalism. Virtually every system of Christian theology recognizes various administrations or economies within God’s plan, yet it would be inaccurate to claim that all of these systems are dispensational. Dispensationalism must be defined in terms of its unique essence, namely that which distinguishes is from other systems of theology.<sup>15</sup>

This need of uniqueness, as will be seen below, is the problem of progressive dispensationalism. May it share enough in common with traditional dispensationalism in its essence to clearly distinguish it from nondispensational systems?

Tim Warner takes exception with those who argue from the classical dispensational camp that progressive dispensationalists are not really dispensationalists at all. He says,

Progressive dispensationalists are often accused of not being true 'dispensationalists.' This begs the question – what is a dispensationalist? Is a dispensationalist one who sees a series of

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<sup>14</sup> Mathison, 3. See appendix A for custom understanding of dispensations. I use a chart by Randall Price and Thomas Ice by permission.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

'dispensations' in God's dealings with mankind? Is a dispensationalist one who sees a future tribulation, followed by Christ's second coming to the earth to establish His Millennial Kingdom, with Israel inheriting the land promised her, and being head of the nations? Is a dispensationalist one who interprets Scripture literally? If these are what characterize dispensational beliefs, then surely progressive dispensationalists are true 'dispensationalists,' since we firmly hold to all of these things. Progressive dispensationalists therefore cannot rightly be charged with "replacement theology" – the belief that God is finished with Israel, and the Church has usurped all of the promises at Israel's expense.<sup>16</sup>

Warner's seems to say that one is a dispensationalist if he believes in a series of dispensations, or a future tribulation and millennial kingdom, or in Israel having a national future, or interprets Scripture literally. Yet, being a dispensationalist is not that a person holds some of these ideas to be true, as is seen from the fact that covenant theologians and dispensationalists alike believe in at least two dispensations, if not three. Non-dispensational pre-millennialists believe in a tribulation and a millennium. Even amillennialists claim to interpret the Scripture literally, and some have expressed belief in a national history for the Jews. Something more must be involved. There must be a center to dispensational belief that clearly distinguishes a person as a dispensationalist. Progressive dispensationalists believe that they advocate the same views of dispensationalism that classical dispensationalists do, but are merely revising dispensationalism similar to what has been done in the past by Ryrie, Walvoord, and others. But, to me, Warner's charts and explanations of progressive dispensationalism make it abundantly clear that we are not speaking of nuanced developments within dispensational thought, but radical changes, to the degree that his overall perspective

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<sup>16</sup> Tim Warner, *Progressive Dispensationalism 101*, [http://www.geocities.com/lasttrumpet\\_2000/prodisp.html](http://www.geocities.com/lasttrumpet_2000/prodisp.html).

reflects progressive dispensationalism.<sup>17</sup> This is so much so that covenant theologians have publicly stated the obvious, "The newer dispensationalism looks so much like non-dispensational pre-millennialism that one struggles to see any real difference."<sup>18</sup>

Historically for a theological position accurately to be labeled dispensationalism it should have some essential and evident traits, generally three in number. There are some components which classical dispensationalists have disagreed on which do not necessarily disturb the system, such as whether or not the kingdom was postponed, whether the new covenant is predicted for both the church and Israel, or whether the church receives it through the blessings of Abraham, and whether there is a distinction of kingdom of God and kingdom of heaven. The necessary components are a consistent literal hermeneutic in the interpretation of Scripture, particularly prophecy in this discussion, holding a clear distinction between Israel and the Church in the purposes of God, and a doxological, in contrast to a redemptive, focus in the understanding of Scripture, as well as the ultimate purpose of God within His world.

These important features of the dispensational system are articulated by several dispensational scholars, and though given a nod by progressive dispensationalists, are revealing of the concern as to whether progressive dispensationalism may rightly be called dispensationalism, even though it is not a pure covenant view either. In each of the above three areas, when one reads progressive dispensationalist along with covenant theologians, there is little disagreement in the articulation of the views. In order to

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<sup>17</sup> Tim Warner, *Progressive Dispensationalism 102*, [http://www.geocities.com/lasttrumpet\\_2000/prodisp2.html](http://www.geocities.com/lasttrumpet_2000/prodisp2.html). Find these charts in the appendix B, used by permission.

<sup>18</sup> Walter A. Elwell, *Christianity Today* (September 12, 1994), 28.

demonstrate this, let us turn to a contrast between traditional dispensationalism with progressive dispensationalism and covenant theology.<sup>19</sup>

*A. Distinction between Israel and the Church*

Charles Ryrie is clear that distinction of Israel and the Church is a *necessary* element of true dispensationalism:

This is probably the most basic theological test of whether or not a person is a dispensationalist, and it is undoubtedly the most practical and conclusive. The one who fails to distinguish Israel and the church consistently will inevitably not hold to dispensational distinctions; and one who does will.<sup>20</sup>

Ryrie then continues, “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.”<sup>21</sup>

If Israel and the church are not distinct, then why did the church cease to be under the law while Israel was always under it? If Israel and the church are not distinct, then one must ask why those who had embraced the faith of Israel, such as John's disciples needed to be baptized in the name of Jesus and receive the Spirit, or why the faithful at Pentecost had to identify with this new truth?<sup>22</sup> The church seems to be a new reality. To be fair progressive dispensationalists have created a hybrid, for they do not mean that the nation of Israel and the church are identical, or that the church is spiritual Israel, as will be seen below, only that the faithful of Israel and the Gentiles make up the church.

Progressive dispensationalists consider the church to be a continuation of the people of Israel in the Old Testament who were believers. They have been united by Christ into

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<sup>19</sup> See the chart by Mike Stallard in appendix C, used by permission. Also see chart 45, p. 78 entitled “A Comparison of Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism,” and chart 51, entitled “Three Stages of Dispensationalism,” p. 85 in H. Wayne House and Randall Price, *Charts of Bible Prophecy* (Zondervan, 2003).

<sup>20</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, rev. & expanded (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966, 1995), 39.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> These factors were suggested to me in a conversation with Dr. Gary Derickson on December 3, 2003.

one new body, and will all participate in the same resurrection and future reign in the Davidic kingdom during the millennium.<sup>23</sup> This view becomes plain, if I have understood them, in the works of standard progressive dispensationalists such as Bock, Blaising, Saucy, but none have probably said it any plainer than Warner:

The 'Church' consists of the believing remnant of Israel, along with the believing remnants of all the Gentile nations, united in one body. Israel and the Church are not identical. However, they overlap where the Jewish remnant is concerned. The term 'Israel' is not used of the Church in general in Scripture, nor is the term 'Church' used of the whole nation of Israel.<sup>24</sup>

He continues by posing the problems that a classical dispensationalist would allegedly have difficulty with, such as how Joel's prophecy has been fulfilled in the church,<sup>25</sup> how the church has become a participate in the new covenant of Jeremiah according to the writer of Hebrews, how the Old Testament saints became retroactively receivers of the eternal inheritance implying a unified redemption program, how the church has been included in the new covenant in Galatians 4:21-31,<sup>26</sup> how Paul became a proclaimer of the hope of Israel if the promises are not to the church, how the Gentles and Jews became joined together in one tree according to Paul in Romans 11:16-29, and how Jews and Gentiles are a new body, the church according to Ephesians 2:11-22.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> For a classical dispensational understanding of the relationship of the covenants see appendix D for charts by Randall Price which explain the Abrahamic Covenant in its relation to sub-covenants, and how these may be graphically displayed in reference to the Gentiles, Israel, and the Church. Used by permission.

<sup>24</sup> Tim Warner, *Dichotomy or Continuity Between the Present and Past Dispensations Opening Argument*, [http://www.geocities.com/lasttrumpet\\_2000/debate\\_1a.html](http://www.geocities.com/lasttrumpet_2000/debate_1a.html)

<sup>25</sup> For discussion of views on Joel's prophecy see chart 34, entitled "Two Views of Joel 2," and chart 35, entitled "Views on the Relationship of Joel 2:28-32 and Acts 2:14-21," in H. Wayne House and Randall Price, *Charts of Bible Prophecy* (Zondervan, 2003).

<sup>26</sup> For discussion of views on the New Covenant, see chart 9, entitled "Views on the New Covenant," in H. Wayne House and Randall Price, *Charts of Bible Prophecy* (Zondervan, 2003).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

### *B. The Use of Literal Hermeneutics*

The second sine qua non of dispensationalism is the consistent use of a literal hermeneutic.<sup>28</sup> Ryrie says about this, “. . . the second aspect of sine qua non of dispensationalism is the matter of historical-grammatical hermeneutics,”<sup>29</sup> and

Consistently literal, or plain, interpretation indicates a dispensational approach to the interpretation of Scripture. And it is this very consistency—the strength of dispensational interpretation—that seems to irk the nondispensationalist and becomes the object of his ridicule.<sup>30</sup>

Yet, do progressive dispensationalists truly follow literal, grammatical, historical interpretation? They really prefer only the terms grammatical and historical, since, supposedly, it is difficult to know what is meant by literal. It is said that arguably everyone holds to literal interpretation some of the time, and it is argued, everyone, including classical dispensationalists depart from it some of the time. But most of us know what literal means in hermeneutics. This has been taught in the standard hermeneutics texts of the past, and practiced regularly by us. The obfuscation of this term so that it becomes merely the opposite of figurative is unnecessary. We all know how some can obscure the meaning of even the word "is". What does "is" mean? Or the recent meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, in which a considerable part of the organization of scholars have difficulty knowing what is meant by the word inerrancy? As Hirsch has taught us, words have shareability of meaning. If we don't know what they mean, then there is little possibility of human communication and no possibly of nuances of meaning within communication.

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<sup>28</sup> For discussion on views of interpretation of prophecy, see chart 15, entitled “A Comparison of Christian Approaches to the Interpretation of Prophecy,” and chart 17, entitled “A Summary of Basic Principles for the Interpretation of Prophecy: Seventeen Characteristics,” in H. Wayne House and Randall Price, *Charts of Bible Prophecy* (Zondervan, 2003).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

When the Scripture speaks of the lion lying down with the lamb, is it speaking of some deeper meaning or higher truth like peace in the world, or does it mean in fact that the lion and the lamb will exist without hostility? When the Scripture says that the prophet Elijah will return in the last days before the coming of the Messiah, was this fulfilled with John the Baptist, or should we expect the actual prophet to come? When the text tells us that the Messiah will actually descend to the Mount of Olives and that it will split into, north and south, is this speaking of a higher principle of the Messiah's majesty or will the real mountain east of Jerusalem move apart? When Zechariah the prophet spoke of a river flowing at the temple which goes into both the Mediterranean and Dead Seas, complete with descriptions and boundaries, does this refer merely to some spiritual truth? Is Ezekiel's temple only a weak description of Jesus the temple of God? How we approach ideas such as these will reveal our commitment to natural interpretation of a text under a correspondence theory of truth.

In dealing with literal interpretation, we speak of how a reader approaching a text would normally read the text, understanding the conventions of language such as idiom and figure, without added outside theology that could be superimposed on the text. This imposition is exactly what progressive dispensationalism does, in my view, with complementary hermeneutics, in which fuller meaning found in the New Testament becomes the means by which to add to the meaning found in the Old Testament text. In

speaking of how progressive dispensationalists<sup>31</sup> like Bock and Blaising follow a complementary interpretative method,<sup>32</sup> Robert Lightner sounds an alarm:

"This is a serious thing to me. If the same hermeneutic was applied to other areas of prophecy, like it is applied to the Davidic covenant, you could never be sure of anything in the Scripture until it was either fulfilled or the canon was closed. Then, of course, you know there is not going to be any further revelation, 'change.' Until that time, all prophecy is open to complementation."<sup>33</sup>

What about the offer of the kingdom that Jesus makes to Israel? Certainly his hearers, his opponents, and his disciples (pre and post resurrection) understood this as a offer of an earthly Davidic rule. Progressive dispensationalists do not believe this, and for that matter some classical dispensationalists, not to mention nondispensationalists, but I have wondered long why of us have not pursued this argument, along with Peter's sermon, a little more forcefully.<sup>34</sup> We should also not let the argument that it would be an insincere offer because Jesus, or the Father, knew they would reject it, so why make it. This is true

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<sup>31</sup> An exception I have found is Tim Warner, who understands that Jesus assumes His Davidic throne at this coming, and Robert Saucy, who believes that Jesus has assumed the throne but reigns when all enemies have been subdued.

<sup>32</sup> See the works of Robert L. Thomas, *The Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism*, TMSJ 6/2 (Spring 1995) 79-95; Charles Zimmerman, "To This Agree the Words of the Prophets": A Critical Monograph on Acts 15:14-17," *Grace Journal* 3 (Fall 63): 28-40; Manfred Kober, *The Problematic Development of Progressive Dispensationalism*, [http://www.faith.edu/pulpits/97\\_04.htm](http://www.faith.edu/pulpits/97_04.htm); Mike Stallard, *Literal Hermeneutics, Theological Method, and the Essence of Dispensationalism* (unpublished paper).

<sup>33</sup> Robert Lightner, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, [http://216.147.82.42/journals/04\\_11\\_journal/2000v4n11\\_id03.htm](http://216.147.82.42/journals/04_11_journal/2000v4n11_id03.htm).

<sup>34</sup> Several fine articles deal with this question of postponement, and with whether Jesus is reigning on David's throne in the current era. See John A. McLean, "Did Jesus Correct the Disciples' View of the Kingdom?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151 (April-June 1994): 215-227; Stephen J. Nichols, "The Dispensational View of the Davidic Kingdom: A Response to Progressive Dispensationalism," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 7/2 (Fall 1996) 213-239; Cleon L. Rogers, Jr., "The Davidic Covenant in Acts-Revelation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151 (January-March 1994): 71-84; Elliott E. Johnson, "Hermeneutical Principles and the Interpretation of Psalm 110," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149: 596 (1992): 428-437; Mal Couch, *Progressive Dispensationalism: Is Christ Now on the Throne of David?—Part 1*, <http://www.tyndale.edu/dirn/articles/david1.html>; Mal Couch, *Progressive Dispensationalism: Is Christ Now on the Throne of David?—Part 2*, <http://www.tyndale.edu/dirn/articles/david2.html>; Mal Couch, *Progressive Dispensationalism: Is Christ Now on the Throne of David?—Part 3*, [http://www.conservativeonline.org/journals/2\\_6\\_journal/progressive\\_dispensationalism\\_3.htm](http://www.conservativeonline.org/journals/2_6_journal/progressive_dispensationalism_3.htm); an interesting article by a progressive dispensationalist argues also that Jesus is not now on David's throne, Tim Warner, *Is Jesus Seated on David's Throne*, <http://www.pfrs.org/pd/pd13.html>.

of all of God's offers to humans, including salvation. Divine omniscience is not separated from human responsibility nor God's mercy and justice.

Lightner also offers in his article an interesting twist on understanding whether the kingdom was in fact offered to Israel, rather than only an offer of salvation:

I can understand that. In fact, it would be foolish, they would cut their own theological throat if they said it was a genuine offer of the Davidic kingdom. What kind of God would put in a contingency for the kingdom's establishment, and then, when this contingency to repent was not met, establish the kingdom, in part, anyway? Everybody knows that Israel didn't repent, evidenced by the crucifixion. So, God says, well okay, I'll introduce it in part. I won't really introduce it, set it up, but I'll just get it started a little bit. What kind of God is that? No, no, he said repent, it's at hand. They didn't repent, and the kingdom didn't come at all in any sense, at His death or His resurrection or His ascension, and it's not operative now either.<sup>35</sup>

### *C. Doxology as the Mitte of Theological Truth*

This third element, God's underlying purpose in His world Scripture, is not discussed regarding a necessary element of dispensationalism as is the others, but it becomes especially important in determining the degree to which progressive dispensationalism looks more and more like Reformed theology than dispensationalism. Ryrie acknowledges that covenant theologians have a strong theology of the glory of God, but to the dispensationalist the glory of God is the focus,<sup>36</sup> not a focus, and the salvation of mankind is a means to that end, not the end itself. Covenant theologians, in contrast, have redemption as God's purpose in the world. He goes on to explain:

To the normative dispensationalist, the soteriological, or saving, program of God is not the only program but one of the means God is using in the total program of glorifying Himself. Scripture is not

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<sup>35</sup> Lightner, [http://216.147.82.42/journals/04\\_11\\_journal/2000v4n11\\_id03.htm](http://216.147.82.42/journals/04_11_journal/2000v4n11_id03.htm).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

man-centered as though salvation were the main theme, but it is God-centered because His glory is the center.<sup>37</sup>

*D. The Distinction between Difference and Disparity*

Often the point is made that progressive dispensationalism has simply followed the leading of men like Pentecost, Walvoord, and Ryrie in refining or revising the position rather than making a break with dispensationalism. For example, dispensationalists of the past have sometimes distinguished the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God, a position few would hold today. Or, former dispensationalists believed that there were two new covenants, a position that only a minority today would espouse. Moreover, the legitimate offer of the kingdom to Israel, and its consequent postponement is rejected in some dispensational circles. Is not, then, additional movements within progressive dispensationalism camps such as the initiation of the Davidic kingdom at Pentecost, the joining of Gentiles alongside Israel as one people, or seeing redemption as the primary purpose of God's acts in history, merely further refinement. Prima facie this may seem the case, but we find out upon subsequent investigation that the differences among traditional dispensationalists of the past are far different than the current substantive and disparate views of progressive dispensationalists.

Ryrie has made the distinction of development and change, making much the same point as I intend here.<sup>38</sup> When methodology and conclusions are at variance with the essential elements of a position, then one would do well to acknowledge the abandonment of the position.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, "Update on Dispensationalism," *Issues in Dispensationalism*, Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master, gen. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 15-16.

### **III. My Concerns that Progressive Dispensationalists Have Crossed the Theological Rubicon to Covenant Theology**

D. Matthew Allen has presented an historical view of the movement of the ancient church from premillennialism to amillennialism. He argues that the church first began to lose the understanding of Israel as a special people of God with specific promises of God that had not yet been fulfilled.<sup>39</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, this is likely to have happened due to the rapid growth of the Gentile church having inadequate grounding in the Jewishness of the Old Testament, due to the ostensible final rejection of the Jewish nation based on the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and the expulsion of the Jews by Hadrian in A.D. 135, due to very strong anti-Christian rhetoric and actions of those Jewish leaders from Yavneh on who reformulated Judaism, excluding important Messianic elements that were embraced by Jewish and Gentile Christians alike, and due to the anti-Semitism present in the Mediterranean world, among possibly other reasons.<sup>40</sup> Certainly the earliest leaders of the first and second century A.D. were Jews, and even the earliest apologists and writers of the Christian church favored the future of the Jewish people, but such a view rapidly fell out of favor as the church strived against persecution toward the triumphalism of the third and fourth century.<sup>41</sup>

When the distinct peoples of God (albeit all saved by the death of Christ and through faith) are not distinguished (and here I include those believers before national Israel), then the function of these peoples within the plan of God become difficult to explain.

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<sup>39</sup> D. Matthew Allen, *Theology Adrift: The Early Church Fathers and Their Views of Eschatology*, <http://www.bible.org/docs/theology/esch/ecesch.htm>.

<sup>40</sup> See H. Wayne House, gen. ed., "The Church's Appropriation of Israel's Blessings," *Israel, the Land and the People* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 77-110.

<sup>41</sup> See in general article by Allen, and my chapter on "The Church's Appropriation of Israel's Blessings," for discussion of these points.

Why did Old Testament saints before the law of Moses not keep the law, and why does not the church? Why were some given specific land promises while others general blessings? Why were the sacrifices different for the various groups? Why did the baptism in the Holy Spirit only begin at Pentecost and not for the saints in the Old Testament? Why is the body metaphor only true of the church? Why did Jesus offer a kingdom to the Jewish nation, and why did His disciples consistently understand the offer that way before and after the resurrection, even after Pentecost? These and many other questions need to be answered if there is only one people of God.

The second factor leading to amillennialism was the abandonment of literal interpretation of the Scripture to find different levels of meaning. This multi-leveled understanding we now know as allegorism. Allen says, "The early apostolic fathers interpreted Scripture according to a 'functional hermeneutic,' meaning that they applied the text to their own situation, often without regard for its original context."<sup>42</sup>

We should not understand that the apostolic fathers and early apologists, such as Justin, were amillennialists; far from it. But eventually other Christians became amillennialists who did not have some of the same theological orientation as they did. Departing from literal, contextual, grammatical, historical exegesis leads eventually to innovative and inventive interpretation and theology. Progressive dispensationalists such as Bock and Blasing truly do endeavor to understand Scripture faithfully, and I don't believe they see themselves as substantially deviating from classical dispensationalism, but in fact the approach has that effect, particularly on those who follow these innovators. The complementary method of Bock is somewhat similar to the multi-leveled method of those who eventually moved toward amillennialism.

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<sup>42</sup> Allen, <http://www.bible.org/docs/theology/esch/ecesch.htm>.

Last, and unmentioned by Allen, is the move from a doxological to a redemptive model in progressive dispensationalism. Now progressive dispensationalists will aver belief in the importance of the glory of God to theology, as will covenant theologians (pre and a), but this is not the issue. The glory of God must be the focus and controlling factor, the *mitte*, or center, of our theology. Redemption is not the most important goal of the Bible or God's work in the world. It is a means to an end, not the end. The Bible is not centered in salvation history, as Gerhard Hasel showed years ago in his biblical theological works: it centers in God Himself. God does everything after His own counsel and for the praise of His glory. This must continue to be heralded by all Christians and particularly dispensationalists.

The failure to maintain a clear distinction between the people of Israel and the church leads to the kind of blurring of theology which gave rise to the amillennialism of the fourth century of the Church, the fruits of which are beginning to show signs in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century in evangelical schools and churches.

#### **IV. Challenge to Progressive Dispensationalists to Explain How they are Still Dispensationalists**

In conclusion, I am not suggesting that progressive dispensationalists are less Christian or serious in their theological endeavor than are classical dispensationalists. I should not be understood to be saying that they do not in fact believe what they say they do about the future of Israel, or many other matters in which they speak. These are friends of mine that I respect. I merely desire to ask them to reconsider whether influences other than the compulsion of Scripture has not caused them to adopt a view

which seems, to me, to be out of harmony with the important distinctions that the Bible makes between the redeemed peoples of God, consistent literal hermeneutics and seeing all things, as Paul did having their beginning, means, and ends in God. I am concerned that to do otherwise is to lead them and their students away from dispensationalism altogether.