

A Presentation Relating to Progressive Dispensationalism  
Dr. John R. Master  
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Pretribulational Premillennialism

**A Brief Historical Overview. of the Development of Progressive Dispensationalism.**

This presentation will attempt to provide an overview of what has been going on in the "progressive dispensational" movement, and how this approach to the Scriptures may affect pretribulational premillennialism.

The "dispensational study group" arose, apparently, as the result of an informal meeting at Talbot Theological Seminary in 1985 discussing "current trends and ideas relating to the topic of dispensationalism."<sup>1</sup> This discussion was led by Craig Blaissing of Dallas Theological Seminary. The initial public meeting was held on November 20, 1986, in Atlanta, Georgia.<sup>2</sup> At that first meeting Blaissing established the theme that Dispensationalism has changed over the years. This was to become the basic apologetic for continuing change as demonstrated by the current writings of those associated with the group subsequently (1991) called "progressive dispensationalists."

At Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary the following year (1986), Darrell Bock presented a paper entitled "The Reign of Christ."<sup>3</sup> Bock's paper contained the idea that Jesus was, during the present church age, sitting on the Davidic throne, thus inaugurating the fulfillment of the Davidic covenant of 2 Samuel 7.

The next year the study group met in Wheaton, and Mark Bailey read a paper entitled "Dispensational Definitions of the Kingdom." During the discussion period varying views were presented regarding definitions of dispensationalism. Ryrie's three part "sine qua non" was mentioned, but it did not appear that the audience could agree on the importance of these items in defining dispensationalism. In fact, at the conclusion of the meeting, there was no agreed upon definition of dispensationalism.

In 1989 at Bethel Seminary West, Vern Poythress of Westminster Theological Seminary presented material from his book *Understanding Dispensationalists*.<sup>4</sup> This meeting, in particular, broadened the scope of the discussion to include those outside of dispensationalism. The following year Tremper Longman, also of Westminster Theological Seminary, presented a paper, as did Elliot Johnson of Dallas Theological Seminary, both dealing with the area of hermeneutics. Both men, from differing theological perspectives, claimed to be using a grammatical, historical, and contextual approach to the Scriptures.

At Kansas City in 1991, Doug Oss presented a paper on dispensationalism from the perspective of one committed to the charismatic movement. A major focus of this paper dealt with the question of the cessation of gifts in the present dispensation. The most recent meeting in San Francisco dealt with the recently published book edited by Bock and Blaissing. In all of the meetings, there has been a genuine attempt to have individuals holding differing views involved in the discussion as respondents.

It seems fair to say that Blaissing and Bock have been major forces behind the discussions to this date. Their papers have provided the framework for the discussions that have taken place first in terms of the concept that dispensationalism has changed over the

years and thus is not a static system, and secondly in the exegetical framework of Bock which deals with the "already" and "not yet" of inaugurated eschatology based on Luke-Acts.

These two men have clearly stated their commitment to pretribulational premillennialism. At the same time, the "progressive dispensational" position has been compared closely with Ladd's position which is avowedly posttribulational. Furthermore, the "progressive dispensational" meetings have sought to involve amillennial scholars, and there is seeming drawing toward each other by both sides as indicated by Hoekema's position of a future for Israel in the eternal state, and the "progressive dispensationalist" articulation of the fulfillment of New Covenant and Davidic Covenant promises by the church in the church age.

A Brief Examination of the Exegesis Relating to the Present Fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant as Presented by Darrell Bock.

In 1987, as indicated above, Darrell Bock put forth the idea of Jesus' presently sitting on the throne of David in fulfillment of the Davidic covenant of 2 Samuel 7 et. al. Rather than using specific proof texts that would state such to be the case, Bock emphasized the need to work carefully with theological themes. This seems most appropriate and valid. For instance, in discussing the doctrine of regeneration (a biblical term found only in Matthew 19:28 and Titus 3:5) one normally includes the Johannine passages dealing with being "born again" (John 3). Of course the danger with such a thematic approach is that the passages may be speaking of something similar but not necessarily identical. Does John 3 speak of being "born again" or of being "born from above?" If the latter understanding is correct, should the texts define or illuminate the doctrine of "regeneration?" When one looks at the "kingdom" passages in the Old Testament is the Millennium or the New Heavens and New Earth in view? There is always the danger that similarity may be confused with identity. On the other hand, to fail to try and synthesize legitimately connected ideas and passages might lead to failing to interpret properly the text.

Bock approaches the Luke-Acts material with this sensitivity to dealing with themes in theological study. Acts 2 and 3 are crucial to Bock's argument. He presents clearly the methodology he uses when he says,

In the space of these two key chapters in Acts, Luke discusses three major Old Testament covenants (the Abrahamic, the Davidic, and the new covenants). Reference is often made, not through the identification of a single term or by naming a specific covenant, but through clear allusions to features of the covenants in question. Through allusion, Luke indicates either fulfillment or anticipation of fulfillment. By this clever association of concepts, Luke presents Jesus as the fulfillment of promises and covenants made to Israel. Yet Luke still notes that some of what Jesus is to do is yet to come. As such, the continuity between Jesus' first and second comings and their relationship with Old Testament promise, with the Old Testament covenants, and with messianic hope is consistently maintained in the various stages of Jesus' career.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, this statement must be understood in the context of the Lucan material which is found in the gospel and which provides the context for interpretation in Acts.

The gospel provides the background for the thematic associations which are made in Acts. "In his gospel, Luke consistently associates the kingdom with Jesus' life and ministry."<sup>6</sup> Again Bock says,

At the very start of his gospel, Luke signals that Jesus will fulfill Old Testament promise in terms of both the national hope of Israel and the spiritual needs of those who participate in God's covenant. The messianic deliverance promised to Abraham is realized in David's seed, a deliverance of both physical and spiritual dimensions.<sup>7</sup>

Bock thus uses Luke 11:20 to argue that the kingdom has come in some sense during Jesus' earthly ministry. While he does not specifically identify this with the Davidic kingdom, identification is implied by his use of the text to support his argument concerning Jesus' present rule on the Davidic throne in heaven. According to Bock, the context makes it clear that Luke 17:21 indicates "...the kingdom is presently available through Jesus' ministry."<sup>8</sup> When Bock goes on to declare "...the kingdom is a program in stages, initiated by Jesus and consummated in judgment..."<sup>9</sup>, one might suggest Bock is stating the very point he is seeking to prove. He further argues, "There is an intensification of inauguration in the death of Jesus..."<sup>10</sup> "Inauguration is a process in Luke's gospel, but it is not really complete until Jesus dies and is raised."<sup>11</sup> "what emerges is a picture of a career that comes in stages as different aspects of what the Old Testament promised are brought to fulfillment as different phases of Jesus' work."<sup>12</sup>

Bock indicates: "This present form of the kingdom of God is the church existing among the other kingdoms of earth."<sup>13</sup> This assertion raises a fundamental question: is the present form of the kingdom of God an inaugurated form of the Davidic kingdom prophesied for Israel in the Old Testament? Even Bock admits, "...the primary focus of the current kingdom in Jesus' authority to save ...."<sup>14</sup>

Acts 2 and 3 provide the focal point for Bock's discussion of the inauguration of the kingdom. According to Bock the expression, "This is what was spoken" means fulfillment and not comparison. His support comes from the use of the expression in Qumran.<sup>15</sup> An apparent problem with this understanding of the expression is that Bock has to qualify what he means by fulfillment to indicate partial fulfillment because some of the things spoken of by Joel have not been fulfilled.<sup>16</sup> It is doubtful in Qumran this idea of partial fulfillment was the normal understanding of such a phrase. There does not seem to be the textual warrant for Bock's conclusion that the expression should be understood to mean "this is the beginning of that."<sup>17</sup>

Peter's use of the expression "in the last days" is also a modification of Joel's quote. This expression finds substantial use in the intertestamental period to refer to the period of time just before the inauguration of the prophesied Old Testament Davidic kingdom. Joel used the expression "afterward" which contextually seems to refer to an event after the time the nation of Israel had acknowledged the LORD as their God. In the situation in Acts, the opposite seems to be the case. For the most part, even after the great response to Peter's message, the nation of Israel rejected Jesus as Messiah. The context in Joel of the Lord's promise seems also to be in a different setting from what appears to be the case in Acts. It is, therefore, not obviously correct to say, "What is present is an inauguration of events, not a total completion, as the nature of the fulfillment of Joel in Acts shows. The 'last days' points to the presence of the eschaton, but not to the presence of all of it."<sup>18</sup> Is this a conclusion from the text or a reading into the text to fit an assumed theological position?

Bock further argues that, "Jesus' resurrection-ascension to God's right hand is put forward by Peter as a fulfillment of the Davidic covenant, just as the allusion to Joel fulfills the new covenant."<sup>19</sup> It may be that Peter is saying that Jesus' resurrection-ascension is what makes possible the fulfillment of the Davidic promise because the throne was eternal and the

promise was to a seed of David. The promise thus demanded for its fulfillment someone greater than a sinful human being whose reign would be cut off by death. When Bock argues for fulfillment it seems, while he may omit the qualifier, he means "partial" fulfillment.

At the same time Bock is arguing for a present partial fulfillment of the Davidic and new covenants, he makes it clear that he is firmly committed to a future fulfillment of the promises for Israel on earth. He differs from Ladd in giving greater emphasis to the importance of the concept of the "realm" as it relates to kingdom rule.<sup>120</sup> It is still not completely clear in this verse how the term "fulfillment" is used. In a personal conversation with Bock, albeit too brief for him to express fully and fairly his views, he suggested the latter fulfillment of the promises (the "not yet") would be a more "intensive" fulfillment.<sup>121</sup> Is this somewhat akin to Beecher's concept of "generic prophecy?"

Seeking to be sensitive to theological themes and ideas one might ask how there can be this present "inaugurated fulfillment" if we are presently in the "times of the Gentiles" as suggested by Luke 21:24? The theme of the time of the Gentiles seems to continue into the future as the idea of the Gentiles treading down of Jerusalem is still future according to Revelation 11:2. When Bock argues that the term "times" (Κατρός) is used consistently to refer to the present period<sup>22</sup>, is he making an argument based on the use of a term that may overlook the implications of thematic considerations where the exact term is not found, but the theme is? To make such a forceful claim based on the use of a word might be counter to the thrust of his earlier argument for Jesus' ruling as king based on thematic considerations where the "critical terms" which would prove Jesus' rule are not found. In one case the exact terms are not needed because of thematic considerations and in another case exact terms are important. Apparently the exact terms are not necessary to prove the inauguration of either the new covenant or the Davidic covenant because in Acts the term "fulfillment" is not used in either case nor are the specific covenant passages mentioned. It seems less than "clear" to argue for a present inaugurated fulfillment of the Davidic covenant when Jerusalem is still "trodden down by the Gentiles."

An argument against Bock's position of Jesus' ruling presently on the Davidic throne is based on the use of "until" ("Εως) in Acts 2:35. Bock acknowledges, "The imagery of Psalm 110 is the imagery of installation..."<sup>23</sup> There does not seem to be any disagreement that the rule spoken of is Jesus' rule as the Davidic king. This seems to be the contextual thrust of Psalm 110. Bock then adds, "...and the picture of Jesus seated with God pictures currently shared rule."<sup>24</sup> This latter statement is not clearly stated or implied in the context of the psalm. In fact the "until" seems to point to the rule's not beginning until all the enemies have been subjected. Jesus may be actively involved in this subjection, but the point is that the rule mentioned in the psalm does not begin until the subjection of the enemies has been accomplished. Since this subjection has not yet been realized, one could argue the Davidic rule of Christ has not yet begun.

What then is presently taking place? What is the present nature of Jesus' reign? Possibly a simpler, more direct understanding of the biblical data would be to acknowledge the reign of Christ in the present church age, but not as the Davidic king. It seems important to consider the "kingdom" theme as central to biblical revelation. Man was given "dominion" by God as a unique feature of his being in the creative act of God. To borrow Verduin's expression, man is a "dominion haver."<sup>25</sup> The final statement about man's destiny in Revelation 22:5 is that he "will reign for ever and ever." In other words, the kingdom program begins with the creation of man and continues through eternity future. The kingdom program began in the Garden, and every dispensation has been an expression of the stewardship

requirements (given as covenants) of the various forms the kingdom has taken as revealed by God. Presently there is a form of the kingdom rule in which the church is its manifestation. In this sense, there is an "already and not yet" as it relates to the kingdom, but this has been true since the fall of man and God's promises of restoration of man to his place of rule over the rest of creation on God's behalf. There is both continuity and discontinuity in the "kingdom" program. The continuity is found in the program itself, and the discontinuity is found in the "stewardship" distinctions revealed in Scripture.

Progressive dispensationalism has brought to the forefront of discussion the continuity in the kingdom program of God that encompasses all of Scripture. This is a stimulating theological perspective. It seems, however, that Bock's thematic approach, as valuable as it may be, is strained in terms of fulfillment of the Davidic covenant by Christ in the present age. Certainly if the Scriptures teach that Jesus is presently ruling from heaven on the Davidic throne, this position ought to be accepted. The simple question is whether Jesus is now ruling in terms of "fulfillment" of the Davidic covenant? He has been given "all authority" and He is at the right hand of God. There is presently a form of the kingdom program, just as there was in Noah's day, in Abraham's day, and even in Adam's day. Is the present form an inauguration of the Davidic form as Bock argues or is this yet future, when Jesus enemies have been made His footstool? In this second case, during the present time, the present form of the kingdom is related to the church while Israel's kingdom promises are yet future.

While Bock and others who hold this view have stated publicly and in print their belief in the pretribulational rapture, the questions they raise may have implications for the position. As Gundry stated:

In the chronological question concerning the rapture the dispensational issue centers in the field of Ecclesiology. An absolute silence in the OT about the present age, a total disconnection of the church from the divine program for Israel, and a clean break between dispensations would favor pretribulationalism: the church would not likely be related to the seventieth week of Daniel, or tribulation, a period of time clearly having to do with Israel. But a partial revelation of the present age in the Old Testament, a connection (not necessarily identification) between Israel and the church, and a dispensational change involving a transitional period open the door to the presence of the church during the tribulation.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald T. Clutter, "Dispensational Study Group: An Introduction," *Grace Theological Journal*, 10.2 (1989), p. 123.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Dispensationalism Israel and the Church*, edited by Craig Blaissing and Darrell Bock, Zondervan Publishing House, 1992. Both Bock's and Blaissing's earlier articles have been developed and refined in their latest writings.

<sup>4</sup> Poythress, Vern S., *Understanding Dispensationalists*, Zondervan, 1987.

<sup>5</sup> Bock, "The Reign of the Lord Christ," *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, edited by Craig Blaissing and Darrell Bock, pp. 37-38.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>21</sup> Personal conversation after the "Dispensational Study Group" meeting in San Francisco on November 19, 1992.

<sup>22</sup> Bock, "The Reign of the Lord Christ," *Dispensationalism Israel and the Church*, edited by Craig Blaissing and Darrell Bock, p. 59.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Verduin, Leonard, *Somewhat less the God The Biblical View of Man*, Eerdinans, 1970.

<sup>26</sup> Gundry, Robert H., *The Church and the Tribulation*, Zondervan, 1973, p. 12.