

DISPENSATIONAL TRUTH

"PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM" Pt. 1

by Charles C. Ryrie

Whether or not this is the best title for such a chapter awaits the verdict of a longer historical perspective. Labels other than "progressive" have been suggested for this new viewpoint, including "reconstructed," "modified," "new," "revised," "kingdom," and "changed." All of these accurately indicate some facet of this new form of dispensationalism, so any one of them would be appropriate titles. But since "progressive" is the word most often used thus far in the literature of the proponents, it will serve to label clearly the content of this chapter.

ORIGIN OF THE MOVEMENT

The public debut was made on November 20, 1986, in the Dispensational Study Group in connection with the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Atlanta, Georgia.¹ The Group has continued to meet at those annual meetings, and several proponents have published books and articles in the succeeding years. Actually the label "progressive dispensationalism" was introduced at the 1991 meeting, since "significant revisions" in dispensationalism had taken place by that time. Two professors at Dallas Theological Seminary, Darrell L. Bock (New Testament) and Craig A. Blaising (Systematic Theology), have been in the forefront of the movement, along with Robert L. Saucy (Systematic Theology) of Talbot Theological Seminary. So far three books have been published: *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* (edited by Bock and Blaising, 1992), *Progressive Dispensationalism* (written by the same two men, 1993) and *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (written by Saucy, 1993).

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In the overall historical picture of dispensational theology, this new movement inaugurates an era clearly distinguished from previous eras of dispensational thought. The initial period started with J. N. Darby and continued through the publication of L. S. Chafer's *Systematic Theology* in 1948. Progressives label this the classical period. (I personally think it makes better sense to divide the early/Darby era from the Scofield/Chafer period). The second (or third) era extends from the 1950s almost to the 1990s and includes the writings of Alva McClain, John Walvoord, J. Dwight Pentecost, and myself. This was first called by progressives the essentialist period (from my listing of the essentials—the *sine qua non*—of dispensationalism), but more recently it has been changed to the revised period. The third (or fourth) present period differs from the previous ones because it includes

"a number of modifications" and "sufficient revisions."²

Many who formerly had been associated with the normative dispensational camp have embraced the revised view, especially in academia. Much of the dialog has been between progressives and covenant theologians, who have openly expressed pleasure that progressives have moved away from normative dispensationalism, though covenant theologians clearly have not moved from the tenets of their position.

In an attempt to justify their movement away from normative dispensationalism, progressives have pointed to differences in some interpretations among normative dispensationalists. They conclude that, if normatives can, do cit, their revisions are justified also. However, the crucial consideration is not that there are some differences, but what are those differences? Are they minor or major? In general, differences in interpretations and emphases among normative dispensationalists do not change the overall system

¹ However, Kenneth L. Barker's presidential address at the 33rd annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society on December 29, 1981, was a precursor of some of the views of the progressive dispensationalism. His address, "False Dichotomies Between the Testaments," appeared in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25, no. 1 (March 1982): 3-16.

² Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1993), 22-23.

a token of public honor ("of glory") for distinguished service. Unlike the gift of salvation which is given at the moment of faith in Christ (Ephesians 2:8), this incorruptible reward ("that fadeth not away") for their faithful service to the Saviour (1 Corinthians 9:24-27) will be given "when the chief Shepherd shall appear" (i.e. the Rapture and Judgment Seat of Christ).

Dear fellow-elders, the mention of this special crown for faithful pastors is designed to remind us of the value and importance of being faithful to the Lord in this awesome responsibility of shepherding God's flock. And though your ministry may be unappreciated in this life, you can be rewarded by the Lord Himself in the next!

For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister. (Hebrews 6:10)

For I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified: but he that judgeth me is the Lord. Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts: and then shall every man have praise of God.

(1 Corinthians 4:4-5)

Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward. (2 John 1:8)

As I reflect upon these passages of Scripture and the awesome role and responsibilities entrusted by God to me as an elder, I sense my great personal inadequacy and find myself crying out,

And who is sufficient for these things?
(2 Corinthians 2:16)

And the Lord via His Word quiets my overwhelmed heart by reminding me,

Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God; Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament... (2 Corinthians 3:5-6a)

I can't do it; but He can! Praise the Lord! And if "I try; I fail. I trust; and He succeeds!" Lord, may we never forget this truth. ■

In the next edition of the Grace Family Journal, we will begin examining the responsibilities of the congregation to their spiritual leaders.

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DOCTRINE AT A GLANCE

The Bible-believing / teaching local church is necessary...

- A. For EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY. (Ephesians 4:7-16)
- B. For ENCOURAGEMENT and EXHORTATION. (Hebrews 10:24-25)
- C. For the ESTABLISHMENT OF DOCTRINE. (1 Timothy 3:15-16)
- D. For the ENGENDERING OF FELLOWSHIP, PRAYER, AND THE ORDINANCES. (Acts 2:42-47)
- E. For the EXERCISING OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS. (1 Corinthians 12:12-27)
- F. For the EVANGELISM OF THE LOST. (Acts 13 & 14)

of dispensationalism, whereas the differences advanced by progressive dispensationalists do form a new and revised system that some (both dispensationalists and nondispensationalists) believe is not dispensationalism anymore.

DESCRIPTIVE DEFINITIONS OF PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM

The subtitle of *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* is "The Search for Definition." One has to conclude after reading the book that the search was unsuccessful and will have to be ongoing. In *Progressive Dispensationalism* the definition of a dispensation is "a particular arrangement in which God regulates the way human beings relate to Him" (a normal way to define the word). Later on in that book the system of progressive dispensationalism is described as understanding "the dispensations not simply as different arrangements between God and humankind, but as successive arrangements in the progressive revelation and accomplishment of redemption."³ Although differences and discontinuities among the dispensations are recognized, samenesses and continuities are emphasized and linked to the theme of redemption throughout all of human history.

Though clarity is somewhat lacking in the area of definition, progressives do make some descriptive statements that help explain their system.

1 "Progressive dispensationalism advocates a holistic and unified view of eternal salvation."⁴ This means that all the redeemed will be blessed with the same salvation with respect to justification and sanctification. One wonders if this is not similar to the concept and purpose of the covenant of grace in covenant theology.

2 The church is not "an anthropological category" in the same class as terms such as *Israel* and *Gentiles*, nor is it "a competing nation" (what about 1 Peter 2:9?), but it is redeemed humanity in this present dispensation. These phrases seem inadequate and unclear, for they do not convey the differences in the progressives' concept of the church (and there are major differences). One divergence seems to be this: normative dispensationalists distinguished the future heavenly promises for Jewish Christians'

who become part of the Body of Christ from the future promises for national Israel in the earthly Millennium; progressives do not ("A Jew who becomes a Christian today does not lose his or her relationship to Israel's future promises").⁵

Another major change in revisionist dispensationalism (as previously discussed in chapter 7) is that the mystery character of the church does not mean that the church was unrevealed in the Old Testament but only that it was unrealized. Also, the church is submerged into an overall kingdom concept. Chapter 4 noted that one progressive dispensationalist called the church "the new Israel." Whether others will follow remains to be seen. But to do so further blurs the distinction between Israel and the church in this present dispensation and actually seems to place one in the covenant premillennial camp.

3 The "blessings [promised in the Abrahamic, Davidic, and new covenants] are given [today] in a partial and inaugurated form."⁶ Thus, progressive dispensationalism can be described as understanding these covenants as already inaugurated and beginning to be fulfilled. Why is no mention made of an already inaugurated Palestinian covenant (Deut. 29-30)?

Is it possible to construct a definition from these three statements? Clearly revisionists do not want to be constricted by the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism proposed in chapter 2. Nevertheless, to help the reader see more clearly the differences between normative and revised dispensationalism, I want to construct a definition/description of progressive dispensationalism following the outline of my *sine qua non*. Progressive dispensationalism (1) teaches that Christ is already reigning in heaven on the throne of David, thus merging the church with a present phase of the already inaugurated Davidic covenant and kingdom; (2) this is based on a complementary hermeneutic that allows the New Testament to introduce changes and additions to Old Testament revelation; and (3) the overall purpose of God is Christological, holistic redemption being the focus and goal of history.

³ Ibid., 14, 48.

⁴ Ibid., 47.

⁵ Ibid., 49-50.

⁶ Ibid., 53.

BASIC TENETS OF PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM

It seems best simply to list what seem to be the basic tenets of progressive dispensationalism and to elaborate and evaluate them in the next section. In this way the reader can have an overall view of the forest before focusing in on the trees. This list is compiled from books, tapes, and articles of the progressives, but the phrasing and order in the listing is my own choice.

- 1 The kingdom of God is the unifying theme of biblical history.
- 2 Within biblical history there are four dispensational eras.
- 3 Christ has *already* inaugurated the Davidic reign in heaven at the right hand of the Father, which equals the throne of David, though He *not yet* reigns as Davidic king on earth during the Millennium.

4 Likewise, the new covenant has *already* been inaugurated, though its blessings are *not yet* fully realized until the Millennium.

5 The concept of the church as completely distinct from Israel and as a mystery unrevealed in the Old Testament needs revising, making the idea of two purposes and two peoples of God invalid.

6 A complementary hermeneutic must be used alongside a literal hermeneutic. This means that the New Testament makes complementary changes to Old Testament promises without jettisoning those original promises.

7 The one divine plan of holistic redemption encompasses all people and all areas of human life — personal, societal, cultural, and political. ■

To be continued in the January/February 2003 edition of the Grace Family Journal.

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CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

MUSIC FROM HELL

by Peter Peters and Vasilij Ryzhuk

For thirty years we have suffered intense persecution. Now freedom is bringing another great harm to our churches. This damage is coming from Christians in America who are sending rock music and evangelists accompanied by rock bands. Our young people do not attend those meetings because we have all committed not to participate in secular entertainment.

This is a great burden to our hearts. Many come with Bible in hand and rock music. We are embarrassed by this image of Christianity. We do not know what words to use in urging that this be stopped. We abhor all Christian rock music coming to our country.

Rock music has nothing in common with ministry or the service to God. We are very much against Christian Americans bringing to our country this false image of "ministry" to God. We need spiritual bread... not false cakes. It is true that rock music attracts people to the church, but not to Godly living.

We were in prison for fifteen years for Christ's sake. We were not allowed to have Christian music, but

ROCK MUSIC was used as a weapon against us day and night to destroy our souls.

We could only resist with much prayer.

Now, we have a time of more openness. We are no longer taken to prison. However, now it is Christians from America who damage our souls. We do not allow this music in our church, but these "evangelists" rent big stadiums and infect teenagers and adults with their rock music. We, the leadership and congregations of the Unregistered churches urge you to join with us, and we advise you to remove rock music from America.

Do not desecrate our teenagers with it. Even the unbelievers recognize it is unholy music. We call this music, "music from hell." We urge all Americans to stop giving money for the organizations of such concerts in Russia. We only want traditional Christian music in our churches.

This is the unanimous decision of all our leaders. ■

This is from the "Head of the Unregistered Union of Churches in Russia" appeared in "Life," dated 21, May, 1992.