

DISPENSATIONAL TRUTH

"PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM" Pt. 2

by Dr. Charles C. Ryrie

ELABORATION AND EVALUATION OF THESE TENETS

The Kingdom

One of the major emphases in revisionist dispensationalism is on the kingdom as the unifying theme of biblical history. One of the major weaknesses in the system is not defining the kingdom and not distinguishing the various kingdoms in the Bible. In general, progressives speak of a single, or unified, kingdom of God in both Testaments, with major emphasis on the "eschatological kingdom" defined as the kingdom of God in the last days (which began with the first coming of Christ). Thus, their exposition of the kingdom of God in the Old Testament (though the actual phrase does not occur in the Old Testament text) focuses largely on the Messianic reign, especially in the future, millennial kingdom. In the New Testament the discussion breaks down into the kingdom related to the life of Christ, to the church, and to the future. All these are aspects of the eschatological kingdom, since the last days begin with the first coming of Christ. The discussions are accompanied by numerous charts.

It would not be practical in a single chapter to attempt to sort out all the facets of the kingdom discussions in revisionist dispensationalism. Nevertheless, two significant areas need investigation.

First, because the focus is largely Messianic, whether discussing the psalms, prophets, the life of Christ, or the epistles, various kingdoms are blurred and their characteristics merged because Christ is the one involved in each. At least two results follow from this. One is the blurring of the distinction between the church and the Davidic kingdom by asserting that Christ is now reigning from heaven on the throne of David and that the church is the present revelation of the

eschatological kingdom.⁷ The second result identifies the goal and purpose of history as Christological in contrast to normative dispensationalism's focus on the glory of God. A Christological purpose is less comprehensive (than the glory of God purpose in normative dispensationalism) but goes hand in hand better with the Messianic, eschatological, unified kingdom emphasis.

Therefore, progressives conclude that the church is the "present reality of the coming eschatological kingdom." It is the kingdom today.¹

Second, this unifying kingdom emphasis places a different cast on the place of the church in the program of God. The church is called a "sneak preview" of the kingdom and "a functional outpost of God's kingdom."⁸ The church is "a Present Revelation of the [Messianic] kingdom."⁹ This emphasis comes from focusing on the Lord's present reign and authority as Messianic – enthroned and reigning in heaven on the Davidic throne in inaugural fulfillment of the Davidic covenant and incarnate as the son of David and "not as generic humanity." Therefore, progressives conclude that the church is the "present reality of the coming eschatological kingdom."¹⁰ It is the kingdom today.

In American evangelicalism the writings of George E. Ladd widely promoted views of the kingdom that are now embraced by progressive dispensationalism. Although progressives try to distance themselves from Ladd and disclaim any dependence on his theology, they are espousing the same views. When Bock was asked if Ladd would disagree with his views, he replied, "I think the

⁷ Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1993), 22–23.

⁸ Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 53, 155.

⁹ Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 257.

¹⁰ Darrell A. Bock, "Evidence from Acts" in *A Case for Premillennialism*, ed. Donald K. Campbell and Jeffery Townsend (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 194.

fundamental thrust of the structure he would not disagree with."¹¹ The major similarities, if not sameness, between Ladd and progressives are these: (1) the focus on the kingdom of God as an overall, all-encompassing theme; (2) the already/not yet, progressively realized nature of the kingdom; (3) the present position of Christ reigning in heaven as the Messianic Davidic king.¹²

The Dispensations

Progressive dispensationalism charts four primary dispensations.¹³ The first is the Patriarchal (from creation to Sinai). Although they acknowledge that other dispensationalists see distinct dispensations within this broad period, it seems odd not to distinguish the pre-Fall arrangements God made with Adam and Eve as a separate dispensation. By every measurement this was a different stewardship. Furthermore, it seems necessary to distinguish the arrangement God introduced with Abraham in view of Paul's emphasis on the Abrahamic promises (Gal. 3:8–16) and in view of revisionists' own emphasis on the Abrahamic covenant. To lump pre-Fall conditions, post-Fall conditions, and the Abrahamic covenant under a common stewardship arrangement or dispensation is artificial, to say the least.

The second dispensation is labeled the Mosaic (from Sinai to Messiah's ascension). This certainly is a clearly distinguishable arrangement. But why extend it to the ascension of Christ? Why not end it with the death of Christ as Colossians 2:14 indicates? The answer may relate to the fact that progressives mark the Ascension as the inauguration of Messiah's reign on the Davidic throne in heaven.

The third is called the Ecclesial (from the ascension to Messiah's second coming). This is the one that

¹¹ Question and answer session at the Evangelical Theological Society, 22 November 1991.

¹² Stephen J. Nichols gives detailed evidence of these similarities by means of side-by-side quotations from Ladd and Bock in an unpublished paper ("Already Ladd—Not Yet Dispensationalism: D. Bock and Progressive Dispensationalism") read at a regional meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, 2 April 1993. See also David A. Dean, "A Study of Enthronement in Acts 2 and 2" (unpublished Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, May 1992).

¹³ Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 123.

has commonly (and more understandably) been labeled Church, or Grace.

The Dispensations Of Progressive Dispensationalism

Patriarchal	Mosaic	Ecclesial	Zionic	
Adam to Sinai	Sinai to ascension of Messiah	Ascension to Second Coming	Part 1: Millennium	Part 2: Eternal State

The fourth is the Zionic, which is subdivided into (1) millennial and (2) eternal. (This is the only one subdivided, though the patriarchal can be.) The eternal aspect is the culmination of the eschatological kingdom on "a renewed earth," and the millennial kingdom is an intermediate kingdom—intermediate between the inaugurated Davidic rule now in heaven and the fullness of the kingdom of God on the new earth.¹⁴ Thus, the new dispensationalism sees eternity as a dispensation (as a minority of dispensationalists have in the past) and the Millennium "as a step toward the final fulfillment of the everlasting promises."¹⁵ With this placing of the Millennium and the new earth together in one overall dispensation, little wonder that one covenant theologian, Vern Poythress (while acknowledging that he does not speak for all) concludes that "provided we are able to treat the question of Israel's relative distinctiveness in the Millennium as a minor (!) problem, no substantial areas of disagreement remain [between progressive dispensationalism and covenant theology]."¹⁶ A question to ponder: Does he make this statement because covenant theologians have now embraced a literal, present earth Millennium (no, they have not), or because he perceives revisionist dispensationalists as having given ground in their eschatological statements (yes, they have)?

The Davidic Reign

One of the major departures, if not *the* major one, of progressive dispensationalism from traditional dispensational and premillennial teaching is that Christ, already inaugurated as the Davidic king at His ascension, is now reigning in heaven on the throne of David. "The Davidic throne and the heavenly throne of Jesus at the right hand of the Father

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 270, 283.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 271.

¹⁶ Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 51.

are one and the same."¹⁷ This present reign is the first stage of His Davidic rule, the second being during the Millennium on the throne of David from the earthly Jerusalem on this present earth.

Other systems of theology have also taught that Christ is now reigning on the throne of David in heaven. This teaching is not new or exclusive to progressive dispensationalism. Covenant premillennialist George E. Ladd wrote in 1974, "*The exaltation of Jesus to the right hand of God means nothing less than his enthronement as messianic King.*"

He then cites as proof Peter's use in Acts 2 of Psalm 132:11 and 110:1, just as Bock, representing the progressives, does years later.¹⁸ Covenant theologian O. Palmer Robertson wrote, "*A reading of the early chapters of the book of Acts indicates that Jesus Christ does indeed now reign in fulfillment of the promises spoken to David.... God's throne and Jesus' position as heir to David's throne seated at God's right hand merge in the new covenant.*"¹⁹ Bock might just as well have written those words.

This already/not yet bifurcation is not new in theological parlance. Nor is it always used in the two-pronged concept of the Davidic rule (now in heaven, later on earth). Introduced by C. H. Dodd in 1926, it meant generally that the kingdom of God was already present, even though in some way it was also future. In George Ladd the "*already*" relates to Christ's reign in salvation and the "*not yet*" to His future reign in the Millennium. In Hoekema (an amillennialist) it means Christ's present heavenly reign on earth and His future reign in the new heavens and new earth.²⁰ In Sproul (an amillennialist) the "*already*" is the present age and the "*not yet*" is the eternal state.²¹

If it is so clear that our Lord is reigning now as the Davidic king in inaugural fulfillment of the Davidic covenant, why is that only alluded to in Acts 2?

In progressive dispensationalism, the "*already*" is Christ's present reign in partial fulfillment of the Davidic covenant and the "*not yet*" is His millennial reign.

To substantiate this requires four beliefs: (1) understanding Acts 2 as teaching not only who Jesus of Nazareth is (God, Messiah, and ultimate fulfiller of the Davidic covenant) but also what He is now doing (reigning on the Davidic throne in heaven = the right hand of the Father); (2) interpreting the phrase "*the kingdom has drawn near*" to mean "*is here*" or "*present*"; (3) understanding Psalm 110 as teaching exaltation to the throne of David in heaven; and (4) in general concluding that associated concepts, "*clear allusions*" (an oxymoron?), and similarities produce identity (e.g., our Lord reigns and the Davidic king will reign; therefore, the Lord has already begun to reign as the Davidic king in fulfillment of the Davidic covenant).

Regarding Acts 2-3, progressives argue that, since Peter states that Jesus was exalted to the right hand of the Father and since Jesus is the ultimate heir to the Davidic throne, He must now be reigning as the Davidic king in fulfillment of the Davidic covenant (the right hand of the Father being the throne of David in heaven). However, Bock acknowledges that the key texts only "*allude to*" or are "*not clear*" or are a "*pictorial description*" eight times in his discussion of Acts 2. Bock clearly states that Psalm 132:11 (quoted in Acts 2:30) is "*the crucial linking allusion*" and "*strongly Israelitish and national in tone.*"²²

Actually, what Peter is arguing for is the identification of Jesus of Nazareth as the Davidic king, since Jesus, not David, was raised from the dead and exalted to the right hand of the Father. He does not add that He is reigning as the Davidic king. That will happen in the future millennial kingdom. If it is so *clear* that our Lord is reigning now as the Davidic king in inaugural fulfillment of the Davidic covenant, why is that only *alluded to* in Acts 2? Links and similarities between reigns do not make clear an equality between the Davidic

¹⁷ Darrell L. Bock, "Evidence From Acts," in *A Case for Premillennialism*, 194.

¹⁸ George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 344.

¹⁹ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 220-21.

²⁰ Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 229.

²¹ R.C. Sproul, "The Object of Contemporary Relevance," in *Power Religion*, ed. Michael Horton (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 317.

²² Darrell L. Bock, "The Reign of the Lord Jesus Christ" in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 36-67. See especially p. 49.

reign and Christ's present rule.²³

As for the meaning of *engkien* ("drawn near" or "is present"), most translations and commentaries understand it to mean "drawn near." Bock takes it to mean "here" — i.e., the kingdom has already arrived — and, of course, he understands this to mean the Davidic kingdom.

[Bock] argues from the fact that the verb is used with *epi* in Luke 10:9, ...[but] this construction... occurs not because the kingdom was present but because the kingdom is always said to come from above. ...Interestingly; none of the illustrations used by Bock to support the meaning of "arrival" are in the perfect tense....Lane concludes, "The linguistic objections to the proposed rendering 'has come' are weighty; and it is better to translate 'has come near.'"²⁴

If Christ inaugurated His Davidic reign at His ascension, does it not seem incongruous that His first act as reigning Davidic king was the sending of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:33), something not included in the promises of the Davidic covenant? Furthermore, the writer of Hebrews plainly declares that Christ "sat down at the right hand of the throne of God," not the throne of David (12:2). That does not deny that our Lord has all authority in heaven and earth or that He rules in the world and in the church; rather, it denies that He is ruling on David's throne now and that the Davidic covenant has already been inaugurated. To

²³ See Zane C. Hodges, "A Dispensational Understanding of Acts 2," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 174–78. Hodges points out technical and theological errors in Bock's use of Acts 2.

²⁴ Stanley D. Toussaint, "The Contingency of the Coming of the Kingdom," in *Integrity of Heart, Skillfulness of Hands*, ed. Charles H. Dryer and Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 231–32. The quote from William L. Lane is from *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 65 n. 93.

conclude otherwise confuses the various rules in the Bible. Remember, too, that David himself was designated and anointed to be king some time before he began to reign as king. Christ is the Davidic king, designated before His birth to reign over "the house of Jacob," not the church (Luke 1:31–33), though He will not be reigning as Davidic king until His second coming.

Does Psalm 110 prove that Christ is now reigning as the Davidic king? Progressives think so, but others believe that the evidence does not support that conclusion. Elliott E. Johnson points out that in Psalm 110 Messiah is presently waiting for a future conquest and victory. His present position is one of honor in the presence of His enemies.

Further, Messiah's present position does not include any of the activities that accompanied the coronation of a king; only His priestly activity is mentioned. Also, David's earthly throne and Yahweh's heavenly throne should be distinguished (though progressives attempt to equate them on the basis of Peter's use of Psalm 132:11 in Acts 2:30). "However, it is preferable to see David's earthly throne as different from the Lord's heavenly throne, because of the different contexts of Psalms 110 and 132. Psalm 110 refers to the Lord's throne (v. 1) and a Melchizedekian priesthood (v. 1; 4) but Psalm 132 refers to David's throne (v. 1; 11) and (Aaronic) priests (vv; 9, 16)."²⁵

A word should be said about the progressives' revised interpretation of Acts 3:19–21 and the phrases "times of refreshing" and "restoration of all things."

The former phrase, they say, refers to the present time (the "already" aspect of the kingdom) and the latter to the future return of Christ (the "not yet" phase). But that would not have been what Peter's audience understood, nor is it supported exegetically. The "that" (*hopos*) in verse 20 introduces a purpose clause; i.e., repent for the purpose of or with a view to. The purpose involves two things happening — the coming of "times of refreshing" and the coming of Christ. Progressives believe that the times of refreshing refer to the present time, preceding the return of Christ. But the construction links the two events: the times of refreshing (the millennial, Davidic kingdom) will come when Christ returns and not before. The two

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clauses (with two subjunctive verbs) that follow *hopos* cannot be separated, as progressives do, in order to support their already (present Davidic kingdom, the "times of refreshing") and not yet (future Davidic kingdom, "restoration of all things") concept. Nothing grammatically separates the promises; in fact, they are joined together by the connective *kai*. Therefore, both expressions refer to the promised restoration of the nation Israel in the Millennium.²⁶ This teaching of an already inaugurated Davidic reign in revisionist dispensationalism is far from firmly established by clear exegesis of the relevant texts. ■

²⁵ Elliot E. Johnson, "Hermeneutical Principles and the Interpretation of Psalm 110," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149

(October–December 1992): 434.

²⁶ Toussaint, "The Contingency of the Coming of the Kingdom," in *Integrity of Heart, Skillfulness of Hands*, 228-30. See also J. Randall Price, "Prophetic Postponement in Daniel 9 and Other Texts," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, 134-35.

To be continued in the next edition of the Grace Family Journal.

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A TRUTH AT A GLANCE

If some folks were
as ready to lay bricks
as they are to throw them...



And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; And to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. *And* be at peace among yourselves. (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13)

FALL BIBLE CONFERENCE

October 26–29, 2003

We want to invite any interested pastors, missionaries, Bible-teachers, or hungry hearted believers to our annual Bible Conference to be held at Duluth Bible Church.

Our conference will begin Sunday morning (October 26th) and run through Wednesday night (October 29th).

The purpose of our conference centers around four objectives:

1. To exalt our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10:31)

2. To encourage and further equip fellow-laborers in the Gospel.

Shepherding God's sheep can be a joyful and rewarding experience or a thankless and trying exercise. Too many pastors and missionaries are congregationally unappreciated, emotionally burdened, and personally criticized, while seeking to make the most of the training and gifts they have received. Our day sessions will be strongly geared to minister to the needs of God's shepherds by way of encouragement and equipping.

3. To edify our church (Duluth Bible Church) and other believers who attend.

In the past we previously had two Bible conferences per year. Last year, however, we began combining our Pastor's Conference and our Bible Conference into one conference. In doing so, our evening sessions on Sunday – Wednesday nights will be designed for all believers in Christ.

4. To entreat fellowship among our sister-churches. (Heritage Trail Bible Church, Clarissa B. C., etc.)

All the details about our Conference will be forthcoming. But for more information do not hesitate to call us at (218) 724-5914 or e-mail us at admin@duluthbible.org.

As God expands the ministry of D.B.C. through various means including the Grace Family Journal, we are finding various pastors and people who are identifying with our grace-oriented biblical convictions and have expressed an interest in attending our Conferences. Perhaps by God's sovereign grace, this will be true of you this year.

My prayer is that you will prayerfully consider joining us, and as a result that God will be glorified and you will be further edified and equipped in your life, in your family, in your ministry, and in your church for many years to come.

All By God's Amazing Grace,

Dennis Rokser

Pastor-teacher of Duluth Bible Church