

# DISPENSATIONAL TRUTH

## "PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM" Pt. 4

by Dr. Charles C. Ryrie

### The Distinctiveness of the Church

**P**rogressives do not see the church as completely distinct from Israel as normative dispensationalists have maintained. Neither do they consider the mystery concept of the church to mean that the church was not revealed in the Old Testament, only that it was unrealized. A corollary of this new view erases the idea of two purposes of God — one for the church and one for Israel. These matters have been discussed in chapter 7.

### A Complementary Hermeneutic

While not denying the grammatical-historical hermeneutic, which has been a hallmark of normative dispensationalism, revisionist dispensationalism has introduced what is called "complementary hermeneutics":

*The New Testament does introduce change and advance; it does not merely repeat Old Testament revelation. In making complementary additions, however, it does not jettison old promises. The enhancement is not at the expense of the original promise.*

*Old Testament promise has not been replaced; it has been opened up, clarified, expanded, and periodized in the progress of apostolic reflection on Jesus' teaching and actions.<sup>32</sup>*

Certainly in the progressive nature of revelation (not all was given at one time, but progressively), the New Testament reveals matters not communicated in the Old Testament. But one must beware of the word "change" in the revisionists' definition of complementary hermeneutics. Amillennialists, for example, understand change to

mean that the promises made to Israel in the Old Testament are fulfilled by the church in New Testament times, without any future fulfillment (since amillennialists do not believe in a future, present earth Millennium). Progressives do not say this, for the last two sentences in their definition guard against change going that far. What kind of change do they consider legitimate? Principally a change in the Davidic covenant, which in the Old Testament concerned only promises to be fulfilled in the Millennium on an earthly throne but now in the New Testament reveals Christ presently sitting and reigning on the Davidic throne in heaven.

As an example of the slippery nature of this complementary hermeneutic if applied to other concepts, consider the concept of "temple." In the Old Testament it regularly referred to a building where God was worshiped. This meaning continues to be used in the New Testament, but

other meanings are revealed. Our Lord referred to His own body as a temple (John 2:19-21). The body of an individual Christian is the temple of the Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19). The local church is a temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16), as is the universal church (Eph. 2:21). What, then, is the meaning of temple in Revelation 11:1-2? A literal hermeneutic answers that it refers to an actual building in the tribulation period since there is no indication in the text that points to any other interpretation. But using the complementary hermeneutic one could conclude that it refers to a community of believers

(since that meaning is found elsewhere in the New Testament), thus placing the church in the tribulation period. Progressives have not used their complementary hermeneutic to conclude this, though it could be so used. However, one nondispensational premillennialist has proposed this understanding:

*"This interpretation understands the temple to stand for the church, the people of God (as in I Cor 3:16-17; II Cor 6:16; Eph 2:19-22).... It*

**The important question is simply this: Are there limits on the use of a complementary hermeneutic, and, if so, how are these limits to be determined and by whom?**

<sup>32</sup> Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 392-93, 59.

means that God will give spiritual sanctuary to the faithful believers against the demonic assault of the Antichrist."<sup>33</sup> One could support this interpretation further by pointing to the Qumran community, which had developed the idea of the community as a new temple.<sup>34</sup>

The important question is simply this: Are there limits on the use of a complementary hermeneutic, and, if so, how are these limits to be determined and by whom?

### Holistic Redemption

Holistic redemption means a redemption that "covers personal, communal, social, political, and national aspects of human life."<sup>35</sup> Revisionists give more attention to social action than they feel normative dispensationalists did or do. This total, or holistic, redemption will only be realized in the Millennium, but it can and should be begun in the church, which then "becomes the workshop in which kingdom righteousness is pursued in the name of Christ."<sup>36</sup> But promoting kingdom righteousness in the present time is not the mandate of the church, though progressives and others make it so.<sup>37</sup> In their discussion of the internal and external social and political ministry of the church, many broad-stroke slogans are used — such as pursuing righteousness, peace, justice (which are good) — and some specific suggestions are put forth — such as being concerned about power structures in the church. But the many particulars and any prioritizing on the basis of biblical references to social responsibilities are absent. In fact, in *Progressive Dispensationalism* only

<sup>33</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 219-20.

<sup>34</sup> Bertil Gartner, *The Temple and the Community in Qumran and the New Testament* (Cambridge: University Press, 1965).

<sup>35</sup> Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1993), 56.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

two Scripture references are included in the discussion of this subject.<sup>38</sup>

The Scriptures contain many specifics about the social responsibilities of believers in areas such as the use of money; civic responsibilities, and vocation. But there are other clear and specific commands. How to catalog and prioritize them will differ. My own prioritized agenda is this: first, the cultivating of personal holiness; second, spreading the gospel; third, being involved in building Christ's church; fourth, having a generous lifestyle.<sup>39</sup> The Scriptures call us to obey church ethics, not kingdom ethics, and to do good to all people as we have opportunity, but especially to the household of faith (Gal. 6:10). Holistic redemption can easily lead to placing unbalanced, if not wrong, priorities on political action, social agendas, and improving the structures of society.<sup>40</sup>

**Holistic redemption can easily lead to placing unbalanced, if not wrong, priorities on political action, social agendas, and improving the structures of society.**

### SOME SIGNIFICANT MATTERS SLIGHTED OR OMITTED

Now that enough books and articles have been written by progressive dispensationalists, it is fair to highlight some important matters omitted or slighted in their system.

1 The minimizing of a clear and consistent distinction between Israel and the church results in ignoring the great prophecy of the seventy weeks in Daniel 9:24-27. Nowhere in the progressives' writings to date have I found any discussion of the passage, only very brief and occasional citations of the reference itself. Why is this so?

For one reason, the passage clearly distinguishes God's program for Israel (v. 24), which runs throughout the seventy weeks (and were decreed "for your people and your holy city"), from what occurs in the interval between the sixty-ninth and

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 285-91. The two references are 2 Corinthians 4:7 and 1 Corinthians 13:12.

<sup>39</sup> See my full discussion in *What You Should Know About Social Responsibility* (Chicago: Moody, 1982).

<sup>40</sup> Note the revisionists' use of the phrase "structural sin" in Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 287.

the seventieth weeks, which we now know to be God's program for the church. For another related reason, revisionists do not care for the concept of "parenthesis," which is too clearly part and parcel of the premillennial interpretation of Daniel 9:24-27. They seem to infer that to speak of the church as a parenthesis makes the church somehow less important in God's program. But, remember, one of the dictionary meanings of parenthesis is "interval," which is further defined as "a space of time between events." So the church can properly be called a parenthesis in God's program for Israel. And since it is, then God must have at least two programs within His overall plan. Recall, too, that there are many other scriptural examples of similar intervals.<sup>41</sup>

2 Noncharismatic progressive dispensationalists have not faced the question as to why signs and wonders are not characteristic of the church age if in fact Christ is already on David's throne. During our Lord's earthly life many signs validated His claim to be the promised Davidic king for Israel. Now that He is allegedly reigning as Davidic king (according to progressives), why are there not miraculous signs happening today in the "already" stage of His Davidic reign?

3 While not denying the pretribulation Rapture or the literal tribulation period, revisionists do not give much attention to these aspects of eschatology. Blaising and Bock do not take obvious opportunities to mention the Rapture, and in one place (discussing 1 Thess. 5) they say only that the Rapture "would appear to be pretribulationary."<sup>42</sup> They decry (as do many of us normative dispensationalists) the sensationalism of some interpreters of prophecy. But abuse of a doctrine is no reason for playing down the truth of that doctrine. Rather, it ought to make us more zealous to present it accurately and in a balanced fashion. Furthermore, there exists already in the writings of progressives a thrust toward positioning the Revelation as a book that is "difficult" to interpret. Playing up the imagery in that book, as some revisionists do, seems to play

**But abuse of a doctrine is no reason for playing down the truth of that doctrine.**

down a plain interpretation of it. The locusts in chapter 9 and Babylon in chapters 17 and 18 are examples of such "literal/symbolic difficulty" in interpreting the book.<sup>43</sup>

4 The Millennium and the eternal state (particularly the new earth) seem to be less distinct in revisionism. Recall that in the progressive scheme of the dispensations, the last one, the Zionitic, was subdivided into two aspects: the Millennium and the Eternal State. Coming at this matter from the side of the amillennialist, recall that Poythress concluded 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 [between progressive dispensationalism and covenant theology] remain."<sup>44</sup> Couple this with some amillennialists' view that Israel's yet unfulfilled promises will be fulfilled on the new earth, and one wonders if eventually the need for a Millennium will be increasingly minimized by progressives. Bock (contrasting progressive with normative dispensationalism) reportedly said in 1992 that progressive dispensationalism is "less land centered" and less "future centered."<sup>45</sup>

One expects that there will be further revisions and changes in progressive dispensationalism as time passes. Where it will all lead and whether or not it will be understood and received by those who have embraced normative dispensationalism, no one knows. But already progressive dispensationalism certainly appears to be more than a development within normative dispensational teaching. Some so-called developments are too radical not to be called changes.

Little wonder that some nondispensational critics of progressive dispensationalism see it as having already changed to covenant premillennialism or, at the least, clearly leading to that view: Willem Van Gemeren (a covenant theologian) pointed out that "Bock agrees with covenant theology that the

<sup>41</sup> J. Randall Price, "Prophetic Postponement in Daniel 9 and Other Texts," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, 159-60 (where twenty-six examples are listed).

<sup>42</sup> Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 317 n. 15.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 91-96.

<sup>44</sup> Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 51.

<sup>45</sup> Darrell Bock, quoted in "For the Love of Zion," *Christianity Today*, 9 March 1992, 50.

eschatological kingdom was inaugurated in the ministry of Jesus."<sup>46</sup> Bruce Waltke, in appraising David Turner's essay; says that his "position is closer to covenant theology than to dispensationalism."<sup>47</sup> Walter A. Elwell thinks that progressive dispensationalism "will be warmly received by nondispensationalists" and concludes that "the newer dispensationalism looks so much like nondispensationalist premillennialism that one struggles to see any real difference."<sup>48</sup> And more, Poythress predicts that the progressives' position "is inherently unstable. I do not think that they will find it possible in the long run to create a safe haven theologically between classic dispensationalism and covenantal premillennialism. The forces that their own observations have set in motion will most likely lead to covenantal premillennialism after the pattern of George E. Ladd."<sup>49</sup>

A concluding thought:

O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us  
To see oursels as ithers see us!<sup>50</sup> ■

<sup>46</sup> Willem Van Gemen, "A Response," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 334.

<sup>47</sup> Bruce Waltke, "A Response," in *ibid.*, 348.

<sup>48</sup> Walter A. Elwell, "Dispensationalism of the Third Kind," *Christianity Today*, 12 September 1994, 28.

<sup>49</sup> Poythress, "Postscript to the Second Edition," in *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presb, & Ref., 1994), 137.

<sup>50</sup> Robert Burns, "To a Louse" (1786).

Taken from *Dispensationalism*, by Dr. Charles C. Ryrie, Moody Press, copyright 1995. Used with permission. Further reproduction prohibited without written permission from the publisher.

## CHRISTIAN LIFE

### "FREEDOM TO BE"

**H**aving died to that wherein we were held; so that we serve in newness of the spirit, and not in oldness of the letter. (Rom. 7:6, ASV)

The law was applied to the natural man, that he might produce; grace is given to the spiritual man, that He might produce.

"Almost every believer makes the same mistake as the Galatian Christians. Very few learn at conversion at once that it is only by faith that we stand, and walk, and live. They have no conception of the meaning of the Word about being dead to the law, freed from the law — about the freedom with which Christ makes us free (Rom. 7:6). Regarding the law as a divine ordinance for our direction, they consider themselves prepared and fitted by conversion to take up the fulfillment of the law as a natural duty. They cannot understand that it is not to the law, but to a living Person, that we are now bound, and that our

obedience and growth are only possible by the unceasing faith in His power and life ever working in us (Phil. 2: 13). " — A.M.

"Good and holy and perfect as the law of God is, it is entirely powerless either to justify or sanctify. It cannot in any way make the old nature better; neither is it the rule of the new nature. The old man is not subject to it, and the new man does not need it. The new creation has another object before it, and another power that acts upon it, in order to produce what is lovely and acceptable to God — Christ the object, realized by the power of the Holy Spirit." —W.K.

*Not after the law of a carnal commandment, but after the power of an endless life. (Heb. 7:16). ■*

This article was excerpted from the devotional book, "None But The Hungry Heart" #1-22.

### DISCLAIMER

Though we seek to have articles in the Grace Family Journal that are biblically accurate, informative and encouraging by a variety of authors, this does not mean that we fully endorse every interpretation, doctrinal position, or association of our contributors.