

Craig A. Blaising

Contemporary Dispensationalism

Introduction

It would be difficult enough to try to explain dispensationalism to someone who had never heard of the word before and possessed only a minimum level of historical and theological understanding. That would be like trying to explain Calvinism or Lutheranism under the same circumstances. However, it is just as difficult when the "ism" in question is widely used as a polemical or dismissive term, a term of reproach, roughly equivalent to bad, ignorant, foolish, or the like. The history of theology abounds with examples such as this. Caricature comes easy and is convenient politically, but knowledge, which requires patience, truth, and love is thereby lost.

Most dispensationalists are not happy with the word dispensationalism. As a label, it is too long, too cumbersome, and too often misused as a rhetorical stock term. Furthermore, some scholars today habitually use the term to refer to older forms of dispensationalism never acknowledging the variety of views which have come to pass under that label. Many contemporary dispensationalists feel themselves only remotely related to these antiquated analyses. It is like hearing a conversation in which you are described in terms of your grandfather. While you have the same name and admit to certain similarities, you nevertheless feel that it is not you that is being described.

The fact is, the term dispensationalism has been used as both a label and a self-designation for some different approaches to Scripture which are historically related to one another as phases of a developing hermeneutical spiral. The process had its distinctive beginning less than 200 years ago in the proposal of certain guiding hermeneutical assumptions. These assumptions were taken up in a Bible Study or Bible Exposition Movement which spread

transdenominationally throughout Protestant Evangelicalism and rising Fundamentalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There were various modifications during that early period, but since that time, at least two major revisions have taken place (along with numerous minor modifications) still retaining the label dispensationalism.

Throughout these developments and changes, an identity pattern can be discerned in certain themes, emphases, and concerns which constitute dispensationalism's abiding character. Dispensationalism is, first of all, a form of American Evangelicalism, sharing many traditional Evangelical concerns and doctrines. Dispensationalism has been a major factor in the shaping of twentieth-century evangelicalism, and it has been shaped in turn by controversy and dialogue in this broader context.

As a Bible Exposition movement, dispensationalism has strongly emphasized the authority of Scripture and its practical application in



Craig A. Blaising holds the PhD from the University of Aberdeen, the ThD and ThM from Dallas Theological Seminary, and BS from the University of Texas. Presently, he is Professor of Systematic Theology at Dallas Theological Seminary and has been associated with that faculty since 1980. He also taught in the Department of Religion, University of Texas at Arlington.

daily Christian life. It has sought to identify different dispensations in the progress of biblical revelation as a key to understanding canonical Scripture and a guide to its application in contemporary faith and practice.

Dispensationalism is a form of premillennialism which has stressed the relevance of biblical prophecy and apocalyptic discourse to future as well as past human history. It stresses the imminent return of Christ as a purifying hope which should guide the present work of the church. And it has been the primary proponent in the last two centuries of the belief that the plan of God includes a future for national Israel.

Finally, dispensationalism has interpreted the New Testament to teach that the church is a qualitatively new manifestation of grace in the history of divine redemption, and American dispensationalists in particular have strongly encouraged interdenominational cooperative ministries (such as missions, para-

church ministries, and evangelistic crusades) as tangible expressions of the reality of one universal Body of Christ while at the same time affirming the biblical necessity and crucial importance of local church and denominational ministries.

This writer has come to use the term dispensationalism for this entire hermeneutical tradition which manifests the identity features noted above and which has developed into different stages as it has tried, tested, and critiqued certain initial assumptions advocated in its earliest phase.¹ This is justified because (1) these different stages have either been labeled or have called themselves dispensationalism (happily or not), (2) they are recognizable as successive stages in an identifiable hermeneutical process (one in which each stage begins by carrying over certain guiding concerns of the previous stages while critically revising others), and (3) there is no other term which is as historically warranted as the term dispensationalism for this developing tradition.

Each of the critical stages of dispensationalism's history has representatives in contemporary American Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism. They all share the identity features briefly mentioned above. Any of them can be and has been called dispensationalism. But there are important differences between them which must be discerned if one wishes to understand contemporary dispensationalism. For purposes of analysis, these stages have been designated as classical, revised, and progressive dispensationalism.² Also included will be some comments on popular apocalypticism to which some classical and revised dispensationalists have made notable contributions.

Classical Dispensationalism

Classical dispensationalism refers to the views of British and American dispensationalists from the beginnings of the Brethren Movement in the early nineteenth century to the publication of Lewis Sperry Chafer's *Systematic Theology* in 1948. The most well known rep-

resentative of this kind of dispensationalism was the *Scofield Reference Bible* published in 1909 and 1917.

It is not possible in the space of this article to review the history of classical dispensationalism, how it spread from the devotional and expository literature of Brethren writers through highly popular interdenominational Bible and Prophecy Conferences in the United States to the *Scofield Reference Bible* and through various institutions.³ Most significant was the fact that prominent American clergymen adopted key hermeneutical presuppositions of the Brethren writers while modifying the Brethren ecclesiological vision in a way that allowed dispensationalism to become an interdenominational evangelical view of the Bible. Crucial to its history among Southern Baptists was the early acceptance and promotion of dispensationalism by J. R. Graves as well as the later ubiquitous impact of the *Scofield Reference Bible*.⁴

The central assumption of classical dispensationalism was that the Bible reveals two different divine purposes regarding the redemption of the human race. One is a heavenly purpose in which God intends to redeem a portion of humanity as a heavenly people. The other is an earthly purpose. Accordingly God intends to redeem another portion of humanity as an earthly people. In eternity, both of these purposes will be realized and confirmed forever with one humanity redeemed in heaven and another humanity redeemed on the earth.

Classical dispensationalism believed that these two purposes helped to explain why God has instituted differing dispensations

¹On the matter of defining dispensationalism and the rationale for description given here, see Craig A. Blaising, "Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*, ed by Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 13-34; and Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, "Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: Assessment and Dialogue," in *ibid.*, 377-94.

²There is also a variety which classical and revised dispensationalists came to label hyper or ultra dispensationalism (indicating their desire to marginalize that faction). I cannot comment on that variant here due to page constraints of this article, but the reader is referred to other published analyses.

³Significant studies on classical dispensationalism include C. Norman Kraus, *Dispensationalism in America: Its Rise and Development* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1958); Clarence B. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism: Its Historical Genesis and Ecclesiastical Implications* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1960); E. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1970); Timothy Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming, American Premillennialism, 1875-1982* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987); G. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture, The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism: 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford Press, 1980); Larry V. Crutchfield, *The Origins of Dispensationalism: The Darby Factor* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992); and Floyd S. Elmore, "A Critical Examination of the Doctrine of the Two Peoples of God in John Nelson Darby" (Th.D. Diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1990). For an examination of Lewis Sperry Chafer with respect to the two purposes theory of classical dispensationalism see Craig A. Blaising, "Lewis Sperry Chafer," in *The Baker Handbook of Evangelical Theologians*, ed. by Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993).

⁴See J. R. Graves, *The Work of Christ in the Covenant of Redemption Developed in Seven Dispensations*, 6th ed. (Memphis, TN: Baptist Book House, 1883).

with human beings in biblical history. Most everyone who has read the Bible recognizes that it reveals a history of divine-human relationships encompassing some different requirements and different forms of worship. Even God's presence among human beings has changed historically with the incarnation of Christ. These changes have commonly been referred to as different dispensations. Dispensationalism, however, inaugurated a new direction in biblical interpretation by interpreting these dispensations in light of two divine purposes for two humanities resulting in two different forms of redemption.

Classical dispensationalists believe that the present dispensation of the church, which is the arrangement God has instituted with humanity since the ascension of Christ and which will continue until his return, is the first dispensation in which God has clearly revealed his heavenly purpose. In previous dispensations, God was pursuing his earthly purpose. He related to people according to their national, ethnic, and political identities promising them a peaceful and prosperous life on earth with national and political security. Biblical prophecy points to the fact that when Christ returns, God will once again pursue his earthly purpose with earthly people while confirming the heavenly purpose with the resurrected in heaven.

Distinguishing between the two divine purposes and two peoples was fundamentally important for Brethren theology. Brethrenism was a protest movement against government intrusion in the church and the alienation of ordinary believers from Christian ministry by the barriers of ecclesiastical ordination. Their concept of a heavenly church distinct from God's earthly purpose allowed them to counter the claims of the state over the church. It gave them an answer to the use of Old Testament and kingdom texts to support state control. They relegated such texts to God's earthly purpose and earthly people which were distinct from the church. Believing ordination to be an imposition of earthly hierarchical patterns on the church, the Brethren envisioned a heavenly assembly in which believers were equally related to God and to each other with the freedom to minister to one another as gifted and guided by the Holy Spirit.

In the period following the War Between the States, the doctrine of the two purposes, especially the heavenly calling of the church, found sympathetic ears among American cler-

gymen in both the North and the South disenchanted with the transformation of Christianity into Civil Religion and the cooption of biblical texts and Christian themes to justify the atrocities of the war and the interests of national and cultural progress. For them, the heavenly view of the church restored the spiritual focus of Christianity, and the doctrine of the two purposes and two peoples allowed them to counter the use of kingdom texts and biblical prophecy by dominant postmillennialism.

The doctrine of the two purposes allowed classical dispensationalists to read the Old Testament independent of much of the New Testament. There were distinct advantages in this for Old Testament interpretation. Believing that God was pursuing an earthly purpose for Jews and Gentiles apart from the church of the New Testament, allowed classical dispensationalists to give value to a "literal" reading of the Old Testament apart from its spiritual meaning for the church. They were able to pursue an interpretation of Old Testament prophecy and apocalyptic discourse which ignored the problem of relating those texts to the present existence and experience of the church. Of course, classical dispensationalists did not dispense with the "spiritual" meaning of the Old Testament (which they referred to as its "typological" meaning), but they insisted that the literal meaning had value in and of itself as a dispensation(s) distinct from the church.

Classical dispensationalists readily linked New Testament prophecy and apocalyptic discourse to Old Testament prophecy allowing them to see the carry over of political and national interests in the eschatological views of New Testament writers, and the linkage of those interests to Jesus Christ. It allowed them to interpret Christ in a radically apocalyptic manner in a way which is now recognized by many in biblical studies. The two purposes/two peoples doctrine, however, radically separated the church from this eschatology. Dispensationalists recognized that some kingdom texts (such as in the Fourth Gospel) spoke of the spiritual realities of regeneration, but they radically separated these kingdom texts from the others which spoke of political and judgmental matters. The basis was once again the two peoples/two purposes doctrine. Scofield proposed what became the most common classical dispensational doctrine of the kingdom by distinguishing between the kingdom of

God which concerned God's moral and spiritual rule, and the kingdom of heaven, which was the political fulfillment of the Old Testament Davidic kingdom, viewed in a merely political and territorial (earthly) manner. The literary distinction in Matthew's gospel between kingdom of heaven and kingdom of God was cited as support.

For all its advantages for a fresh reading of the Old Testament and an appreciation of biblical eschatology and apocalyptic literature with its implications for understanding Jesus Christ and for the political future of Israel in the divine plan, the two purposes/two peoples doctrine left several problems in New Testament interpretation. It was not able to adequately explain the New Testament use of the Old Testament especially in texts explaining or setting forth the church. Classical dispensationalists spoke of the typological use of the Old Testament in New Testament teachings on the church, but typological for them meant "spiritual" or figurative. The two purposes/two peoples doctrine did not allow them to accept a historical fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies in the church.

One example of this problem is the New Testament interpretation of the Old Testament promise of a new covenant. In Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, a new covenant of spiritual and national renewal is promised by God for Israel, an earthly people according to classical dispensationalists. How then does one understand Paul and the writer to the Hebrews when they speak of the new covenant being in force for the church (2 Corinthians 3 and Hebrews 8-10)? How does one understand Jesus' teaching that the Lord's Supper, which the church commemorates, represents the new covenant which he established for them in his blood (Luke 22:20; Mark 14:23-25; Matt. 26:27-29; 1 Cor. 11:23-25)? Some classical dispensationalists saw new covenant promises being applied in a *spiritual* manner to the church in a similar way to which Old Testament texts can be spiritually interpreted for the church. Those same new covenant promises, however, must be literally applied only to Israel. This is an unsatisfactory solution for it confuses spiritual blessing (that is, blessings of the Holy Spirit) with "spiritual" fulfillment (that is a non-literal fulfillment of a promise), whereas the spiritual blessings spoken of by Jesus, Paul, and the writer to the Hebrews are actually "literal" promises in Old Testament texts. Another approach was proposed by Lewis Chafer, who

believed that the New Covenant mentioned in these New Testament texts was a completely different covenant from that predicted by the Old Testament prophets, for the latter envisioned earthly people only, whereas the New Testament spoke of a covenant being applied to heavenly people. They must, consequently, be different covenants.

The more well-known hermeneutical problems created by the two purposes/two peoples doctrine are found in classical dispensationalists' views of the teachings of Jesus in the synoptic Gospels. Because of their radical separation of church and kingdom, classical dispensationalists viewed the Sermon on the Mount (a kingdom sermon) as unrelated to the church. Likewise, the Lord's Prayer, since it is a prayer for the coming kingdom, is not a prayer for the church. On the other hand, they tried to recoup these favorite texts by admitting their use in a moral or spiritual (figurative) manner. But this was a symptom of a larger problem. The two purposes/two peoples doctrine required Jesus to be two different Christs! This is not just the difference between Savior and Judge. Rather, it is the difference of being two different saviors. To earthly people, he will be an earthly savior granting an earthly redemption. To heavenly people, he will be a heavenly savior, giving heavenly redemption. His teaching is likewise divided between heavenly and earthly teaching. Most of his teaching in the synoptic Gospels was viewed in relation to the earthly purpose and the earthly people. Consequently, much of the Gospels' presentation of Jesus was made inapplicable to the church at least in any primary sense.

Much more could be said about classical dispensationalism, including the way the two purposes doctrine was extended to encompass two modes of life, designated law and grace. Furthermore, there is the whole matter of how Victorious Christian Life views were adopted by turn-of-the-century dispensationalists so as to constitute the grace mode of life completely. But we must now consider how dispensationalism underwent a revision in the late 1950s and 1960s, a revision so successful that although there are some classical dispensationalists in contemporary American Evangelicalism, almost none can be found in any of the seminaries or Bible institutes commonly associated with the dispensational tradition.

Revised Dispensationalism

In 1967 the annotations of the *Scofield Refer-*

ence Bible were revised by a group of scholars who represented a new direction for the tradition of dispensationalism. This new direction began to appear in writings in the late 1950s and early 1960s and came to dominate dispensational thought by the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s.⁵ Some of the more well-known representatives include John F. Walvoord, Alva J. McClain, Herman Hoyt, Charles C. Ryrie, E. Schuyler English, J. Dwight Pentecost, and Stanley Toussaint.

Classical dispensationalism had reached a point of crisis in the 1940s with respect to the two purposes doctrine. The battle was fought primarily in Reformed circles involving Presbyterians and Baptists. The teachings of C. I. Scofield and Lewis Chafer were found to be at variance with the Westminster Confession on the point of the unity of the Covenant of Grace. The dispute led the factions to divide themselves as "covenantalists" and "dispensationalists."⁶ Shortly after this time, however, the "dispensationalist" side underwent a very significant modification by dropping the notion of eternally parallel heavenly/earthly salvations. They unified the nature of eternal salvation for all the redeemed. However, they differed among themselves as to whether that salvation would be earthly (in the biblical theological sense of the new earth) or heavenly (in the classical theological view of heaven) in nature.

On the other hand, these revised dispensationalists kept much of the structure of the two purposes doctrine for interpreting biblical history up to eternity. The structure, however, lacked the metaphysical dualism which had given it meaning. In its place, revised dispensationalists substituted a more specific distinction between Israel and the Church as two forms of redeemed humanity, destined for the same heavenly or new earthly salvation. By maintaining ethnic, national Israel as a separate group to be saved apart from the church, they evidently believed they could support the dispensational structure of biblical interpretation they inherited from classical dispensationalists. Much of the Old Testament was concerned with Israel, with Israel's national and social life. Old Testament prophecy also envisioned future blessings on Israel as a nation in keeping with Old Testament ideals of peace,

security, and prosperity. But revised dispensationalists believed that with the ascension of Christ, God introduced a new purpose for a new group, the church, who would be blessed under a new dispensation with spiritual blessings. After this dispensation, God would once again bless Israel, as a group apart from the church, with national, material blessings in a millennial kingdom. Then, all the redeemed will be blessed together for eternity, except that Israel will always remain Israel, a separate group from the church.

Revised dispensationalists also modified the Scofield doctrine of the kingdom. Some, such as Alva J. McClain and Stanley Toussaint, adapted dispensational kingdom theology to the views of Consistent Eschatology so that the kingdom was viewed entirely in an apocalyptic sense, unrelated to the present experience of the church. Others, such as John Walvoord, Charles Ryrie, and J. Dwight Pentecost were significantly moved by the insights of Realized Eschatology to postulate the church today as a present form of the kingdom.⁷ In response to the criticisms of George Ladd, they dropped the kingdom distinctions of Scofield, modified his essential structure in different ways and introduced their own terminology.⁸ As a result, there is no revised dispensational kingdom theology but competing interpretations which have had various levels of influence.⁹

The unification of eternal salvation and the willingness to see the church as a part of the eschatological kingdom program was a step toward seeing the dispensations of biblical history as related, successive phases in a unified plan of redemption. This was aided by revised dispensationalists' attempt to make dispensational biblical interpretation consistently "literal." They identified "literal" interpretation as the grammatical-historical approach to Scripture being pursued and developed by other evangelicals. But their ideal of a *consistently literal* approach theoretically eliminated the means by which classical dispensationalists resolved the New Testament use of the Old Tes-

⁵See Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965).

⁶It seems that the term "dispensationalism" was first used in the 1920s in the beginnings of this controversy.

⁷Except for Alva J. McClain (*The Greatness of the Kingdom* [Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1959]), most revised dispensationalists did not interact directly with the British and Continental discussions on Jesus' teaching of the kingdom. The influence of realized eschatology came remotely through their reaction to George Ladd's own adaptation of realized eschatology as a criticism against classical dispensationalism.

⁸George E. Ladd, *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1952).

⁹On various views of the kingdom of God in revised dispensationalism see Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1993), 39-46.

tament. The Old Testament prophecies regarding the kingdom of God and the blessing of Israel, drawn upon by New Testament writers in their explication of the church, would now need to be seen in terms of grammatical-historical fulfillment.¹⁰

Revised dispensationalists were unable to carry through a complete abandonment of the two purposes doctrine because of the sheer momentum of classical dispensationalism's impact upon evangelicalism and the thoroughness by which the two purposes structure had been integrated into a comprehensive interpretation of Scripture. Nevertheless they revised several well-known interpretations found in the *Scofield Reference Bible*. In some different ways they reappropriated gospel texts such as the Sermon on the Mount and the Lord's Prayer for the church today.¹¹ They quietly abandoned Chafer's two new covenant theory and prepared the dispensational tradition to face squarely the implications of a common spiritual redemption shared by both redeemed eschatological Israel and the Church.

Popular Apocalypticism

Today, a number of writers, especially in the media, use the term dispensationalism to refer to popular Christian apocalypticism. In actual fact, popular Christian apocalypticism is much broader than its dispensational element.¹² It finds its truest expression in what may be termed historicist premillennialism. Historicist and futurist premillennialism are two different ways of relating present history to the apocalyptic events in Scripture associated with the return of Christ to earth. Historicist premillennialism believes that present day events are fulfilling these prophetic and apocalyptic predictions. Due to the fact that both Daniel and Revelation interweave a chronology into their visions, historicist premillennialism oftentimes leads to predicting dates for the return of Jesus.

Dispensationalism is a form of futurist pre-

millennialism. It maintains that the tribulation events marking Jesus' coming are not taking place in present history. The traditional dispensational doctrine of a pretribulation rapture for the church helped to maintain this futurist position. As long as the church was present on earth, dispensationalists believed that the tribulation could not yet be present. Because of some notorious failures by historicist premillennialists predicting the return of Christ, many late nineteenth-century premillennialists turned to the stringent futurism of dispensationalism. By the early twentieth century, dispensationalism and premillennialism were practically interchangeable terms.

But whenever events of world history seem to fit the pattern of the apocalypse, the temptation to proclaim them as the fulfillment of prophecy may be hard to resist, especially for those who truly believe that the Lord's coming is imminent. While maintaining their futurist interpretation of tribulation events, the true signs of the Lord's premillennial advent, some dispensationalists responded to the political, military, and religious turmoil of the twentieth century by speculating about *signs of the signs*. It must be possible, they thought, to see history moving toward the tribulation scenario even before the rapture occurs.

The writings of Hal Lindsey represent a culmination of this compromise with historicism.¹³ The reestablishment of the nation Israel in 1948, the conflicts between Israel and the Arab states, and the alignment of nations during the Cold War were all read into the vision of Daniel, Ezekiel, and Revelation about nations in conflict in the Day of the Lord. Lindsey identified the phenomena of nuclear war as the prophetic fulfillment of predictions about the fire of God, plagues, and other disasters described by the prophets. And he strongly implied (if not outrightly predicted) that the rapture would occur in the late 1980s.

When "the religious right" became a political force in the 1980s, many raised concerns about the political influence of dispensationalism, by which they meant popular apocalypticism. However, by that time a strong resurgence of the posttribulation belief (i.e., that the rapture of the church will take place after the Tribulation, at the time of Christ's return to

¹⁰Some revised dispensationalists resolved this dilemma by advocating a special spiritual hermeneutic for the Apostles which could not and should not be emulated by the church. This is obviously not a satisfactory solution, for it leaves the church's hermeneutic without any foundation except a modernistic ideal of consistency.

¹¹See John A. Martin, "Dispensational Approaches to the Sermon on the Mount," in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, ed. by Stanley D. Toussaint and Charles H. Dyer (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986); and idem., "Christ, the Fulfillment of the Law in the Sermon on the Mount," in C. Blaising and D. Bock, *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 248-63.

¹²For a study of popular apocalypticism, see Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1992).

¹³See his *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970); *There's a New World Coming: "A Prophetic Odyssey"* (Santa Ana, CA: Vision House, 1973); *The Terminal Generation* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1976); and *The 1980s: Countdown to Armageddon* (New York: Bantam Books, 1980).

rule the earth) had also swept through premillennialism contributing to the historicist mindset. Without a pretribulation rapture, there was nothing to preclude the present times from being or becoming the tribulation. Today, popular apocalypticism is quite diverse. There is a dispensational element represented by Lindsey and others, along with various non-dispensational forms. But one should not identify all dispensationalists in this manner.

Many dispensationalists reject Lindsey's historicism as an extreme form of dispensationalism. Even those such as John Walvoord who refer to modern nations when speaking of tribulation events distinguish themselves from Lindsey.¹⁴ Other dispensationalists, especially progressive dispensationalists, reject historicism as a hermeneutical error which presumes prophetic authority for the Bible interpreter and also misconstrues the visionary genre of biblical apocalyptic.

Progressive Dispensationalism

Through the 1980s and early 1990s, as a result of working on the problems of revised dispensationalism through a historical-literary interpretation of Scripture, many dispensationalists have come to the position of completely abandoning the two purposes/two people theory. Instead, they believe that the Bible reveals one divine plan of holistic redemption for all peoples. This holistic redemption is progressively revealed and affirmed in Old Testament promises of blessing, the New Testament proclamation of the gospel, and the biblical hope of the future coming of Christ. This same holistic redemption is likewise partially and progressively realized in biblical history through a succession of divine-human dispensations and will be ultimately fulfilled when Christ returns and completes the final resurrection. The term *progressive dispensationalism* is taken from this notion of progressive revelation and accomplishment of one plan of redemption.¹⁵

The term *holistic* in this description refers to the whole of human life. This includes not only the whole of personal life—body, soul, will, and emotions—but also the corporate dimensions of human life—human society, culture, ethnicity, political life, and nationality.

Holistic redemption means that God intends to redeem human life in all its aspects, both personal and corporate. Holistic redemption also embraces the context of human life, the earth itself, and the heavens. It represents the extent of divine blessing revealed in the Scriptures.

Progressive dispensationalism sees the dispensations of biblical history as truly successive arrangements united by the divine purpose of holistic redemption. These arrangements between God and humankind find their rationality in the one divine plan. The revelation and realization of that plan from dispensation to dispensation is not, however, a smooth geometrical progression. There are many examples of judgment leading to shifts and turns in God's sovereign accomplishment of his plan which are not predictable by human reason interpreting past divine promises. Progressive dispensationalism affirms that the promises of God will be fulfilled in their wholeness. But the manner and timing in which he will fulfill them is known only to God and known by us only to the extent that he has revealed it.

For example, we are in a dispensation in which the Messiah, having been revealed on earth has ascended into heaven. His political blessing of Israel and rule over all the nations (an important aspect of holistic redemption) awaits his future return. This present dispensation (during which Christ has been in heaven) has not witnessed a mathematical progression of Israel's national blessing from the dispensation of David and Solomon. But one should not conclude that God is pursuing a wholly different purpose, a separate plan for a different people. The blessings which Christ bestows upon Jews and Gentiles who come to him in faith in this dispensation are also part of the one plan of holistic redemption which includes within its design political and national blessing. The latter may be delayed by divine will, but they are just as much a part of the divine plan even as the fullness of Christ's own personal inheritance also awaits his coming.

In its view of eternal redemption, progressive dispensationalism differs from classical and revised dispensationalism in that it does not see the church as a separate group of the redeemed alongside Israel, whether as a different *kind* of people (i.e., heavenly as opposed to earthly, as in classical dispensationalism) or a different and exclusive class in the same order

¹⁴See "Critics Fear That Reagan Is Swayed By Those Who Believe in a Nuclear Armageddon," *Christianity Today*, 14 December, 1984, 51.

¹⁵For a presentation on progressive dispensationalism, see the above mentioned works: C. Blaising and D. Bock, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church and Progressive Dispensationalism*. Also see Robert Saucy, *A Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993).

of redemption (as in revised dispensationalism). There will be diversity among the redeemed due to the personal and corporate aspects of humanity. Progressive dispensationalism affirms a future for Israel along with a future for Gentiles because the promises of God reveal the divine intention to save humanity in its corporate aspects, with Israel being specifically mentioned as an object of divine blessing and as the means of blessing to the Gentiles.

The church, however, is not a separate group in that picture. The church is not an ethnic or national category of humanity along the same order as the terms Israel and Gentiles. Consequently, the church is not a distinguishable group from redeemed Jews and redeemed Gentiles in eternity.

In New Testament theology, the term church is used in a universal and singular sense to designate collectively all Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus Christ and are consequently united to him by his gift of the Holy Spirit. As a collective body, the church differs historically and dispensationally from the redeemed of the Old Testament in that it is related to the risen and ascended incarnate Messiah having received from him blessings of the Spirit qualitatively greater and more equally distributed than before his coming. Consequently, there is an important historical and dispensational distinction between the redeemed Jews and Gentiles of the church and redeemed Jews and Gentiles prior to Christ. However, the blessings given to the church in this dispensation are part of the overall plan of holistic salvation to be given to all redeemed Jews and Gentiles when the history of redemption is culminated. The church testifies to the fact that in the final redemption, the blessings of Christ's righteousness and renewal by the Spirit of God will be given to all the saved, blessing them in their personal and collective identities whether Jews and Gentiles. Thus the church will not be a separate group alongside redeemed Israel and the Gentiles. Rather, those blessings which give redeemed Jews and Gentiles identity as the church in this dispensation will be brought to fullness for all the redeemed of Israel and the Gentiles in the eternal order of holistic salvation.

Progressive dispensationalism has a much more unified view of the biblical covenants and the kingdom of God than do earlier forms of dispensationalism. Because of its understanding of holistic salvation, progressive dispensationalism envisions the fulfillment of the

broad scope of covenantal blessing. Consequently it is not faced with the choice of "spiritualizing" the promises of earthly, national, and political blessings or resorting to a redemptive dualism to make room for them. Specifically, progressive dispensationalism does not have the difficulty which classical and revised dispensationalism faced on the new covenant. Rather than resorting to a two new covenant theory or viewing the church as a figurative fulfillment of new covenant promise, progressive dispensationalism interprets the New Testament teaching on the New Covenant as a partial inauguration of what Jeremiah and the other prophets promised. The fullness and completeness of that promise awaits the return of Christ.¹⁶

Furthermore, progressive dispensationalists tend to view the Davidic promise as the means by which all promises of blessing (holistic redemption) are accomplished. This promise is presently inaugurated in Jesus Christ and will be consummated at his return. In this, progressive dispensationalists differ from classical and revised dispensationalists who relegated the Davidic promises to an earthly, political purpose wholly separate from the heavenly purposes or (in revised dispensationalism) to an Israelite national purpose wholly separate from the church. In progressive dispensationalism, Christ is the key to the accomplishment of a holistic redemption which he reveals first in himself, then in the church (a community which he forms by the Holy Spirit), and then in the full revelation of his return.¹⁷

This leads us to the observation that for progressive dispensationalism, the kingdom of God is the unifying theme of the history of divine revelation, and Jesus Christ is the apex of that kingdom, the agent and mediator through whom it is brought to fulfillment, and the focal point of divine revelation. In the former dispensation, the revelation of the kingdom of God had developed to the stage of covenanted rulership through the house of David. With

¹⁶Progressive dispensationalism sees the Abrahamic promise to bless Israel and all the nations as underlying all the covenants of promise. This is why there is no contradiction when new covenant blessings of the Spirit promised to Israel in the Old Testament are granted to Gentiles as well as Jews in the New Testament. For a more extended discussion of a progressive dispensational view of the biblical covenants see *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 128-211.

¹⁷Ibid. See also D. Bock, "The Reign of the Lord Christ," in C. Blaising and D. Bock, *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 37-67; idem., "Evidence From Acts," in *A Case For Premillennialism: A New Consensus*, ed. Donald K. Campbell and Jeffrey L. Townsend (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992); and idem., "The Son of Man and the Saints' Task," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150 (1993), forthcoming.

the incarnation of God in the house of David, the kingdom advanced into its eschatological form. But even the revelation of the eschatological kingdom has progressed in conjunction with the history of the Christ. Rather than interpreting the New Testament in terms of several different kingdoms as in earlier forms of dispensationalism, progressive dispensationalists understand the Scripture to teach the dispensational unfolding of one eschatological kingdom, different aspects of which are revealed according to divine purpose and timing in conjunction with the ascension and descension of Christ.

This means that the church is a revelation of the kingdom of God. But one should not imply from this that the state should control local churches or that the church is a political state alongside other governmental bodies. Political authority over all nations belongs to Christ now, but how and when he will exercise his authority is a matter of his and the Father's will. Progressive dispensationalists believe that the New Testament teaches that Christ will function as both political and spiritual head among the redeemed and over the world when he comes. Prior to that time, his special activity is revealed in the formation of believing Jews and all kinds of Gentiles of faith into a *community* for the indwelling of God by the Holy Spirit. This community interpenetrates the diverse political structures of this world. Even though it awaits the revelation of Christ's political administration at his return, it should already begin to explore within itself the social and political righteousness of Christ within its own redeemed *community* of people. These people should reveal in this dispensation the eschatological kingdom reality of per-

sonal and corporate holiness. They are not only to be personally at peace with God, and at peace with each other on a person to person basis, but to manifest the peace and love of Christ among the cultural, social and ethnic interrelationships of the redeemed, for they are an inaugurated manifestation of a holistic redemption.

Conclusion

What is contemporary dispensationalism? There are a variety of dispensationalisms which one might encounter today. All of them emphasize the authority of Scripture, the importance of recognizing different dispensations for understanding Scripture, the distinctiveness of the church in the history of revelation, the importance of biblical prophecy and apocalyptic discourse, the imminent and pre-millennial coming of Christ, and a future for national Israel. Within this common identity pattern, the different dispensationalisms can be interrelated as historical phases of a developing hermeneutical process. It began with the proposal of the two divine purposes, two peoples of God, and two redemptions theory. Classical dispensationalism worked this hermeneutical construct into an extensive interpretation of the entire canon of Scripture. Revised dispensationalism modified it in important ways. Dispensational forms of popular apocalypticism used it but concentrated on discovering analogical matches between biblical apocalyptic discourse and present history. Progressive dispensationalism, however, represents the abandonment of the two purposes theory for a doctrine of holistic redemption in which the manifold aspects of human life, personal and corporate, are interrelated in a united salvation.



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