

Problems with Progressive Dispensationalism

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Dispensationalist critic, George E. Ladd, wrote the following words regarding dispensationalists: “It is doubtful if there has been any other circle of men who have done more by their influence in preaching, teaching and writing to promote a love for Bible study, a hunger for the deeper Christian life, a passion for evangelism and zeal for missions in the history of American Christianity.”¹ The system of dispensationalism has endured much opposition within the past few decades, primarily from nondispensational evangelicals. However, a form of “dispensationalism” called “progressive” has emerged whose adherents believe they are in the line of normative or traditional dispensationalism, yet, together, they have made significant changes and revisions to the traditional dispensational system. Whereas adherents of Progressive Dispensationalism (hereafter PD) regard themselves as supplementing the continual development of dispensational theology, they have also sought dialogue between dispensational and nondispensational systems. Although progressives have rejected Dr. Charles C. Ryrie’s *sine qua non* in his classic *Dispensationalism Today* (published by Moody Press in 1966), which was later revised and expanded in 1995 as simply *Dispensationalism* to include his confrontation of the increasingly popular PD, they have not articulated a definition. Therefore, Ryrie offered the following definition/description of progressive dispensationalism based on the outline of his *sine qua non*: “(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.”²

Defining Dispensationalism

The word “dispensation” is simply a compound of two Greek words, *ōikōs* (“house”) and *nōmōs* (“law”). The central idea of dispensationalism is “house law” or “managing or

¹ George Eldon Ladd, *Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 49.

² Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 164.

administering the affairs of a household.”³ From this one derives the idea of an “economy, stewardship, arrangement,” or simply a “dispensation.” The Greek word for dispensation is *ōikōnōmia* and is found in passages such as Luke 16:2-4; 1 Corinthians 9:17; Ephesians 1:10; 3:2, 9; Colossians 1:25; and 1 Timothy 1:4.

Dispensationalism is that biblical system of theology that views the Word of God as unfolding distinguishable economies in the outworking of the divine purposes for the nation of Israel in a distinct and separate manner from His purpose for the church. Ryrie demonstrated that from these ideas one distinguishes “the outworking of God’s purpose.”⁴ Dispensations are also understood as the sovereign work of God, not man. The dispensations are “economies instituted and brought to their purposeful conclusion by God.”⁵

To summarize: Dispensationalism views the world as a household run by God. In His household-world God is dispensing or administering its affairs according to His own will and in various stages of revelation in the passage of time. These various stages mark off the distinguishably different economies in the outworking of His total purpose, and these different economies constitute the dispensations. The understanding of God’s differing economies is essential to a proper interpretation of His revelation within those various economies.⁶

Dispensations are recognizable historic divisions in Scripture wherein God observes the actions and thoughts of man in time and history, and judges the actions and thoughts of man. In every dispensation, man fails to obey God both morally and spiritually. Dispensations are *not* differing manners of salvation. Throughout the ages of time and history, as revealed in Scripture, man is always saved by grace through faith in the content of God’s revelation. The content of faith may change, but man is always saved by grace through faith alone. In the New Testament, saving faith is trusting in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ for one’s sins. Christ and His atonement are the content of the sinner’s belief.

Number of Dispensations

Most dispensationalists believe Scripture affirms seven dispensations. However, all would agree there at least three main historical divisions in God’s interaction with man: Law, Grace, and Kingdom.⁷ The Apostle Paul clearly made a distinction between the Dispensation of Law and the Dispensation of Grace in Colossians 1:25-27. Paul also alluded to the Dispensation of the Kingdom in Ephesians 1:10. By analyzing the Bible

³ Ibid., 25.

⁴ Ibid., 29.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ For instance, the Dallas Theological Seminary doctrinal statement (Article V) reads: “We believe that different administrative responsibilities of this character are manifest in the biblical record, that they span the entire history of mankind, and that each ends in the failure of man under the respective test and in an ensuing judgment from God. We believe that three of these dispensations or rules of life are the subject of extended revelation in the Scripture, viz., the dispensation of the Mosaic Law, the present dispensation of grace, and the future dispensation of the millennial kingdom. We believe that these are distinct and are not to be intermingled or confused, as they are chronologically successive.”

carefully, other dispensations seem to surface naturally in the historical narration. Few have questioned the fact that the apostle Paul referenced at least three of the seven.

Paul clearly contrasted between the Dispensation of Law and the Dispensation of the Church. He wrote concerning the stewardship (“dispensation”) that was given to him by God, the “mystery” that “has been hidden from the *past* ages and generations; but has now been manifested to His saints . . . the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col 1:25-27). This truth had been hidden from ages past but is now manifested to the present saints *in contrast to the fact* that saints of the past had not known this great spiritual truth of redemption!

In Colossians 1, and in Ephesians 3, Paul’s “mystery of Christ” (Eph 3:4) is clearly the Dispensation of the Church. He wrote, “which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed” (3:5). Specifically the Gentiles would become fellow partakers [with the Jews] of the same spiritual body, and become fellow heirs of the promise in Christ Jesus (3:6). Therefore, it was given to Paul “to bring to light what is the administration [dispensation] of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God” (3:9). Without question, the great Apostle was referring to the Dispensation of the Church.

Finally, Paul alluded to the Dispensation of the future Kingdom when he wrote in Ephesians 1:9-10: “[God] made known to us the mystery of His will . . . with a view to an administration [dispensation] suitable to the fulness of the times, *that is*, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things upon the earth.”

Dispensations in Progressive Dispensationalism

“Progressive dispensationalists understand the dispensations not simply as *different* arrangements between God and humankind, but as *successive* arrangements in the *progressive* revelation and accomplishment of redemption.”⁸ It appears that most theological systems which are antagonistic to dispensationalism are favorable (in some degree) to PD. For instance, Chris Strevel, pastor of Covenant Presbyterian Church, applauded the progressives for an emphasis on “covenantal unity.”⁹ PD teaches that the church is receiving benefit of a “partial and glorious experience” of some aspects of the Davidic kingdom, which according to postmillennialism is commendable since this teaching emphasizes covenantal unity as some Old Testament prophecies are fulfilled in the church. According to progressives, “The present dispensation is not the full and complete revelation of the eschatological kingdom. It is a progressive stage in the revelation of that kingdom.”¹⁰ PD emphasizes differences and discontinuity within the dispensations, but similarity and continuity is highlighted and related to a redemptive

⁸ Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1993), 48.

⁹ Chris Strevel, “Dispensational Theology: A Flawed Hermeneutic Produces Flawed Eschatology,” audiotope (SCCCS Conference, “Left Behind or Moving Forward,” Summer 2001). Pastor Strevel also commended progressives for “soteriological clarification,” “ethical renewal,” “present realization,” and “future fulfillment.”

¹⁰ Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 260.

(kingdom of God) theme throughout the whole of human history.¹¹ Accordingly, PD yields four primary dispensations.¹²

DISPENSATIONS IN PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM				
Patriarchal	Mosaic	Ecclesial	Zionist	
Creation to Sinai	Sinai to Christ's Ascension	Ascension to Second Coming	First Part: Millennial	Second Part: Eternal State

It is difficult to understand why progressives begin their Patriarchal Dispensation with Adam and continue it to Sinai, when it would be best to understand the pre-fall Dispensation of Innocence separately. Even Galatians 3:8-16 emphasizes the uniqueness of the Dispensation of Promise. Ryrie commented on this peculiarity: "To lump pre-Fall conditions, post-Fall conditions and the Abrahamic covenant under common stewardship arrangement or dispensation is artificial to say the least."¹³

There is no problem with the beginning point of the Mosaic Dispensation beginning at Sinai, but there is simply no good biblical reason for not ending it at the death of Christ (cf. Rom 3:20; Gal 3:18-25; 4:5; Col 2:14). It appears the already/not yet presupposition is the only reason for ending this dispensation at the ascension.

The New Covenant was ratified by Christ's death and was launched by the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2). The Dispensation of the Church is based upon the New Covenant and characterizes how God will deal with people in the current dispensation. The Ecclesial (as opposed to church) Dispensation will simply be a confusing term to most.

The Zionist Dispensation, which is subdivided into the millennium and the eternal state, clearly disregards the uniqueness of the millennium (the promised dispensation so often mentioned in the Old Testament). The promises in the Old Testament are Jewish promises made to Israel concerning an earthly, historic glory with the King Jesus Christ reigning in splendor. The three sub-covenants of the Abrahamic Covenant will be fulfilled in the kingdom. The final rebellion in the Dispensation of the Kingdom will close the dispensations in the failure of mankind. The ungodly dead, apparently from all dispensations, are raised for final judgment prior to the beginning of Eternity with a New Heaven and a New Earth. The uniqueness of the millennium has always been an integral component of dispensationalism, and is now a component that progressives have surrendered unbiblically in their eschatology to grant appeal with covenant theology.

The emphasis in PD upon similarity and continuity of the dispensations to the exclusion of discontinuity is more in common with covenant theology than traditional dispensationalism. Progressives are currently committed to futurist eschatology, but the stress upon continuity raises concern as to what extent they will continue to distinguish God's program for Israel and the church (major de-emphasis on the uniqueness of the church has already been articulated in PD writings). If PD completely commingles Israel and the church (i.e. replacement theology), then it will be obvious that the system is not a

¹¹ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 163.

¹² Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 123.

¹³ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 166.

valid form of dispensationalism. Of course, if biblical dispensationalists do not challenge the threat with a reasonable response, when progressives have finally found their “definition” they may have so eroded formerly dispensational schools to the point of no return.

Christocentricity

Blaising has said that Christocentricity means, “[a]ll Scripture points to Christ and is interpreted correctly only with respect to Christ.”¹⁴ Contrary to Blaising, this is a feature that has been an emphasis universally recognized by all dispensationalists (Luke 24:27, 44). However, Blaising and Bock wanted to give the impression that PD has returned to the Christocentricity of Niagara and that the Scofield and Ryrie (essentialist) eras had abandoned this principle with their alleged “anthropologically centered”¹⁵ and “doxological unity.”¹⁶

What is needed today is a new approach to defining dispensationalism...one that may rehabilitate and revise features that were central to an earlier dispensationalism but may have been eclipsed by the concerns of an intervening generation [such as Scofield and Ryrie] (such as the factors of exclusivity and Christocentricity, which present-day dispensationalists share more closely with the Niagara dispensationalists than they do with their immediate predecessors).¹⁷

Scofield and Ryrie demonstrated that they are just as Christocentric as Niagara.

The Central Theme of the Bible is Christ. It is this manifestation of Jesus Christ, his Person as “God manifest in the flesh” (1 Tim. 3:16), his sacrificial death, and his resurrection, which constitute the Gospel. Unto this all preceding Scripture leads, from this all following Scripture proceeds.¹⁸

The outstanding theme that ties those sixty-six books together is God’s provision of a Savior in Jesus Christ. The Old Testament predicts His coming, and the New Testament announces the good news of His coming. Not every verse, of course, directly mentions Him, but He is the theme that ties the Bible together.¹⁹

Blaising and Bock used this point about Christocentricity as their integrating principle between Old and New Testament theology.²⁰

The dispensationalism of this book distinguishes itself from the immediately preceding dispensationalism [i.e., Ryrie] and Scofieldism by the fact that instead of being anthropologically centered on two peoples, it is Christologically centered.²¹

¹⁴ Craig A. Blaising, “Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, eds. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 18.

¹⁵ Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, “Assessment and Dialogue,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 383.

¹⁶ Blaising, “The Search for Definition,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 27.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁸ *The Scofield Reference Bible*, ed. C. I. Scofield, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909), vi.

¹⁹ Charles C. Ryrie, *Ryrie’s Concise Guide to the Bible* (San Bernardino, CA: Here’s Life Publishers, 1983), 13.

²⁰ Blaising and Bock, “Assessment and Dialogue,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 382.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 383.

It appears that Blaising and Bock are using Christocentricity in a manner different than Niagara and other dispensationalists. They seem to have used it as a mechanism to separate dispensational distinctives (hardly the same direction that those of the Niagara era were moving). They seem to be using Christocentricity in the same manner a covenant theologian uses the covenant to argue against distinctions seen by dispensationalists. Christocentricity is one of the devices they used to argue for a present form of a Davidic rule for Christ.

The movement from the past to the present and then to the future dispensations is not due to a plan for two different kinds of people but rather is due to the history of Christ's fulfilling the plan of holistic redemption in phases (dispensations).²²

For Blaising to describe PD as Christocentric, as set against the characterization that Scofield's dispensationalism is anthropologically centered or Ryrie's is defectively theocentric is an arbitrary judgment. It could just as likely been said (*only as a matter of illustration*) that Blaising and Bock's dispensationalism is influenced by Karl Barth, since he is often described as having a Christocentric theology. It would be better to understand each brand of dispensationalism as having a certain view of each aspect of theology. Each view has an anthropological dimension. Each view has a Christological position, etc. Therefore, it does not make one form of dispensationalism any better or more heroic (better able to explain the Bible) to state that PD is Christocentric, as set against other forms of dispensationalism.²³

Israel and the Church

The emphasis upon the continuity of the dispensations in PD results in a lessening of teaching regarding the uniqueness of the church. Even the mystery concept of the church is not taught as unrevealed in the Old Testament but merely unrealized. The outcome of continual PD development and departure from dispensationalism may result in teaching God does not truly have a separate program for the church. The church is already regarded as a sub-category of the kingdom in PD. It is called an "'already', or 'sneak preview'" of the kingdom²⁴ and a "'functional outpost of God's Kingdom.'"²⁵ The church is regarded as the present revelation of the kingdom today.²⁶ Indeed, David Turner referred to "the 'new Israel,' the church."²⁷ Significantly, Bruce Waltke's response to PD noted that Turner's "position is closer to covenant theology than to dispensationalism."²⁸

²² Ibid.

²³ Ron J. Bigalke Jr. and Thomas D. Ice, "History of Dispensationalism," in *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis of the Movement and Defense of Traditional Dispensationalism*, ed. Ron J. Bigalke Jr. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995), xxxvii-xxxix.

²⁴ Darrell L. Bock, "The Reign of the Lord Christ," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 53.

²⁵ Robert L. Saucy, "The Church as the Mystery of God," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 155.

²⁶ Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 257.

²⁷ David L. Turner, "The New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:1-22:5," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 288.

²⁸ Bruce K. Waltke, "A Response," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 348.

By confusing the uniqueness of the church, PD is regarding the rapture as a minimal doctrine and therefore disregarding God's revealed program for the church.

Blaising explained that PD's search for a new definition "has led many dispensationalists to abandon the *transcendental distinction* of heavenly versus earthly peoples in favor of a *historical distinction* in the progressive revelation of the divine purpose. The unity of divine revelation, of the various dispensations, is found in the goal of history, the kingdom of God."²⁹ It is important to remember that progressives have an agenda for integrating dispensational and nondispensational systems, in addition to the distinctions between the church and Israel. It is for this reason they downplay the rapture and the fact that this is the next great event for the church. The rapture is way down the list of important doctrines in PD; yet, with all due respect, there are over thirteen identifiable rapture passages in the New Testament which does not make the doctrine a minor issue.

Blaising alluded to dispensationalist statements of a heavenly destiny for the church and an earthly destiny for Israel. The word "destiny" is possibly misleading. The words purpose, program, and function are best used to describe what is occurring with the church and Israel. God has a distinct purpose and program for the church now. He has a distinct purpose, program, and function for Israel in the kingdom, even though the church will be there with the Lord. Acts 1:6-7; 3:18-on; 1 Thessalonians 1:10, and especially all that is written in Jeremiah 30-33, have much to say about the regathering of the Jews, God's purpose for them in the kingdom, and the intent of the kingdom.

Perhaps the greatest concern regarding PD is the confusion it has created regarding the distinctions between Israel and the church. For instance, one progressive wrote, "The believing remnant of Israel within the church share in promises that have Old Testament roots. Through the covenants, Messiah, and promises of Israel, they experience promised blessings in which Gentiles also participate."³⁰ Another progressive stated, "One of the most striking differences between progressive and earlier dispensationalists, is that progressives do not view the church as an anthropological category in the same class as terms like Israel, Gentile Nations, Jews, and Gentile people. . . . The church is precisely redeemed humanity itself (both Jews and Gentiles) as it exists *in this dispensation* prior to the coming of Christ."³¹ Another progressive, for yet another example, referred to "the 'new Israel,' the church."³² It appears, at times, that progressives are advocating a holistic and unified doctrine of salvation that is similar to the covenant of grace in covenant theology. Furthermore, Paul did regard the church as anthropologically distinct from Israel and the Gentiles in 1 Corinthians 10:32. Another progressive referred to Israel and the church as the "one people of God" meaning salvation has always been by grace through faith (which is, of course, biblical), but such terminology confuses the distinctions between Israel and the church and actually appears to be in greater agreement with covenant theology.

Although progressives claim to employ a grammatical-historical interpretation, they mean something entirely different from traditional dispensationalism. For instance,

²⁹ Craig A. Blaising, "Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 33.

³⁰ Carl B. Hoch Jr., "The New Man of Ephesians 2," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 126.

³¹ Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 49.

³² Turner, "The New Jerusalem," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 288.

grammatical-historical interpretation means there is a single-meaning assigned to a text that does not change. However, the complementary hermeneutic of PD does teach the meaning of texts can change. It is true that progressives are not teaching the New Testament abandons Old Testament promises (as in amillennialism), but their focus on “preunderstandings” and openness to nondispensational systems causes this author to wonder if they will eventually move in that direction since they are already closer to a modified form of covenant theology.

Literal Interpretation of the Biblical Covenants

Progressive dispensationalist, Craig Blaising, indicated the drift today from literal interpretation. He wrote, “Hermeneutics has become much more complex today than when Charles Ryrie affirmed literal interpretation as the ‘clear, plain, normal’ method of interpretation. . . . Literary interpretation has developed so that some things which earlier interpreters thought they ‘clearly’ saw in Scripture, are not ‘clearly’ seen today at all.”³³ It is because of progressive dispensationalists’ drift toward nondispensational systems of interpretation that they have adopted the same hermeneutical principles of anti-dispensational systems. The grammatical-historical interpretation (which Blaising referenced) has always been identified with dispensational hermeneutics; however, PD uses the term in a manner quite different than dispensationalists historically.

In the 1950s and ’60s, other evangelicals were also shying away from “spiritual hermeneutics” [“typology”] in favor of grammatical-historical interpretation. However, evangelical grammatical-historical interpretation was also broadening in the mid-twentieth century to include the developing field of biblical theology. Grammatical analysis expanded to include developments in literary study, particularly in the study of genre, or literary form, and rhetorical structure. Historical interpretation came to include a reference to the historical and cultural context of individual literary pieces for their overall interpretation. And by the late 1980s, evangelicals became more aware of the problem of the interpreter’s historical context and traditional preunderstanding of the text being interpreted. These developments are now shared by evangelical biblical scholars of different traditions, including many dispensationalists. They have opened up new vistas for discussion which were not considered by earlier interpreters, including classical and many revised dispensationalists. These are the developments which have led to what is now called “progressive dispensationalism.”³⁴

Almost two decades earlier, Blaising had written, “. . . consistently literal exegesis is inadequate to describe the essential distinctive of dispensationalism.”³⁵ Progressive dispensationalists are not rejecting literal interpretation completely; they are rejecting consistent, traditional historical-grammatical interpretation. Traditional dispensationalists have always employed a consistent and literal interpretation of the Scripture from Genesis to Revelation.³⁶ Today a new, compromised hermeneutic of the former is being employed by progressive dispensationalists called a “complementary hermeneutic.”

³³ Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 36.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

³⁵ Craig A. Blaising, “Developing Dispensationalism, Part 2: Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalists,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (July-September 1988): 272.

³⁶ See Robert L. Lightner, “Consistency from Genesis to Revelation,” in *Revelation Hoofbeats*, gen. ed. Ron J. Bigalke Jr. (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2003), 95-105.

Certainly there have been differences of opinion in the history of dispensationalism; however, the progressives' new approach to hermeneutics is a major change compared to earlier dispensationalism, which always taught that there was only one intended meaning of a text. Historically, the Protestant Reformers affirmed that subjects could change in paragraphs, but there is only one subject in view in any given passage. In other words, there is no expanded meaning that can be derived beyond the original intent of Scripture.

It is important again to note that Blaising and Bock's book, subtitled *The Search for Definition*, rejected Ryrie's *sine qua non* but the authors did not attempt to articulate any essentials themselves! Blaising believes that traditional dispensationalism is the product of Baconianism and would rather have Christians to be "text-based."³⁷ The issue is whether there can be clear essentials that are demonstrated to be valid by interaction with the Text. The interpreter is told that he must recognize his "human limitations" and preunderstanding (the "hermeneutical spiral") before interpreting Scripture. Certainly, one must rely on the Holy Spirit to illumine the mind (1 Cor 2), but this is not to say that a *sine qua non* is irrelevant. The conclusion is one of postmodern subjectivity rather than any form of objectivity. The result is a multilevel (up to three levels) reading of Scripture that creates a complementary hermeneutic.³⁸

Bock argued, "Both our limitations and our grid [our preunderstandings³⁹] are combined to form a prism through which we interpret reality and through which we read our texts. As good as the text is that which we read, it always comes to us through the prism we construct of reality."⁴⁰ Presuppositions⁴¹ and preunderstandings, according to PD, hinder interpreting Scripture according to the original intent.⁴² Concerning the postmodern influence upon hermeneutics, McQuilkin and Mullen wrote,

It [postmodern thinking] is said by some to be the logical development of modernism toward ever greater relativity, not only in the perception of truth but also of reality itself. On this view postmodernism would be the logical outcome of Enlightenment thinking, the final step of recognizing that meaning is created in part, at least, by my personal perceptions. . . . The role of the interpreter, the knowing subject, is being redefined not merely for how meaning is to be understood and communicated but actually for how the interpreter participates in the creation of meaning and even, for some, the creation of whatever reality there is.⁴³

Due to presuppositions and preunderstandings, the interpreter can only approximate toward understanding the authorial intent of Scripture, which is why progressives give much emphasis to what is called a "community hermeneutic."⁴⁴ Postmodernists apply the deconstruction of literature to "interpret reality" by emphasizing the reader-response theory of meaning, which "is a fancy way of saying that when you read something, you can never know for sure what the writer meant. Meaning is determined by the reader. . . .

³⁷ Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 75.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 100-103.

³⁹ Bock defined preunderstandings as authoritarian and cultural influences [*Ibid.*, 60].

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴¹ Bock defined presuppositions as fixed, and may be held either consciously or unconsciously [*Ibid.*].

⁴² In fairness, Bock does believe there are fundamentals of the faith which are absolute [*Ibid.*, 70].

⁴³ Robertson McQuilkin and Bradford Mullen, "The Impact of Postmodern Thinking on Evangelical Hermeneutics," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40 (March 1997): 69-70.

⁴⁴ A community hermeneutic would include four or more acceptable interpretations of a given verse, as opposed to being dogmatic concerning a single meaning of a given verse. Interpreting the authorial intent of a given biblical verse is not the goal; rather, conviction and responsiveness are the emphasis.

Nothing is clear. Nothing is certain. Everything is interpretation.”⁴⁵ The meaning of a given verse is dependent upon the presuppositions and preunderstandings of the one who is reading the text. There can be as many acceptable interpretations as there are readers. Presuppositions and preunderstandings “influence perspective and impact interpretation.”⁴⁶

Consequently, the multilevel (“layered”) approach of PD is remarkably similar to the amillennial approach of Vern Poythress who suggested four levels of communication in the symbolism of Bible prophecy.⁴⁷ Likewise C. Marvin Pate, a progressive dispensationalist, followed the multilevel approach of amillennialism as he wrote in harmony with preterists who interpret first century Jerusalem with those prophecies of Babylon in the book of Revelation.⁴⁸ Pate’s interpretative approach is eclectic as he combined forms of preterism and idealism with futurism.⁴⁹ Instead of teaching one single meaning, Pate can be in harmony with almost all prophetic views. The self-defeating nature of this eclectic approach is seen in Pate’s attempt to state Revelation records prophesied events preceding the predictions that prophesied of tribulation events. For instance, he believes the prophesied wars within the second, third, and fifth seal judgments occurred before Revelation was written.⁵⁰ Clearly, progressives do not offer clarity of the text; rather they offer confusion by introducing precariousness to hermeneutics.

The issue in regards to the difference in hermeneutics has to do with the subject of progressive revelation, which is the gradual unfolding over a chronological period of certain revealed truths of God as recorded in Scripture. The issue of hermeneutics is the major difference between progressives and traditionalists. Progressive revelation emphasizes development, or enlargement of God’s sovereign plan. Dr. John Walvoord wrote,

Dispensationalists all recognize that there is the element of progressive revelation throughout Scripture, and in fact this is inherent in and emphasized by dispensational interpretation. The difference between the dispensational interpretation and the nondispensational interpretation is not an affirmation or denial of progressive revelation, but rather is the contrast between literal versus nonliteral interpretation. It seems clear to most observers of the history of doctrine that prior to the writings of the New Testament, prophets as well as ordinary people in the Old Testament understood that God had a special program for Israel, and that this had its consummation in the

⁴⁵ David Henderson, *Culture Shift: Communicating God’s Truth to Our Changing World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 192.

⁴⁶ Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 61.

⁴⁷ Vern Sheridan Poythress, “Genre and Hermeneutics in Rev. 20:1-6,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 36 (March 1993): 41-43. He suggested the nature of symbolism in Bible prophecy suggests four levels of communication: (1) “The linguistic level, consisting of the textual record itself”; (2) “The visionary level, consisting of the visual experience that John had in seeing the beast”; (3) “The referential level, consisting of the historical reference of the beast and of the various particulars in the description”; and, (4) A symbolical level, consisting of the interpretation of what the symbolic imagery actually connotes about its historical referent.”

⁴⁸ C. Marvin Pate, “A Progressive Dispensational View of Revelation,” in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, gen. ed. C. Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 160-61, 168-169.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 145-146.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 151-157. See also Darrell L. Bock, “Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism,” in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views*, gen. ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 107.

coming of their Messiah and in their repossession of the promised land. The golden age predicted in the Old Testament for Israel anticipated a literal fulfillment.

The difference in interpretation originates when amillenarians and some premillenarians interpret the New Testament as contradicting or amending this concept to the extent of substituting a nonliteral fulfillment of these hopes voiced in the Old Testament. The issue accordingly is not progressive revelation versus nonprogressive revelation, but rather whether in progressive revelation there is contradiction or correction of what was commonly assumed to be the main tenor of Old Testament revelation.⁵¹

The complementary hermeneutic does not emphasize development rather it emphasizes change. Progressives stated, “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.”⁵² In other words, “complementary additions” result in an unparalleled interpretation of the New Testament that goes beyond the original intent and creates an entirely new context. The direction that progressives are taking is a liberal, at-will hermeneutic.

Certainly, there is a sense in which the biblical covenants are fulfilled progressively. For instance, Abraham enjoyed some of the promises that God has covenanted with him. The Davidic Covenant was fulfilled some in David and Solomon’s day, yet there will be a complete fulfillment in the millennial kingdom. However, a change in progressive revelation is that Christ is reigning now of David’s throne in heaven. Furthermore, the Land Covenant could imply another people based on the complementary approach, which leaves the interpreter guessing as to whether or not a specific prophecy is fulfilled or not. It is the progressive “change” that is revisionist of the Old Testament. Complementary hermeneutics allows the interpreter to be liberal with the Text. While progressive revelation affirms developments in Scripture, there is not a change of meaning in the New Testament.

The Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 12:1-3) promised a land (12:1; cf. 13:14-17), a seed, or numerous descendants (12:2; cf. 13:16; 17:2-6), and a blessing, or redemption (12:3; cf. 22:18). Consequently, it is the beginning of all redemptive covenants, and all of God’s spiritual blessings for both Jew and Gentile are the result of this covenant (12:1-3, 7; 13:14-17; 15:1-21; 17:1-21; 22:15-18). Therefore, it must be the starting point for any discussion regarding covenant fulfillment. A consistent use of the literal hermeneutic makes interpretation regarding the Abrahamic Covenant to be a foundational element for dispensational premillennialism. The covenant is seen as unfulfilled and unconditional to be fulfilled with Israel. Since the sub-covenant promise to Israel regarding the land are inseparable from the fulfillment of the sub-covenants of seed and blessing within the Abrahamic Covenant, any discussion of fulfillment must correspond to Israel being in possession of her land under her Messiah King. If the covenants are understood literally, then fulfillment can only correspond to a future blessing of believing, national Israel in the land of promise under the rule of Messiah in the millennium. PD has five main weaknesses regarding the interpretation of the biblical covenants.

⁵¹ John F. Walvoord, “Part 1: Does the Church Fulfill Israel’s Program?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137 (January-March 1980): 121.

⁵² Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, “Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: Assessment and Dialogue,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 392-393.

First, the complementary hermeneutic of PD obfuscates the distinction between Israel and the church. Since the church is not taught to be a mystery, but only unrealized in the Old Testament, the corollary is disregard for the two distinct purposes of God for Israel and the church. Blaising's statement that "Jewish Christians will join the Old Testament remnant of faith in the inheritance of Israel" raises the question why a believing Jew today would not inherit the blessings promised to the church. Saucy included the church in the concept of the "people of God," which he began with the nation of Israel (and did not answer how pre-Israelite redeemed people are included in this concept), and taught that the church participates "along with Israel in the final inheritance that God has prepared for all of his people, both those who are Gentiles and those of Israel."⁵³ Such statements are a form of spiritualization of covenant promises to Israel which have now been applied to the church. PD emphasizes greater continuity between the dispensations (i.e. progress between the dispensations wherein the unifying theme of history is the kingdom of God)⁵⁴ regarding the purposes of God for Israel and the church so that it is not entirely dissimilar from the teaching of covenant theology which equates Israel with an Old Testament church.⁵⁵ The rejection of the concept of Israel and the church as distinct peoples of God possessing distinct programs is a major weakness of PD.

Second, by obfuscating the distinctions between Israel and the church, PD does not adequately recognize the centrality of the nation of Israel in the program of God. The Abrahamic Covenant necessitates Israel to inherit certain promises and blessings distinct from God's blessings to the church. The Zionism of PD merges the millennium and the eternal state which fails to give adequate attention to the centrality of Israel in the millennial kingdom. Referring to the one-people-of-God dispensationalism (i.e. PD), covenant theologian Vern Poythress commented, "So, 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."⁵⁶

Third, traditional dispensationalism recognizes Scripture to indicate a natural seed of Abraham (Isa 41:8), Christ as seed (Gal 3:16), and a spiritual seed (3:29). The church is the spiritual seed of Abraham since she experiences salvation through faith in Christ, but the heir of the national promises is the natural seed, Israel. PD minimizes discontinuity in redemption when speaking of one people of God "related to him through the same covenant salvation" by grace through faith in God's promises based on Christ's atoning death. Therefore, the distinction in God's purposes for Israel and the church is rejected.⁵⁷ Belief in the "one people of God" in redemption would seem to include a unified eschatological purpose for Israel and the church (and would require the rejection of a pretribulational rapture). PD emphasizes redemptive continuity between Israel and the church as the seed of Abraham, but does not apply the continuity consistently to include all eschatological aspects. Israel and the church do not have separate purposes, but are

⁵³ Saucy, "The Church as the Mystery of God," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 134-135; cf. Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 187-193.

⁵⁴ Craig A. Blaising, "Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 33.

⁵⁵ Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 51.

⁵⁶ Vern Sheridan Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 51.

⁵⁷ Robert L. Saucy, "Israel and the Church: A Case for Discontinuity," in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988), 241.

both components of God's eschatological kingdom program since "the true seed of Abraham includes both Jews and Gentiles."⁵⁸

Fourth, if all the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant (i.e., land, seed, and blessing) are inherited by those in Christ, then PD should teach the church receives promise of the land which will progressively diminish the central role of Israel in the millennium. Furthermore, if the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenants are inaugurated then there should also be mention of an inaugurated Land Covenant. Furthermore, traditional dispensationalists have taught that Jesus is currently exalted at the right hand of the Father, but this throne is not to be confused with David's throne. Progressive dispensationalists teach that Christ is now reigning on David's throne in heaven at the right hand of the Father as an "already" partial fulfillment and inaugurated Davidic kingdom but also teach Christ is "not yet" reigning on earth in the future millennium. Therefore, the Father's throne and the Davidic throne are thought to be synonymous. Progressives believe Jesus' statement that the kingdom of heaven is near means the "already" aspect of the kingdom arrived with the first coming of Christ.

Fifth, PD fails to teach progressive revelation adequately. Progressives have stated, "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."⁵⁹ Certainly, God has progressively revealed more truth; He has even introduced new truths in the New Testament and developed truths from the Old Testament. However, the New Testament nowhere changes or reinterprets the Old Testament. Progressive revelation does not mean the New Testament changes Old Testament prophecies so that it cannot be understood apart from the New Testament.

Clearly, PD is not the historical antecedent of pretribulational, premillennial dispensationalism. The real issue is whether the Bible is inerrant, whether it is verbally inspired, and whether it should be interpreted literally. The concept of literal interpretation is the real issue in the interpretation of prophecy today.⁶⁰ Consistent, literal interpretation is the *sine qua non* of any theological system since it allows no fuller or extended meaning beyond the original intent of Scripture. The current trends in evangelical hermeneutics, as followed by progressive dispensationalists, will inevitably

⁵⁸ Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 50.

⁵⁹ Blaising and Bock, "Assessment and Dialogue," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 392-393.

⁶⁰ On several personal conversations with the late Dr. John F. Walvoord, he would state the importance of verbal, plenary inspiration in the development (as opposed to changes by PD) of dispensationalism. Regarding the important issues regarding traditional dispensationalism, Walvoord reiterated the same thinking in response to a winter 1999 advertisement on dispensationalism submitted by Mal Couch to the *DFW Christian Heritage*. Walvoord wrote, "The whole discussion as it stands should be clarified by the history of the doctrine. Dispensationalism did not grow out of premillennialism or pretribulationism but out of the fact that there is progressive revelation in the Bible. . . . Frankly I do not believe that dispensationalism is the real issue. The real issue is whether the Bible is inerrant, whether it is verbally inspired, and whether it should be interpreted literally. The concept of literal interpretation is the real issue in the interpretation of prophecy today" [John F. Walvoord, personal correspondence to Mal Couch, 1999; quoted in *The Conservative Theological Society / Tyndale News* (Spring 1999): 2-3].

lead away from dispensational conclusions. In contrast, a consistent, grammatical-historical interpretation will naturally lead to dispensational conclusions.⁶¹

Dispensational Hermeneutics

Much of the discussion among dispensationalists with progressives and nondispensationalists converges on the method of hermeneutics, especially regarding literal interpretation. One of the major postmodern trends today is this frequent use of apocalyptic genre as a method of hermeneutics. The major characteristic of apocalyptic genre is to draw attention to the highly symbolic nature of prophetic writings. The only book in the New Testament that would fit the category of being entirely apocalyptic is the Book of Revelation. However, Revelation should not be placed in a category unlike ordinary prophecy that is quite literal and can be interpreted at face value quite literally. Since those favoring a non-literal category of genre—termed apocalyptic—for interpreting prophecy draw much attention to the use of *sensus plenior*, New Testament quotation of Old Testament prophecy, symbols and figures of speech, and the role of prophetic prediction in their arguments these issues will be addressed.

Sensus Plenior

For those who attempt to make distinctions between authorial intent and divine intent, *sensus plenior* is the plea. S. Lewis Johnson and Elliott E. Johnson have written on the subject in hopes of establishing a connection between divine intent and authorial intent. Both writers believe the Old Testament remains the basis for determining New Testament fulfillment. The control placed on this “deeper sense”⁶² is to prevent outrageous speculation typical of inane allegory. The control is “the implication of the words” in

⁶¹ A new approach to Bible study methods is the use of literary genre called “apocalyptic.” The term is used to distinguish predictive prophecy which is interpreted quite literally. If there is an entire genre that is apocalyptic then there is a basis for interpreting Bible prophecy in a non-literal fashion. At some point, all non-futurist schools of interpretation (preterist, historicist, and idealist) spiritualize Bible prophecy under the presupposition that its apocalyptic style allows it to be distinguished from a historical-grammatical interpretation. On the other hand, if Bible prophecy is not categorized according to a specialized study of apocalyptic genre then it must be interpreted literally as is true of non-prophetic portions of Scripture. Even the symbols and figures of speech that are common distinctives of Bible prophecy proffer themselves to a normal, literal interpretation. Two popular commentaries today emphasizing apocalyptic as literary genre are Greg Beale and Grant Osborne’s commentaries on the Book of Revelation. Both commentators described their hermeneutical approach as eclectic. Osborne combined preterist, futurist, and idealist methods [Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament) (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2002), 1-49; Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 88-89]; Beale combined futurist and idealist methods [Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (New International Greek Testament Commentary) (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1999), 48-49]. The eclectic method of hermeneutics allows the interpreter to choose whatever meaning in any given passage is suitable to his pre-understood eschatological position.

⁶² An example of the use of “deeper sense” would be the current battle between essentialist dispensationalism and progressive dispensationalism. Progressives (and amillennialists) believe there is a heavenly allusion to New Testament fulfillment of passages such as Psalm 2 and Psalm 110. Amillennialists believe the New Testament changes any earthly fulfillment of the Old Testament, whereas progressives oscillate on the issue.

light of progressive revelation (S. Lewis Johnson)⁶³ or the “defining sense” of the writings of the human author (Elliott E. Johnson).⁶⁴

The interpretation of the Bible, as with any work of literature, should be an effort to understand the intent of the author. A proper hermeneutic is the one wherein the interpreter sets aside his own presuppositions about what a passage may mean and works by means of exegesis to allow the passage to speak for itself. According to grammatical-historical interpretation, both words and sentences have one single meaning. Bernard Ramm wrote, “But here we must remember the old adage: ‘Interpretation is one, application is many.’ This means that there is only one meaning to a passage of Scripture which is determined by careful study. But a given text or a given passage may speak to a number of problems or issues.”⁶⁵ Likewise, the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy assented, “We affirm that the meaning expressed in each biblical text is single, definite, and fixed. We deny that the recognition of this single meaning eliminates the variety of its application” (Article VII).⁶⁶ If this principle of single meaning is abandoned or neglected then the result will be a postmodern mélange of doubt and speculation.

The issue of *sensus plenior* is whether a given passage contains a deeper meaning than grammatical-historical interpretation demands. The results of such attempts are allegorical rather than literal interpretation. The dispensational hermeneutic has always been that every word, sentence, paragraph, and book of the Bible is inspired by God in written language which means that it should be interpreted following normal, grammatical connotations and denotations.⁶⁷ The idea is the Bible was not recorded in an incomprehensible language thus requiring it to be interpreted by some mysterious *modus operandi*. The Bible was written in understandable languages, such as Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Therefore, those who read and interpreted the Bible would not search for

⁶³ S. Lewis Johnson, *The Old Testament in the New: An Argument for Biblical Inspiration* (Contemporary Evangelical Perspectives) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980).

⁶⁴ Elliott E. Johnson, “Dual Authorship and the Single Intended Meaning of Scripture,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143 (July-September 1986): 218-227.

⁶⁵ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook on Hermeneutics*, 3rd rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 113.

⁶⁶ The Chicago Statements on Biblical Hermeneutics, “Articles of Affirmation and Denial” (accessed 29 November 2006) available from http://www.namb.net/site/c.9qKILUOzEpH/b.238325/k.AC1C/Chicago_Statement.htm. The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy adopted the 25 articles in November 1982. J. I. Packer wrote, “In November 1982 the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy called a second international conference of approximately 100 scholars to tackle a second major task, the achieving of a consensus on the principles and practices of Biblical interpretation. It was recognized that while belief in the inerrancy of Scripture is basic to maintaining its authority, that belief and commitment have real value only so far as the meaning and the message of Scripture are understood. In fact, most of the action in present-day debate about the Bible centers on questions of interpretation and hermeneutics” [J. I. Packer, *God Has Spoken* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 157].

⁶⁷ The term literal simply means “belonging to letters.” Therefore, literal interpretation of Scripture is derived from the actual words in their ordinary, grammatical meaning. Literal interpretation does not go beyond the grammatical-historical context. The superiority of the literal hermeneutic is that it interprets the original sense of Scripture according to the normal and customary usage of its language. Literal interpretation of all literature (including Scripture) is the attempt to understand the actual communication based upon what is written. In contrast to literal interpretation is the allegorical or non-literal hermeneutic. The allegorical or non-literal view attempts to interpret a passage based upon a presupposition or understanding that is not found specifically in the biblical passage. Therefore, allegorical interpretation imports a key idea from outside a passage as the basis for interpretation and is not found or supported explicitly from the text.

some deeper meaning other than a plain, or normal, meaning. The Bible is understandable when read according to normal, grammatical writing.

The notion of a *sensus plenior* in the interpretation of Bible prophecy is in opposition to the grammatical-historical hermeneutic. Certainly, as Ramm observed, there are numerous practical applications of a given passage that still consist with a grammatical-historical, plain interpretation of Scripture. Second Timothy 3:16 affirms, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness."

However, if at any moment in the interpretation of Scripture the principle of single meaning is lost the corresponding effect will be a degree of uncertainty that disconcerts any scientific interpretation. It is logical that Scripture must have a single meaning, or it would not carry any meaning. The task of the interpreter is not to obfuscate, but to clarify Scripture. If the words of Scripture are not interpreted grammatically and historically, all meaning is reduced to obfuscation in a most dangerous manner.

Instead of affirming traditional grammatical-historical interpretation, interpreters today are entertaining views of more than one meaning to a passage. Rejecting the traditional view of hermeneutics, distinction is often made between author intent and divine intent in prophecy. Dispensationalists have affirmed that all interpretation should be limited to the author's original intent. It is granted that the human author may not have understood all that he was writing (cf. 1 Pet 1:10-11), but this does not mean there is a difference between divine intent and human intent. Departure from the principle of single meaning occurs when "related submeanings" are introduced.⁶⁸ The idea that a passage has one single meaning and related submeanings is contradictory. If a passage has one single meaning, there is no reason for talking of related implications or "related submeanings." Discussions about authorial intent, submeanings, and *sensus plenior* demonstrate the drift away from traditional grammatical-historical interpretation.

The complementary hermeneutic of progressive dispensationalism is yet another example of this drift. Bock wrote, "But textual meaning is not really limited to reproducing what the reader thinks the author might have meant . . . there is a difference between description and understanding."⁶⁹ Progressives view the control of a single meaning upon the inspired text of the author as being too simple. Concerning single meaning progressives stated, "These texts have a message that extends beyond the original settings in which they were given. Something about what they say lives on. Their intrinsic merit has caused them to be preserved and passed on."⁷⁰ Denying the "simplicity" of one interpretation and many applications, progressives set forth a typological-prophetic "pattern" fulfillment.⁷¹ The "patterned" design of prophetic interpretation means that many applications are actually many meanings which are beyond the grammatical-historical determination of the text. The complementary hermeneutic means progressive revelation in the New Testament can add a different meaning to the original text. Progressives do not like the accusation of *sensus plenior* but the classification is appropriate since they are clearly moving beyond the historical-grammatical context.

⁶⁸ Johnson, "Dual Authorship and Single Meaning," 143.

⁶⁹ Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 64.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 102.

According to 1 Peter 1:10-11 (a commonly used passage by those appealing to *sensus plenior*), the Old Testament prophets were unable to distinguish the two advents of Jesus Christ. Now, after His first coming, it is readily apparent that the Church Dispensation will precede His second coming. Peter said the disciples could not readily reconcile the sufferings of Christ with the glories to follow, but he was not affirming a deeper meaning to the Old Testament prophecies. A similar difficulty of understanding the timing issue between the rapture and second coming was true of the disciples. At first, the disciples were unable to distinguish the rapture from the second coming. Recognizing this confusion, Jesus did not attempt to explain all the details of the church age since this “mystery” teaching would have been more than the disciples could comprehend at the time.

The issue of timing concerning the two phases of His second coming would be crystallized to the disciples through progressive revelation. After the church was in existence for a few years, this would occur primarily through the New Testament writings of Paul. From Genesis to Revelation, God has revealed His program progressively to His people. The same is true concerning the doctrine of the rapture as an imminent event, followed by seven years of tribulation, and the return of Jesus Christ to earth.

Second Peter 1:21 states no **profhteia** ever came by the will of a man, but by the **pneumato**" the writers of Scripture were moved. First Peter 1:10-11 records how the **profhtai** spoke by the **pneuma Cristou**! The work of the exegete in prophetic interpretation involves intense study.⁷² *As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that **would come** to you made careful search and inquiry, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow (1 Pet 1:10-11).* Nevertheless, Peter indicated exegesis is not based on the wild speculation of man by means of a deeper sense, but it is based on the revelation of God. In other words, *it was revealed to them (1:12).*

Grammatical-Historical Interpretation

Three key factors in understanding a passage are context, context, and context. Prophecy must be interpreted contextually (according to its original context); otherwise, it becomes a pretext. Context includes the following: the verses immediately before and after the passage (immediate context), the paragraph, the context of the entire book, its audience (Israel or the church), the context of the entire Bible, and the historical-cultural environment at the time of the writing. Therefore, the expositor needs to consider the author's context, both far and near.

The context of the writings of the author includes the theme of the whole book, that is, audience and purpose. The far context involves the plot developed by the book. The

⁷² Second Timothy 2:15 demarcates the goal of the exegete's diligent searching of the Scriptures: *Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth.* The Greek word translated as *handling accurately* is **ojrqotomouhta** (present participle of **ojrqotomew**). In the Septuagint, **ojrqotomew** is used with **odou'** in Proverbs 3:6 and 11:5. Scripture is referring to a path that is divided accurately so that another can follow the same path clearly. When **ojrqotomew** is used in regard to biblical exegesis it means that the exegete is to make straight paths for those who will follow behind him.

near context involves the surrounding verses immediately before and after the chapter. The student of the Word must consider the dispensation and the historical-cultural environment at the time of writing.

Use of context in determining the meaning of a portion of Scripture is essential. For example, chapter and verse divisions must be ignored for contextual reasons since these divisions were not a part of the original text. The author's line of thought or reasoning in part, and as a whole, will indicate the meaning of a single part. From the context of a single part, a word or phrase can have more than one meaning. For example, biased news reporters could quote individuals out of context to make the person appear to have said something entirely different.

There are other aspects of context. Since the Bible has only one ultimate Author, God, the entire Bible is an aspect of context. Therefore, what one author may write, or the word or figures of speech used are aspects of biblical interpretation. For example, some of the figures of speech in Revelation are best interpreted by consulting Old Testament prophets who used similar or the same figures of speech.

Finally, the author's context is critical to understand. The author's historical-cultural environment is important because he speaks or writes as a person in his environment to other people in the same world. Certainly, there are some constants between one period of history and another, but there are also many changes that develop throughout time. The historical-cultural environment of the author would be the world of his time; it is important to understand what the author is communicating to people in his world.

The various aspects of the circles of context are fundamental sources for interpretation. The immediate context is perhaps the most determinative, but other more subtle aspects of context require the interpreter to examine the remote context, the context of the entire book, the context of the entire Bible, and ultimately the author's historical-cultural environment. To ignore context allows the reader to force Scripture to say nearly anything wished or desired and degenerates into non-literal interpretation.

Old Testament Citation in the New Testament

It is clear that Jesus employed a consistently literal method as He interpreted the Old Testament. For instance, He accepted the narratives of Abel (Matt 23:35), Noah (24:37-38), Abraham (3:9; 8:11; 22:32), Isaac and Jacob (8:11; 22:32), Moses (8:4; 19:8), David (12:3; 22:43, 45), and Jonah (12:40) as records of historical fact. Jesus never used an allegorical method of interpretation whenever He made application of the historical record. Never did Jesus divide Scripture into multilevel ("layered") meanings thereby distinguishing a surface level meaning based on a literal reading of the text and a deeper level meaning based on a numinous reading of the text. Jesus rebuked the religious leaders because they developed sophisticated methods for interpreting Scripture and replaced a literal understanding with their contrived traditions. On the contrary, no accusation of interpreting Scripture unnaturally or non-literally was ever attributed to Jesus by the religious leaders.⁷³

Similar to Jesus, the apostles interpreted the Old Testament literally. Of course, some today believe the New Testament writers change the meaning of the Old Testament. For

⁷³ Henry A. Virkler, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 54.

instance, Robert Saucy argued for a deeper meaning in Psalm 110 because he believes Peter's quotation of the Psalm in Acts 2 modifies the original meaning of the Old Testament text. The distinguishing characteristic of the progressive hermeneutic is the historical-grammatical-literary-theological meaning beyond the original it gives to earlier interpretations. Saucy did not demonstrate literal fulfillment in the New Testament use of literal prophecy from the Old Testament, but he argued for new applications of the Old Testament. Using the book of Hebrews as an example, he wrote,

In this connection it is important to recognize that the purpose of the writer to the Hebrews is not to give us an interpretation of Old Testament prophecy. The book is rather "a word of exhortation" (13:22). . . .⁷⁴

the Scriptures frequently reveal different applications of similar language without implying a change in identity. The fact that the same phrase about God's son being called out of Egypt applies to both Israel and Christ does not make these objects identical (cf. Hos 11:1 and Mt 2:15). God's similar working throughout salvation history makes the use of analogous language common in the biblical revelation.⁷⁵

Finding application of a literal Old Testament prophecy quoted in the New Testament is more consistent with grammatical-historical interpretation than the progressive hermeneutic.⁷⁶ If the New Testament adds meaning to Old Testament prophecy, this does not mean the original meaning of the text has changed. Progressive revelation in the New Testament is common because some meanings of the Old Testament were not fully discernable or revealed until the New Testament writers gave the added meaning under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The central idea to keep in mind is the added meanings in the New Testament are the result of progressive revelation under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the writing of the New Testament. In other words, the authority is derived from the *quotation* of the literal Old Testament prophecy in the New Testament. Only God was able to give the progressive revelation, and only He knew that the Apostles would be inspired in New Testament times with the added meaning. The support for hermeneutics that would allow for New Testament quotation in a non-literal fashion that ignores the grammatical-historical context fails.

In the same manner as Jesus, the apostles interpreted the Old Testament literally. It is granted that certain New Testament citations appear to change the original meaning of the Old Testament text or appear to interpret the Old Testament in a non-literal fashion, but the more one looks at the grammatical-historical context in the New Testament the writers can be seen to interpret consistently the Old Testament according to a normal (plain) interpretation. Virkler commented,

In conclusion, the vast majority of the New Testament references to the Old Testament interpret it literally; that is, they interpret according to the commonly accepted norms for interpreting all types of communication. . . . There is no attempt to separate the message into literal and allegorical levels. The few cases where the New Testament writers seem to interpret the Old Testament unnaturally can usually be resolved as we understand more fully the interpretive methods of biblical times.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Saucy, *Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 56.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁷⁶ Ron J. Bigalke Jr., "The Abrahamic Covenant," in *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis*, 62-63.

⁷⁷ Virkler, *Hermeneutics*, 58.

The principle for biblical interpretation means there is one single meaning. After determining the single meaning, many legitimate applications can be gleaned from the text. Normal grammatical-historical interpretation avoids selectivity in the biblical text, such as *sensus plenior*, which actually changes meaning of the original. Ramm detailed the precision involved in grammatical-historical interpretation when he warns against “*apparent* cross reference,” which finds a word or words (or expression) to be the same each time it is used thereby allowing the interpreter to equate two different meanings as one meaning in one or both passages.⁷⁸ Consistently literal interpretation is essential to understand Bible prophecy. Literal interpretation involves grammatical, historical, and contextual interpretation. Among most evangelicals, a literal hermeneutic is employed; however, in the discipline of prophecy is when some begin to deviate and even disregard simple rules of interpretation.

Progressive Dispensationalism In Relation to Covenantal Idealism

Since PD has minimized the importance of inductive Bible study (i.e. the scientific method, which requires the interpreter to gather all facts before deriving general conclusions) and a form of literal interpretation, it will be enlightening to include an assessment of covenantal idealism in relation to progressive teachings. For instance, an induction on the use of the terms Israel and the church will demonstrate clear distinctions in the nature and program for Israel and the church.⁷⁹ Progressives talk much about preunderstanding and the need to be cognizant of cultural influences when interpreting the Bible, but it appears (to this lecturer) that covenantal idealism has significantly influenced PD hermeneutics and theology which results in progressives minimizing the absolute necessity of consistent literal interpretation and adopting instead a form of spiritualization which disregards the principles stated in this addendum regarding the interpretation of Scripture.⁸⁰

The dominant interpretative method of idealism is the redemptive-historical. The redemptive-historical⁸¹ hermeneutic is based on the following principles: (1) Scripture is progressive revelation; (2) Scripture can only be understood from Genesis through Revelation Christologically; (3) the people of God in both the Old and New Testaments were redeemed through faith in Christ; and, (4) the people of God in the Old Testament were under the same organic, covenant body as the people of God in the New Testament. Greidanus (Dutch Reformed covenant theologian)⁸² believed the redemptive-historical hermeneutic allows one to communicate Christ from all of Scripture. A “Christian

⁷⁸ Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 140-141.

⁷⁹ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 84-85.

⁸⁰ Blaising, “Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 30-33.

⁸¹ The term redemptive-historical is derived from the German word for “sacred history” (*heilsgeschichte*). Redemptive historians understand the past as God’s self revelation to mankind in the person of Jesus Christ. The life, death, and resurrection of Christ are the means of God’s redemptive purposes. Redemptive history attempts to unify the historical events by which God advances His saving kingdom.

⁸² Popular redemptive historians include: Geerhardus Vos (1862-1949); Klaas Schilder (1890-1952); Herman N. Ridderbos (1900-); Oscar Cullmann (1902-1999); and, Charles G. Dennison (1945-1999).

preacher cannot preach an Old Testament text in isolation, but must always understand the text in the context of the whole Bible and redemptive history. . . .”⁸³

The focus of the redemptive-historical hermeneutic is the progressive self-revelation of God to His covenant people through the medium of history. As “the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, God is the beginning and the end” of all things in the earth below and heaven above. All history moves in the direction of the consummation of God’s good purposes. The incarnation of Jesus Christ is the culmination of the two ages: “this present evil age and the one to come” (cf. Matt 12:32; Gal 1:4; Eph 1:21). Since the powers of “the one to come” have already entered history in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the two age view of reality means “the age to come” (the kingdom of God) arrived sooner than expected (Mark 1:15; Luke 17:20-21). Those who are united by faith to Christ have been transferred from this present evil age into the power of the one to come. In other words, they are now in the kingdom of God.

Although the church is already in the kingdom of God, there is still tension since the kingdom of God has not yet arrived in its completeness. The age to come is related to this present evil age which creates a transitory eschatological tension in between the time of the first and second comings of Christ (cf. 2 Cor 4:16). Redemptive-historical hermeneutics begin with this two-age knowledge of the Christian life. The hermeneutic attempts to bring the church into a greater awareness of her position in Christ by emphasizing the fact that the believer is already raised with Christ, but has not yet entered the complete eschatological fullness of the kingdom which will take place at the second coming of Christ. The believer groans in this present evil age while longing for the return of the Lord.

The first coming of Christ in humiliation was to accomplish God’s eternal redemption and the second coming will be in glory to consummate the kingdom of God. The completeness of time is the direction in which history is moving. Christ foreshadowed and hinted at the consolation of Israel throughout the Old Testament. Redemptive history means Christ now reigns as the fulfillment of the Old Testament types and shadows. Similar to the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, the church is the chosen nation, the sole investiture of God’s grace, in the kingdom age and will be a blessing to all the nations of the world. The church is the heir and seat of all the covenantal blessings. Presently, the church is situated at the end of the ages and has already realized eschatological fulfillment in contrast to mere promise and typology. The church is the historical expression of the kingdom of God according to the new covenant. The redemptive-historical approach is to understand Scripture as God’s progressive revelation in the sense that all Scripture points to the person and work of Jesus Christ. All Scripture is interpreted in light of His historical life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

Progressive revelation means the New Testament authors amplify the revelations of former ages. The New Testament amplifies the Old Testament themes and expounds upon them in light of Christ. The comprehensive knowledge of God’s redemptive purposes for history is the result of a more comprehensive and personal knowledge of God. The more comprehensive knowledge of God is revealed in the events of redemptive history. According to the redemptive-historical hermeneutic, the Old Testament must be interpreted both Christologically and eschatologically in light of the person and work of

⁸³ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 230.

Messiah. The redemptive-historical approach maintains that history is the vehicle by which God reveals his sovereign purpose of redemption progressively. Eternal redemption in Jesus Christ and His eschatological kingdom is the central theme of Scripture.

Conversely, dispensationalism would disagree with the Christological interpretation of the Old Testament. The amount and content of Christocentric and salvific revelation that the redemptive-historical hermeneutic demands is far too much. Even if there is agreement that a certain amount of Christocentric knowledge was available to certain individuals in the Old Testament by means of covenants, visions, dreams, or revelation, the number of individuals with such knowledge would be so minute so as to make salvation in the Old Testament virtually unfathomable. However, even though there was not a great amount of Christocentric knowledge of Christ there was salvation by faith in the Old Testament.⁸⁴

The eschatology of idealism is similar to covenant theology, since understanding of the so-called covenant of grace controls it. It is granted this is not the only covenant referenced, but it is the one covenant that is seen to rule over all other covenants since the failure of the covenant of works (Gen. 3). According to covenant theology, God relates to mankind through two covenants: the covenant of works (*foedus operum*) and the covenant of grace (*foedus gratiae*). Sometimes the covenant of grace is understood under two aspects: (1) the Godward aspect, and (2) the manward aspect. The Godward aspect is called the covenant of redemption (*pactum salutis*), which is between God and Christ from all eternity and will result in the eternal redemption of all believers. The manward aspect is between God and the believer and will result in eternal redemption to the believer who has faith in Jesus Christ.

The covenant of works was between God and Adam. Adam was promised eternal life for perfect obedience to God. Since Adam failed, death came. Evidence given for the covenant of works is Hosea 6:7. Apparently, the prophet was conscious (like Adam) of a prelapsarian covenant of works. Romans 2:13 and 4:4 are cited as examples that the Apostle Paul presupposed the reality of a prelapsarian covenant of works. The excommunication from the Garden of Eden and subsequent removal of the Tree of Life in Genesis 3:22-24 is thought to be evidence of the provisional nature of the covenant of works. Other evidences for the covenant of works include the creational Sabbath and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The covenant of grace (*foedus gratiae*) was made, from all eternity, to save man from the penalty of disobedience. Covenant Theology teaches there is progressive revelation of the outworking of this covenant throughout the Old Testament. The *protevangelium* of Genesis 3:15 announced the existence of the covenant of grace.

The administration of the Gospel is traced throughout Old Testament redemptive history according to belief in the progressive proclamations of the covenant of grace. For instance, certain provisions of the covenant of grace were revealed to Noah. The first mention of the Noahic covenant (Gen 6:17-19) was particular and an administration of the covenant of grace. The second mention of the Noahic covenant (9:8-17) amplified the fact that there would be an all-inclusive non-salvific covenant promising the constraint of judgment until the last day. The covenant of grace was afterward established with Abraham and his descendants. The Abrahamic covenant renewed the postlapsarian

⁸⁴ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 118-121.

covenantal promise originally made in the covenant of works between God and Adam (3:15-17). At this point, the covenant became national. In redemptive history, the covenant of grace is renewed in Abraham, as the father of all who believe (Rom 4:11; cf. John 8:56).

God's promise of land to Abraham (Gen 15:18; Exod 6:4; Judg 2:1) was typical of the blessings to be made manifest according to the new covenant (Gen 2:4; Gal 3:14; Heb 8) and the final state (Heb 11:10). As historically prior to the Mosaic covenant, the Abrahamic covenant was renewed under Christ but the Mosaic covenant was not. In terms of justification and soteriology, the Mosaic covenant was an administration of the covenant of grace. All believers who were justified under the Mosaic covenant were saved by grace though faith in Christ alone. In terms of the land promise though, the Mosaic covenant, with necessary changes, was a republication of the Adamic covenant of works. Israel received the land promise and maintained possession by grace. However, the nation fell into apostasy and excluded from the land for failing in obedience to a temporary, typical covenant of works (Gen 12:7; Exod 6:4; Deut 29:19-29; 2 Kgs 17:6-7; Ezek 17).

According to 2 Corinthians 3:6, New Testament believers are "servants of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." The Mosaic covenant was predisposed to the ministry of the letter (the Law) but the New Covenant was inclined to the ministry of the Holy Spirit. According to the redemptive-historical hermeneutic, the New Covenant, as the certainty symbolized by the pre-incarnational types and shadows (John 6:32; 2 Cor 1:20; Heb 7-9), is the fulfillment of the protevangelium to Adam (Gen 3:15) and the (Abrahamic) covenant of grace.

The exterior conditions of the covenant of grace are a faulty imposition that is placed on Scripture and, as such, it distorts proper exegesis of both the Old and New Testament. Conversely, the grammatical-historical hermeneutic of dispensationalism is far more superior to exegete the Testaments since it can address Scripture much more accurately and provide hope that the idealist desires of eschatological passages. The difference is dispensationalists teach hope to Israel since the King will return to fulfill His covenantal promises to her and to the church who are joint-heirs with the coming King.

Israel and the Church

Idealism views the church as the eschatological fulfillment of the same Old Testament promises God made with Israel. The death and resurrection of Christ is the culminating event for believers of all ages; it unites them without distinction for the common purpose and entrance into the kingdom of God. The covenantal promises with Israel in the Old Testament find their fulfillment in the church at the death and resurrection of Christ. The church is now raised to its final mediation from glory. Since idealism places heavy emphasis on church covenant fulfillment,⁸⁵ it will be beneficial to consider the nature of biblical covenants. Dispensationalism not only emphasizes the spiritual aspect of the covenantal promises of God, but also the physical aspects. John Feinberg explained,

⁸⁵ Hamstra, "Idealist View of Revelation," in *Four Views of Revelation*, 96.

For nondispensationalists history is seen primarily as salvation history. In other words, the emphasis is on God's ongoing plan in saving men. For dispensationalists history is the gradual implementation and outworking of the kingdom of God. A major part of that implementation involves saving people, but the soteriological and spiritual elements are not the only aspects of the kingdom. . . . For example, nondispensational treatments of the nature of the covenants and of Israel's future invariably emphasize soteriological and spiritual issues, whereas dispensational treatments emphasize both the spiritual/soteriological and the social, economic, and political aspects of things.⁸⁶

In contrast to dispensationalism, idealism merely emphasizes the spiritual and salvation aspect of God's covenantal promises. Both systems would emphasize a doxological purpose to history, but the dispensationalist approach is much broader than the idealist. Dispensationalism emphasizes both spiritual and physical blessings within the doxological purpose of history.

The Kingdom of God

Idealism teaches the kingdom of God is a present, spiritual reality. The church is a partaker in the kingdom of God even though it is only presently seen by faith. The consummation of the kingdom of God occurs when all God's covenants are fulfilled in the *eschaton* with God's earthly creation. At this time, the kingdom of God will be by sight. The idealist position assumes, without biblical exegesis, that God's covenants with Israel were conditional and because of the nation's disobedience, the promises have been reassigned to the church. Ryrie countered this belief well in the quote below.

Premillennialists point out that if the yet unfulfilled part of that covenant is to be fulfilled literally (the promise of the land of Palestine), this will have to occur in a future Millennium, since there has been no place in past or present history for a literal fulfillment. Amillennialists [idealists included] say that we need not expect a future fulfillment because (a) the promises were conditional and the conditions were never met; or (b) the land promise was fulfilled in the time of Joshua (Josh. 21:43-45); or (c) it was fulfilled under King Solomon (1 Kings 4:21); or (d) it is now being fulfilled by the church; or (e) it is fulfilled in the heavenly Jerusalem. I only observe that each of those five suggestions negates the validity of the other four. One receives the impression that the amillennialist does not really know how or when the Abrahamic Covenant should be fulfilled. He is only certain that it will not be in a future, earthly Millennium.⁸⁷

Generally, idealists will teach the millennium was inaugurated at the resurrection of Christ. At His crucifixion and resurrection, Christ emerged victorious over Satan and ascended into heaven in order to begin His present reign over all creation in an "already and not yet" eschatological sense. The last days, or *eschaton*, of Acts 2:16-21, Hebrews 1:1, and the majority of the Book of Revelation are not the seventieth week of Daniel. The members of the church are now subjects of the kingdom since Christ was crowned King of Kings at His ascension.

Jesus Christ is now and already "the ruler of the kings of the earth" (Rev 1:5) for "The kingdom of the world has become *the kingdom* of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever" (11:15b). The church is "already" reigning with Jesus

⁸⁶ John S. Feinberg, "Systems of Discontinuity" in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 85.

⁸⁷ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 447.

Christ, but eternal redemption has “not yet” arrived in its fullness. The “signs of the times” will continue throughout the interadvent age regardless of time for the period to reach its eventual fullness. The first century and modern church is invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb in heaven (not on the earth in the millennium), but will not experience the marriage supper until the fullness of the ages, or if death precedes the consummation.

Major prophecies, such as the Olivet Discourse and the Book of Revelation, are interpreted as part of the redemptive-historical plan of God which began in the first century Roman persecution of the church. Idealism emphasizes a two-age⁸⁸ coming of the kingdom of God. Christ’s first coming was the dawning of the first age, as John the Baptist preached, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 3:2). At His death and resurrection, Christ emerged victorious over death and Satan. At His ascension, Christ began His eternal reign upon the throne of David (Luke 1:32-33; Acts 2:30-31).

Rather than understanding a passage like 2 Corinthians 4:18 as an exhortation to distinguish the temporal (the ephemeral and evanescent) in contrast to the eternal, idealist understands eschatological events as already accomplished, though not yet evident by sight but by faith. Eternity is everlasting now, and the church abides in the eternal realm now (John 17:3) which cannot be seen. However, a reference to the ultimate glorification of the body must not be taken to mean the kingdom is already, though not by sight, and not yet, by sight. The believer walks by faith (cf. Rom 6:4, 13:13; 2 Cor 1:12; 5:7) in the present time, but when glorified shall know fully (1 Cor 13:12) and see fully (1 John 3:2). It is poor exegesis though to argue for a present form of the kingdom which cannot be seen, but understood by faith as “already but not yet.”

An important characteristic of idealism is the reality of suffering for the church in the present world. Since Christ was hated by the world, the church is expected to be hated on account of His name (Matt 10:22). The church today is similar to the first century saints who were martyred or persevered during the Roman persecution. The role of the church on earth is to share in Christ’s sufferings which means there is no expectation for an earthly adulation.

The expectation of the idealist is the fulfillment of the second stage of the coming kingdom of God. The final consummation of all the heavenly promises is this second stage in idealism. At this time, the church will not live solely by faith, but also by sight. All the shadows and types will fade away and the eternal reign of the church with Christ will commence. Therefore, the idealist does not look with hope to an earthly kingdom for Israel, wherein the church will be joint-heirs with Christ; rather, the idealist consigns all hope in the consummation of heavenly promises.

Idealism is wholly dependent on a two-age “biblical” theology which focuses primary attention upon an already not yet eschatology. For example, emphasis is placed on the fact that God already “raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:6). However, the church still anticipates a bodily resurrection “for we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed” (1 Cor 15:50), or

⁸⁸ “Biblical Theology and Redemptive Historical Hermeneutics” (accessed 18 July 2003) available from <http://www.two-age.org/index.htm>.

emphasizes the certainty of the glorification of the saints (Rom 8:30). Glorification is the last stage of the believer's salvation and so he still anticipates the complete fulfillment.⁸⁹

It is noteworthy that the alleged "developments" by PD are actually radical changes of the dispensational system and is moving closer to the covenantalism found in idealism. For instance, Blaising wrote,

Progressive dispensationalists understand the dispensations not simply as *different* arrangements between God and humankind, but as *successive* arrangements in the *progressive* revelation and accomplishment of redemption. . . . Because they all have the same goal, there is a real, progressive relationship between them. As each leads to the goal of final redemption, Scripture draws various connections between them which relate them together in a truly progressive fashion. It is from this progressive relationship of the dispensations to one another that the name *progressive dispensationalism* is taken.⁹⁰

Blaising's statement could easily have "progressive dispensationalists" changed to "covenantalists" and "dispensations" changed to "covenants" and it would be remarkably same as the theology of covenantalism. In response to Blaising, Ryrie wrote, "Although differences and discontinuity among the dispensations are recognized, sameness and continuities are emphasized and linked to the theme of redemption throughout all of human history."⁹¹ The radical changes to dispensationalism by PD have led Bruce Waltke to question whether "the term *dispensationalism* will still be useful." He wrote, "If ethnic Israel's role is only its remnant status on a permanent equality with the Gentiles in the one true people of God with no distinctive role in the land beyond the Parousia, then the term *dispensationalism* is misleading and ought to be dropped."⁹² Traditionalists would agree.

The Future of Dispensationalism

There can be no doubt that dispensationalism is facing some radical changes from within the dispensational camp. It does seem if progressives continue making such radical changes to dispensationalism that they will eventually destroy the system. One struggles to understand such candid statements by a former president of a historically sound dispensational school, who would even consider himself a traditionalist, in light of the dominance of progressive teaching at this school. He remarked, "Dispensations is a scare word. I'm not sure we're going to make dispensationalism a big part of our marquee. But in the progress of revelation, there is need to fit terms so they make sense, to use words that do not frighten or create misunderstanding."⁹³

⁸⁹ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); William Hendrikson, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1939); Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1962); Robert B. Strimple, "Amillennialism," in *Three Views of the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999); Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953); Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953).

⁹⁰ Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 48-49.

⁹¹ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 163.

⁹² Waltke, "A Response," 354.

⁹³ Charles Swindoll, "Interview," *Christianity Today* (25 October 1993): 14.

If PD continues to dominate and influence historically dispensational schools, clear eschatological teaching may be sacrificed for an unclear expectation of the future. According to one writer, PD is already “less ‘land-centered’ and ‘future-centered’ than past versions.”⁹⁴ The reason for the change is that the covenantal blessings for Israel in the millennium are radically reinterpreted. According to progressive Carl Hoch, the privileges of ethnic Israel “were restricted to Israel before the death of Christ and the creation of the Church.”⁹⁵ Since progressives have already obfuscated the distinctions between Israel and the church, it is consistent to minimize distinctions between the millennium and eternal state, thereby making the need for a millennium almost unnecessary.

It is best to regard PD not as development but a departure from traditional dispensationalism.⁹⁶ Consequently Elwell concluded, “The newer dispensationalism looks so much like nondispensationalist premillennialism that one struggles to see any real difference.”⁹⁷ Bock responded by stating critics of progressive dispensationalism have misunderstood the crucial differences between his “already/not yet” dialectic and the covenant premillennialism of George Ladd.⁹⁸ Bock did confess that his understanding of a present kingdom is very much like covenant premillennialism (which is a position antagonistic to dispensationalism). The crucial difference would be that the progressive concept of the millennium is more Israelitish than Ladd.⁹⁹ However, Bock continues to be influenced by Ladd regarding the present, preliminary stage of fulfillment. Bock even confessed, “Nevertheless, it is true that this complementary approach of reading Scripture means that this view of the kingdom in the present era looks very much like Ladd’s.”¹⁰⁰ Gerry Breshears’ report on the 1987 Evangelical Theological Society meeting of the Dispensational Study Group (chaired by Craig Blaising) was that moderate dispensationalists and moderate covenant theologians are much more similar than classic dispensationalism or classic covenant theologians. He summarized, “It seems both are moving toward each other in rapprochement. That was generally agreed.”¹⁰¹ Indeed, this desire for rapprochement with nondispensationalists appears to be the impetus for PD.

It needs to be stated that progressive dispensationalists are considered brothers in the Lord. Several progressives have written clear defenses of biblical truths that are greatly appreciated. However, each generation faces its challenges to communicate accurately the Word of God to its contemporaries and must not compromise biblical doctrine in the process. The biblical mandate to handle “accurately the word of truth” is essential to any theological system; however, it is especially relevant based on PD’s revisions and changes in the direction of covenant theology.

⁹⁴ Ken Sidey, “For the Love of Zion,” *Christianity Today* (9 March 1992): 50.

⁹⁵ Hoch, “The New Man,” 125.

⁹⁶ Stephen J. Nichols, “Already Ladd—Not Yet Dispensationalism: D. Bock and Progressive Dispensationalism.” Paper Presented to the Eastern Regional Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society (Philadelphia, PA, 2 April 1993).

⁹⁷ Walter Elwell, “Dispensationalists of the Third Kind,” *Christianity Today* (12 September 1994): 28.

⁹⁸ Darrell L. Bock, “Current Messianic Activity and OT Davidic Promise: Dispensationalism, Hermeneutics and NT Fulfillment,” *Trinity Journal* 15NS (Spring 1994): 70, n. 29.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 69-70.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁰¹ Gerry Breshears, “Dispensational Study Group Discussion,” *Grace Theological Journal* 10NS (Fall 1989): 161.

Throughout its history, there has been systematic development of dispensationalism since Darby. Of course, modern dispensationalists continue to develop and refine dispensationalism. However, progressives are introducing fundamental changes to dispensationalism. The progressives clearly depart from refinement of the views of former dispensationalists and introduce radical revision. It must be noted that there is disagreement even among progressives on particular issues since some have been more prolific than others in advancing PD.

There have been a significant number of responses to the progressive view. However, there has not been a single book written solely from a typical dispensational position answering the issues raised by progressives. The publication of *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis of the Movement and Defense of Traditional Dispensationalism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005) has now changed that. Since the first work communicating PD was a joint effort, the traditionalist response was also a combined effort. All the authors of the work pray it will bring greater clarity to God's revelation and it can be a work for serious students of Scripture, professors, and pastors to use to communicate the Word of God accurately. If discernment is not exercised and a reasoned response articulated, PD will continue to erode the foundations of formerly dispensational schools, the teachings will become more and more accepted in the college and seminary, and eventually the writings will become more prominent in the Christian bookstores, which will result in the local church becoming more confused regarding God's plan of the ages. May the grace of God grant us all the wisdom to discern and to respond to the issues!