

Progressive Dispensationalism and Normative Dispensationalism: Separate Hermeneutical Assumptions

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Those in the progressive dispensationalist camp are comfortable with disposing of grammatical-historical hermeneutics, whereas normative dispensationalists align themselves closely with it. The fact that Darrell Bock could write a Forward commending William Webb's controversial X-Y-Z approach shows that they are both influenced by modern hermeneutical theorizing. Bock himself emphasizes the supposed problem with saying that Scripture may be read in a consistently literal manner¹; Schleiermacher's warning about imposing a rigid set of rules upon the text before we actually read it²; the importance of "preunderstanding"³; and sensitivity to literary genres.⁴ This is why he, along with his fellow Progressive Dispensationalists, has bid adieu to consistent grammatical-historical interpretation (G-H) and has adopted a "complementary hermeneutic" wherein the passage being read is helped by the rest of the Biblical Canon. The hermeneutical tool chosen to ground this approach is an adaptation of the "already-not yet" hermeneutic.

Progressive Dispensationalism: A "Search for Definition."

Progressive Dispensationalism (PD) is a hybrid of concepts borrowed from both dispensational and non-dispensational schemes. By "progressive" the leaders of this movement mean, not new or novel dispensationalism. In fact, they mean it as a description of its chief characteristic, which is to see a progression between the Testaments.⁵ That is to say, they favor continuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament instead of the discontinuity that is the unavoidable outcome of sharply distinguishing Israel from the Church, a distinction that is drawn whenever G-H hermeneutics is allowed to investigate the prophetic texts of Scripture. Indeed, Blaising described it as "post-Essentialist" dispensationalism.

PD should be seen as a rapprochement⁶, an olive branch extended to Covenant theology. The forces that brought it into being appear to be, a. The issue of how the Old Testament is interpreted by the New⁷ b. The impact of secular theorizing about the philosophy of language that many PD's have been exposed to.⁸ c. The lack of new scholarly works being produced by classic dispensationalists which address the postmodern context. This has produced a vacuum of scholarly interaction, which has in turn made it difficult for modern dispensationalists to develop their theology; d. This problem has been exacerbated by a number of young dispensationalists going off to universities in Europe where the system is looked upon as sensationalistic, and often derided as unscholarly.

Some Divergences from Classic Dispensationalism.

Therefore, PD introduces significant changes in the normative system.⁹ For example, normative dispensational scholars like Charles Ryrie have noted that PD includes the eternal realm in its concept of history.¹⁰ This means that Eternity has been incorporated in the so-called “Zionist” dispensation (coupled with the Millennium).¹¹ Leading progressive dispensationalist Darrell Bock has been quoted as declaring that progressives and covenant theologians (though not normative dispensationalists) share the same basic already/not yet hermeneutic.¹² This means that they can no longer subscribe to any part of Ryrie’s proposed *sine qua non* of dispensationalism. They even have a section in their book, *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* entitled, “Beyond the *Sine Qua Non*.”¹³

Hermeneutically speaking, the following passage helps to bring out the different outlook taken by PD. We have inserted the names of leading hermeneutical theorists in order to show how thoroughly entrenched PD’s are in the landscape of modern hermeneutical theory:

Over the past three decades important developments have taken place in the evangelical perception and practice of historical and literary interpretation. Appreciation has grown for the historicity of both subject and object in the act of interpretation. This includes respect for the problem of historical distance [e.g. Lessing, Ricoeur] resulting in horizontal differences between text and interpreter [Gadamer, Ricoeur], the role of the interpreter’s preunderstanding [Schleiermacher, Gadamer], and methodological applications of the hermeneutical spiral [Gadamer, Thiselton]. Likewise, the role of community in interpretation is increasingly recognized [Fish, Derrida]. This leads to an awareness of the influence of tradition upon the interpreter’s preunderstanding [Gadamer, Ricoeur] as well as the broader dialogic context [Bakhtin, Vanhoozer] of interpretive questions and possible answers.¹⁴

In PD the Church is not an intercalation, so its distinction from Old Testament Israel becomes unclear to say the least. In a chapter devoted to PD, Ryrie demonstrates the knock-on effects of the beliefs of this new movement. Among these effects are, redefining the concept of “mystery” so that it is not a truth previously *unrevealed* in former ages, but is instead a truth previously *unrealized*¹⁵; and making the baptism with the Holy Spirit an Old Testament work.¹⁶ This has already led one PD proponent (David Turner) to call the Church the “new Israel”.¹⁷

Finally, progressives, utilizing a version of the “already/not yet” hermeneutic¹⁸, think that Christ is now seated upon the throne of David (citing, e.g., Psa.110). In other words, since the Melchisedekian priesthood of Christ has been inaugurated (Hebrews 5, 7), the promised Davidic reign, mentioned in the same Psalm, has already been inaugurated (seeming to run contrary to Rev. 3:21)! This completely re-jigs both the standard view of a Divine economy, and forces the progressive dispensationalist into employing his “complementary hermeneutic,” which is little more than admitting that the New Testament re-interprets the Old Testament.¹⁹

These things considered it is hard to see progressive dispensationalism as anything else but a more literal form of historic premillennialism, and not a relative of dispensationalism at all.²⁰ Indeed, one gets the distinct impression that many PD's wish to distance themselves as far as possible from classic dispensationalists. For example, Blaising's apology for what he calls "recent" dispensationalism ends up reading like an attempt to disengage himself from his dispensational predecessors. Interestingly, this is how it is taken by one of his Reformed critics.²¹

¹ Darrell L. Bock, "Response" to Elliott Johnson in, ed., Herbert W. Bateman IV, *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 77.

² Bock, "Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism," *ibid*, 86.

³ Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, (Wheaton, IL: BridgePoint, 1993), 59-62.

⁴ *Ibid*, 85ff.

⁵ Bock, *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism*, 90.

⁶ The word crops up in Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

⁷ See the formative essay by Kenneth Barker "False Dichotomies Between the Testaments" *JETS* 28 (March 1982).

⁸ Cf. Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 58.

⁹ We do not say that there have not been changes and disagreements within dispensational circles. This is plain enough to see. But we are saying that PD and the changes it introduces really do alter the overall tenets of normative dispensationalism. It adopts a different set of hermeneutical rules, which lead to a different theology.

¹⁰ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 167.

¹¹ Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 281-283.

¹² Bock, *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism*, 135.

¹³ Craig A. Blaising "Beyond the *Sine Qua Non*," in Blaising and Bock, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 30-34.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 30.

¹⁵ See particularly Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 143ff. *Idem*, "The Church as the Mystery of God," in Blaising and Bock, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*.

¹⁶ Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 176-177.

¹⁷ See David L. Turner's essay, "The New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:1-22:5: Consummation of a Biblical Continuum," in Blaising and Bock, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 288.

¹⁸ This is not an easy concept to see fully. One may think it stands for one thing when, in fact, it stands for something else. There is no room to go into it here, but this method should not be mistaken as the teaching, long accepted by dispensationalists, that there are eschatological aspects which are present in the lives of believers in the Church age (e.g. Rom. 8:28-30; Col. 3:1-4). Rather, it forces the interpreter into a more wide-angled "canonical" hermeneutic, thereby introducing the "Analogy of Faith" as a hermeneutical principle in its own right. Cf. *Three Central Issues*, 75-76.

¹⁹ This matter of the interpretation of the Old Testament by the New is thought by Bateman to be the crux of the argument of what it means to be "literal" in one's interpretation. See Bateman IV, ed., *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism*, 38.

²⁰ This is how it is seen by at least one Covenant critic. See appendix A to Keith A. Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1995), 135-137.

²¹ See Curtis I. Crenshaw and Grover E. Gunn, III, *Dispensationalism Today, Yesterday and Tomorrow*, (Memphis, TN: Footstool Publications, 1989), 436.