

Sunday, March 30, 2014—Grace Life School of Theology—*Grace History Project*—Lesson 133  
The 1990s: The Development of Progressive Dispensationalism

### **The Advent of Progressive Dispensationalism**

- Progressive Dispensationalism (PD) is a movement that began to take shape among academic Evangelical theologians in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1993, Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock published *Progressive Dispensationalism*. In chapter one, titled “The Extent and Variations of Dispensationalism”, they offer the following introductory remarks regarding the advent of PD:
  - “Progressive dispensationalism offers a number of modifications to classical and revised dispensationalism which brings dispensationalism closer to contemporary evangelical Biblical interpretation. Although the name is relatively recent, the particular interpretations that make up this form of dispensationalism have been developing over the past fifteen years. Sufficient revisions had taken place by 1991 to introduce the name Progressive Dispensationalism at the national meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society that year. This present book, along with the publications: *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church: The Search for Definition* and *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, are key representatives of this viewpoint.” (Blaising & Bock, 22-23)
- So, after fifteen years of discussion and refinement, the descriptor PD was first used at a meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in 1991. The lessons in this sequence are not interested in surveying the development of PD over time. Rather, we are interested in understanding and evaluating PD in its mature form.
- According to Blaising and Bock, the goal of this fifteen year process of development brought “dispensationalism closer to contemporary evangelical Biblical interpretation.” (22) This, of course, implies that those who were involved in this process believed that “classical” and “revised” dispensationalism manifested enough problems that placed it out of step with “contemporary evangelical Biblical interpretation.”
- Three major works, all published within the same two year window, captured the essence of the PD movement.
  - 1992—*Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church: The Search for Definition*, edited by Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock
  - 1993—*The Case For Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational & Non-Dispensational Theology*, by Robert L. Saucy
  - 1993—*Progressive Dispensationalism*, by Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock

- For our purposes with the *Grace History Project* we elected to limit the majority of our study of PD to the last two books listed above because they are a more mature presentation of the major arguments of PD.
- Many critics of PD have viewed the full title of Robert Saucy's book (*The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational & Non-Dispensational Theology*) as encapsulating the main motive of PD, i.e., to reconcile Dispensational and Covenant Theology as theological systems. It is to this introductory matter that we now turn our attention.

### **Progressive Dispensationalism: The Mediating View**

- The first chapter of Robert Saucy's book titled, "The Critical Issue Between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Systems," presents PD as the "mediating position" between dispensational and non-dispensational systems of theology.
- At the outset of chapter one, Saucy states the following regarding the "history of discussion" between dispensational and non-dispensational theology.
  - "Throughout the history of discussion between dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists, numerous points of contention have been raised. These differences stem largely from the particular emphasis of each system in its understanding of Biblical history. As its name indicates, the dispensational view tended to emphasize the difference in the various periods of human history brought about through the progressive revelation of God's salvation program. Non-dispensationalists, on the other hand, inclined toward an emphasis on the unity of God's work in Biblical history.

Continued study of the Scriptures has seen development and modification of both perspectives. Most dispensationalists would acknowledge that some of the early statements of distinctions were overstated. This is often the case when a position is first espoused against another position as was the situation of early dispensationalism against traditional covenant theology. At the same time, the rise of the discipline of Biblical theology with its emphasis on interpreting the Scriptures in their historical environment has contributed to a greater appreciation of the development within the historical redemptive plan and the resultant differences entailed on the part of many non-dispensationalists." (Saucy, 13)

- Prior to noting areas where tension still exists between dispensational and non-dispensational theology, Saucy uses the rest of this section to note "those areas which for many interpreters are no longer in dispute." (14) Under the subheading "Resolved Issues," Saucy comments on the following topics: 1) Law and Grace; 2) The Sermon on the Mount; 3) The Kingdom of Heaven and the Kingdom of God. Since many of these same subjects were discussed in Lesson 113 The Covenantal-Dispensational Rift, we will refrain from commenting on these sections at this time. Suffice it to say, Saucy cites the fact that recent works on dispensationalism by non-dispensational authors make no mention of different "ways of salvation" as proof that Law and

Grace are no longer a divisive issue between the two theological systems. Regarding the Sermon on the Mount and The Kingdom of Heaven and the Kingdom of God, Saucy gives the impression that there is more continuity between dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists in how they view these subjects than there was in the past.

- The major bone of contention between dispensational and non-dispensational theology according to Saucy centers around, “God’s purpose and plan in Biblical history.” (19) Saucy does not view the fundamental difference between dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists as “a basic hermeneutical principle (literal v. spiritual) nor the ultimate purpose of human history.” (20)
  - “The basic issue is the way we understand the historical plan and the goal of that plan through which God will bring eternal glory to himself. More specifically, it is the question of the purpose and plan of God within human history, i.e., from this creation until the inauguration of the eternal state. This inquiry involved not only the basic goal of history, but the meaning and integration of the various aspects of God’s work during this period. We must understand not only what God intends to do, but how he accomplishes it. The call of Abraham, the election and formation of the nation of Israel, God dealing with the church and the nations, and the various covenant arrangements—all these are facets of the historical plan that must be integrated and understood.” (Saucy, 20-21)
- How one defines the nature of the kingdom of God is central to understanding PD as a mediating position between dispensational and non-dispensational theology. Regarding this point Saucy writes:
  - “Many Biblical scholars, past and present, point to the concept of the kingdom of God as the theme of history. Much recent non-dispensational thinking is illustrated by Anthony Hoekema, who writes that ‘the kingdom of God is the central theme of Jesus’ preaching and, by implication, of the preaching and teaching of the apostles . . . It is in the kingdom of God that we must see the real meaning of history.’ ” (21)
- The purpose of history, according to non-dispensational theology, varies on whether or not “they believe that the Scripture teaches a literal, earthly, millennial reign of Christ.” (21) Amillennialism sees the reign of Christ in the present age and therefore, “tends to view the kingdom purpose of God in history as fundamentally a spiritual reign over the people of God.” (21) In contrast, premillennial non-dispensationalists view the messianic reign of Christ as including the establishment of God’s will in the structure of human society and government before the mediatorial work of Christ is complete and the kingdom is delivered up by the Father for eternity.” (22)
- Historically, non-dispensationalists have emphasized the unity of the historical working of God more than dispensationalists. (22) Regarding this emphasis on unity that is inherent to non-dispensational theology, Saucy writes in part:

- “. . . For traditional covenant theologians, the various economies of God are the outworking of the one covenant of grace. For others that emphasized the kingdom theme, these economies are stages in the development of God’s purpose to redeem his creation from the power of sin and its effects.

Basic to all non-dispensationalist thought is a unity of the people of God that does not allow for a future place and purpose for the nation of Israel in the historical plan of God’s redemption. . . Perhaps the view most commonly held among evangelical non-dispensationalists is that Israel’s is simply an incorporation of that people into the church.

. . . The church takes the place of Israel as the historical people of God and has been endowed with all the privileges and blessings of Israel. This is essentially the stance adopted by the Roman Catholic Church at the Second Vatican Council. The council spoke of the future incorporation of Israel within the church, but made no reference to any role or purpose for Israel in God’s plan. . .

The common thread running through these non-dispensational views is the emphasis on the unity of the people of God. . . The concept of a special future role among the nations is somehow canceled out by the non-dispensationalists’ regard for overriding unity.” (Saucy, 21-24)

- Meanwhile, traditional dispensationalism asserted a twofold purpose for God’s working in history, according to Saucy.
  - “Traditional dispensationalism proposed a twofold purpose for God’s program in history—one program related to the earth and worked out through Israel, the other related to heaven and worked out through the church. Chafer called this distinction the defining feature of dispensationalism: “The dispensationalist believes that throughout the ages God is pursuing two distinct purposes: one related to the earth with the earthly people and earthly objectives involved which is Judaism; while the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved, which is Christianity.”

. . . Perhaps the key distinction of traditional dispensationalism, therefore, is its emphasis on the distinction or discontinuities in the historical program of God. While affirming “an essential unity to divine dealing in human history,” Walvoord explains that dispensationalism “distinguishes major stewardships or purposes of God, particularly as revealed in three important dispensations of law, grace, and kingdom.

The most crucial distinction in traditional dispensationalism is between Israel and the church. . . This separation is so sharp that the church is precluded from any present relationship to the messianic kingdom promises.

It is common for dispensationalists to refer to the “church age,” the period between Pentecost and the rapture, as a parenthesis of time interrupting the messianic kingdom

program. . . Assigning this place to the church led to the conclusion that it is not related to the messianic kingdom promises and the covenants on which this kingdom program rests. Although usually specifying the Davidic kingdom promises in particular, the fundamental teaching of traditional dispensationalism is that no part of the Old Testament kingdom predictions are being fulfilled in any way during this age.” (Saucy, 24-26)

- In the final section of Chapter One titled, “A Mediating Position,” Saucy presents what he believes to be the middle ground between dispensational and non-dispensational theology. As one might expect, much of the mediating view focuses on removing the discontinuities between the two theological systems in terms of presenting a unified purpose for history.
  - “In our opinion there is a mediating position between non-dispensational and traditional dispensationalism that provides a better understanding of Scripture. This view seeks to retain a natural understanding of the prophetic Scriptures that appear to assign a significant role to the nation of Israel in the future, in accordance with a dispensational system. But it also sees the program of God as unified within history, in agreement with non-dispensationalists, and it denies a radical discontinuity between the present church age and the messianic kingdom promises.” (Saucy, 27)

#### **Works Cited**

- Blaising, Craig A., and Darrell L. Bock. *Progressive Dispensationalism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993.
- Saucy, Robert L. *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational & Non-Dispensational Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993.