

Sunday, April 6, 2014—Grace Life School of Theology—*Grace History Project*—Lesson 134
The 1990s: The Development of Progressive Dispensationalism, Part 2

Progressive Dispensationalism: The Mediating View

- Please note that this section is continued over from Lesson 133.
- 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)
- Saucy views “the kingdom” as the main theme of Biblical history. Therefore, he argues understanding that the nature of the kingdom of God is imperative in identifying the purpose of history.
 - “As the theme of Biblical history, the kingdom is that program through which God effects his lordship on the earth in a comprehensive salvation within history. . .

According to Biblical revelation, the focal point of the conflict between the powers of evil and the kingdom of God is the earth. . . The earth appears in Scripture as a rebelling province in the universal kingdom of God. It is God’s purpose to bring an end to this rebellion and its sinful effects, not only in human history, but in all creation. Thus, God’s kingdom, which today may be said to be over the earth, will one day be established on the earth. . .

God’s kingly rule is brought to the earth through the mediation of the kingdom of the Messiah. According to Biblical prophecy, the coming of the kingdom involves the redemption of creation from all the effects of sin through the personal salvation of individuals, the socio-political salvation of the nations, and finally the salvation of the earth and heavens through re-creation. This pervasive mediatorial kingdom program, ultimately fulfilled through the reign of Christ, is the theme of Scripture and the unifying principle of all aspects of God’s work in history.” (Saucy, 27-28)

- After arguing for a single unified plan of God, Saucy teaches that the church is not a historical parenthesis unrelated to the history that preceded it but rather an integrated phase in the establishment of the prophetic kingdom.
 - “The historical plan of God, therefore, is one unified plan. Contrary to traditional dispensationalism, it does not entail separate programs for the church and Israel that are somehow ultimately unified only in the display of God’s glory or in eternity. The present age is not a historical parenthesis unrelated to the history that precedes and follows it; rather, it is an integrated phase in the development of the mediatorial kingdom. It is the beginning of the fulfillment of the eschatological promises. Thus the church today has its place and function in the same mediatorial messianic kingdom promise that Israel was called to serve.” (28)
- In summation, Saucy sees the Biblical history set forth in Scripture as teaching “unity with distinctives.”
 - “In our understanding of Biblical history then, Scripture teaches a “unity with distinctives,” fusing together what might be termed the primary emphasis of both dispensational and non-dispensational theology. Although traditional dispensationalism, as we see it, has tended to draw distinctives too sharply, it must be credited with calling attention to the particularities of Biblical history that were ignored and virtually eliminated in other theological systems. By contrast, non-dispensational scholars have encouraged us to focus on the truth of the unity of God’s historical work.” (Saucy, 29)
- Blaising and Bock, authors of *Progressive Dispensationalism*, agree with Saucy on the main function of Progressive Dispensationalism (PD). PD is designed to create unity between Dispensational and Covenant theology by stressing a “holistic and unified view of eternal salvation.” In their introduction to PD in Chapter One of their book, Blaising and Bock write:
 - “Progressive dispensationalists agree with revised (and classical) dispensationalists that God’s work with Israel and Gentile nations in the past dispensation looks forward to the redemption of humanity in its political and cultural aspects. Consequently, there is a place for Israel and for other nations in the eternal plan of God.

On the other hand, progressive dispensationalists believe that the church is a vital part of this very same plan of redemption. The appearance of the church does not signal a secondary redemptive plan, either to be fulfilled in heaven apart from the new earth, or in an elite class of Jews and Gentiles who are forever distinguished from the rest of redeemed humanity. Instead, the church today is a revelation of spiritual blessings which all the redeemed will share, in spite of their ethnic and national differences.

Consequently, progressive dispensationalism advocates a holistic and unified view of eternal salvation. God will save humankind in its ethnic and national plurality. But, He will bless it with the same salvation given to all without distinction; the same, not only in

justification and regeneration, but also in sanctification by the indwelling Holy Spirit. These blessings will come to all without distinction through Jesus Christ, the King of Israel and of all the nations of redeemed humanity.” (Blaising and Bock, 47-48)

The Question of Biblical Theology

- During Lesson 133 a question was raised regarding the role of Biblical Theology (BT) in the development of PD. The question was prompted because of the following quotation I shared from Saucy in Lesson 133:
 - 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)
- Being present with us for last week’s lesson, Dr. DeWitt fielded some questions regarding BT and suggested that interested parties read his article title “Biblical Theology, Systematic Theology and the Dispensation of Promise: Correlating a Biblical Dispensation and a Theological Method” in the Vol. 1, No. 1 of the *Grace Journal of Theology*. Since the development of PD seems to have been reliant on the methodology of BT, prudence dictates that we spend some time looking at BT in order to gain a better understanding of the origins of PD.
- Part 1 of Paul Enns’ *The Moody Handbook of Theology* is devoted to explaining BT. Last week during the Q & A portion of the lessons, Dr. DeWitt spoke of BT as a method of studying theology. In Chapter One titled “Introduction to Biblical Theology” Paul Enns also makes a distinction between BT as a “*method* of theological study” and *the movement* that is antagonistic to the evangelical faith. (19) Regarding the movement Enns writes:
 - “First of all, then, the expression is used to describe the Biblical theology *movement*. This was an outgrowth of liberalism and neo-orthodoxy. It began with the publication of Walther Eichort’s first volume of Old Testament theology in 1933 and ended with the publication of von Rad’s second volume of Old Testament in 1960. . .

The movement initially was a reaction to liberalism and sought a return to an exegetical study of the Scriptures, particularly emphasizing a study of Biblical words. Kittel’s monumental ten volume *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* is an outgrowth of that. As a movement, however, it never separated itself from its liberal underpinnings; it retained the historical-critical methodology. For example, in studying the gospels, adherents of the Biblical theology movement applied the historical-critical methodology

in attempting to discover which of the words attributed to Christ were actually spoken by Him.

While the movement recognized the weak message of liberalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it retained the liberal presuppositions concerning the Bible. Adherents held to the neo-orthodox view of revelation, taught evolution as a theory of origins, and emphasized the human aspect of the Bible rather than the divine. As a result, the movement was self-defeating. It was impossible to do a serious, exegetical study of the Scriptures while at the same time denying the authority of the Scriptures.” (Enns, 19-20)

- According to Paul Enns, the second way in which BT forms the “*methodology* that takes its material in a historically oriented manner from the Old and New Testaments and arrives at a theology.” (20) This is what DeWitt was trying to explain last week when he spoke of BT as a *methodology* used to arrive at a theological system, i.e., Dispensational Theology or Covenant Theology. Enns goes on to state the following regarding BT:

- “It is exegetical in nature, drawing its material from the Bible as opposed to a philosophical understanding of theology (i.e., Systematic Theology); it stresses the historical circumstances in which doctrines were propounded; it examines the theology within a given period of history (as Noahic or Abrahamic eras) or of an individual writer (as Pauline or Johannine writings).

Biblical theology in the above-defined sense may be called “that brand of theological science which deals systematically with the historically conditioned progress of the self-revelation of God as deposited in the Bible.” (Enns, 20)

- Enns offers the following explanation for how BT and Systematic Theology (ST) differ from one another.
 - “BT investigates the periods of history in which God has revealed Himself or the doctrinal emphases of the different Biblical writers are set forth in systematic fashion. BT, while presented in a systematized form, is distinct from ST that assimilates truth from the entire Bible and from outside the Scriptures in systematizing Biblical doctrine.” (Enns, 20)
 - “In contrast to ST, which draws its information about God from any and every source, Biblical theology has a narrower focus, drawing its information from the Bible (and from historical information that expands and clarifies the historical events of the Bible). BT thus is exegetical in nature, examining the doctrines in various periods of history or examining the words and statements of a particular writer. This enables the student to determine the self-disclosure of God at a given period of history.” (Enns, 21)

- BT pays attention to the historical circumstances in which Biblical doctrines were given, according to Enns. However, it also takes into account the long held evangelical concept of progressive revelation and seeks to trace the progress of revelation across the whole of the Biblical record. (Enns, 20)
- Enns maintains that BT is the result of exegesis, which lies at the foundation of BT.
 - “Exegesis calls for an analysis of the Biblical text according to the literal-grammatical-historical methodology. 1) The passage under consideration should be studied according to the normal meaning of language. How is the word or statement normally understood? 2) The passage should be studied according to the rules of grammar; exegesis demands an examination of nouns, verbs, prepositions, etc., for a proper understanding of the passage. 3) The passage should be studied in its historical context. What were the political, social, and particular and cultural circumstances surrounding it? BT does not end with exegesis, but it must begin there. The theologian must be hermeneutically exacting in analyzing the text to properly understand what Matthew, Paul, or John wrote.” (Enns, 21)
- The following “Sequence of Biblical Theology” is presented by Enns on page 22: Exegesis→BT→ST. He goes on to summarize the relationship between BT and ST as follows:
 - “Both are rooted in the analysis of Scripture, although systematic theology also seeks truth from sources outside the Bible. In noting the relationship of these two theologies, numerous distinctions can be observed. 1) BT is preliminary to ST; exegesis leads to BT which in turn leads to ST. 2) BT seeks to determine what the Biblical writers said concerning a theological issue, where ST also explains why something is true, adding a philosophical viewpoint. 3) While BT provides the viewpoint of the Biblical writer, ST gives a doctrinal discussion from a contemporary viewpoint. 4) BT analyzes the material of a particular writer or period in history, whereas ST investigates all materials, both Biblical and extra-Biblical, that relate to a particular doctrinal matter.” (Enns, 22-23)

Contrasts Between BT and ST

Taken from Page 23 of *The Moody Handbook of Theology* by Paul Enns

BT	ST
Restricts its study to <i>Scripture</i> .	Seeks truth from <i>Scriptures</i> and from <i>any source</i> outside the Bible.
Examines the <i>parts</i> of Scripture.	Examines the <i>whole</i> of Scripture.
Compiles information on a doctrine from a <i>specific writer</i> (e.g., John or Paul) or a <i>particular era</i> (e.g., Abrahamic, Mosaic, or prophetic).	Compiles information on a doctrine by correlating <i>all the Scriptures</i> .
Seeks to understand <i>why</i> or <i>how</i> a doctrine is developed.	Seeks to understand <i>what</i> was ultimately written.
Seeks to understand the <i>process</i> as well as the result—the <i>product</i> .	Seeks to understand the result—the <i>product</i> .
Views the <i>progress</i> of revelation in different eras (as in Edenic, Noahic).	Views the <i>culmination</i> of God’s revelation.

- Enns concludes his “Introduction to Biblical Theology” (Chapter 1) by offering the following three reasons why BT is important.
 - *Shows Historical Development of Doctrine*—“BT is important in that it prevents the study of doctrine apart from its historical context. In the study of ST it is entirely possible to ignore the historical context of doctrinal truth; BT serves to avert that problem by paying attention to the historical milieu in which the doctrine was given.” (Enns, 24)
 - *Shows the Emphasis of the Writer*—“BT reveals the doctrinal teaching of a particular writer or during an entire period. In that sense, BT systematizes the Scriptures pertinent to a writer or period and determines the major teaching or doctrinal focus of the writer or period of time.” (Enns, 24)
 - *Shows the Human Element in Inspiration*—“While it is true that the Bible is verbally inspired and inerrant, it is also true that the writers of Scripture each wrote according to their distinctive style. BT emphasizes the human factor in the writing of Scriptures (but not to the exclusion of inspiration). Thus BT is intent on discovering what John or Paul taught or what was emphasized during a period of Old Testament History. BT ‘points up the individual backgrounds, interest, and style of the authors’. BT emphasizes the part that the writers had in the composition of the Word of God, while, of course, building on the divine superintendence of the writings.” (Enns, 24)

Conclusion

- In short, the formulation and articulation of Progressive Dispensationalism came about largely due to application of the *methodology* of Biblical Theology by Evangelical academic theologians during the late 1970s and 1980s. As recently as March 2014, Dr. Dale DeWitt, retired professor from Grace Bible College, has argued in the *Journal of Grace Theology* that BT is far more friendly to dispensational theology than ST. When commenting on Genesis 1 through Exodus 1, the time frame that DeWitt identifies as the Dispensation of Promise, he states the following regarding BT and ST:
 - “Two of BT’s several methods yielded something of the portions repeated themes, the focus of two of its local pericopae, and, finally some aspects of its theology. In contrast, ST is not a method for analyzing the flow of Biblical thought. Only Biblical theology since J.P. Gabler offers a grid of analytical concept for discerning the meaning of large blocks of Biblical text and their smaller supporting pericopae.” (DeWitt, 19)
- PD is an attempt to reconcile (mediating view) the differences between Dispensational and non-Dispensational (Covenant) Theology. After a fifteen year period of discussion and refinement, PD was introduced at the 1991 meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society. As a movement among academic Evangelical theologians the tenants of PD are best represented in the following three works which all date from either 1992 or 1993.

- 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
- Next week we will begin looking at the chief differences between classical, revised, and progressive dispensationalism.

Works Cited

Blaising, Craig A., and Darrell L. Bock. *Progressive Dispensationalism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993.

DeWitt, Dale S. "Biblical Theology, Systematic Theology and the Dispensation of Promise: Correlating a Biblical Dispensation and a Theological Method" in *Journal of Grace Theology*. Vol. 1 No. 1-Spring 2014.

Enns, Paul. *The Moody Handbook of Theology*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1989.

Saucy, Robert L. *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational & Non-Dispensational Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993.