

Sunday, April 13, 2014—Grace Life School of Theology—*Grace History Project*—Lesson 135
 The 1990s: The Development of Progressive Dispensationalism, The Extent and Varieties of
 Dispensationalism—Classical Dispensationalism

Introduction

- In Lessons 133 and 134 we began our consideration of Progressive Dispensationalism (PD). PD was a development among academic theologians during the late 1970s and 1980s. The term PD was first advanced at the 1991 meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society. Shortly thereafter, three books were published outlining the teaching and goals of PD.
- As we have seen, the chief goal of PD is to offer a mediating position between Dispensational and Covenant Theology. In an attempt to understand more regarding how PD is considered a mediating view between Dispensational and Covenant Theology it is necessary to compare and contrast three distinctive types of Dispensational Theology: Classical, Revised, and Progressive.
- In order to do this we will rely primarily on *Progressive Dispensationalism* by Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock. Chapter 1 of the book titled “The Extent and Varieties of Dispensationalism” does an excellent job of outlining the major differences between these major variations of dispensationalism.

Classical Dispensational

Central Dualism

- According to Blaising and Bock, the most important feature of classical dispensationalism (CD) is its dualistic idea of redemption.
 - “Perhaps the most important feature of classical dispensationalism is its dualistic idea of redemption. In order to understand the Bible, one needed to recognize that God was pursuing two different purposes, one related to the heaven and one related to the earth. These two purposes affected God’s dealings with humanity. In fact, they resulted in an anthropological dualism: a heavenly humanity and an earthly humanity. . .

In summary, the central dualism of classical dispensationalism asserts that God is pursuing two purposes in redemption, one relating to heaven and a heavenly people and one relating to the earth concerning an earthly people. Both purposes will be accomplished and confirmed forever.” (Blaising and Bock, 23-24)

The Dispensations

- CD saw the different dispensations as periods under which human beings were tested. In other words, “God arranged the relationship of humankind to Himself to test their obedience to Him,” according to Blaising and Bock.

- “In the earlier dispensations, God gave promises regarding earthly life, but humans repeatedly sinned and failed to obtain the promises in any lasting sense. The present dispensation of the church is the first dispensation which clearly presents God’s heavenly purpose. When Christ is revealed at the end of this dispensation, He will confirm the two purposes, first in a millennium, which tests humanity one last time before judgment, and then in eternity.

One of the differences between the church in this dispensation and the people of God in past dispensations is that the church is supposed to know that it is a heavenly people destined for an eternal inheritance in heaven. People of past dispensations sought to obtain the earthly promises. They died however, without obtaining them. They either did not know of a heavenly destiny or were dimly aware of it. Although they failed to attain the earthly promises, God in his grace will include those who trusted in Him (that is, the elect) in the heavenly salvation.

But the church is supposed to know that she has a heavenly future and is called to a heavenly way of life. The failure of this dispensation comes when the church thinks that it has an earthly purpose, when it begins to think of itself as an earthly people and become preoccupied with earthly things. Such preoccupation has brought about what is called “Christendom”—that political cultural phenomena of Western Christian nations. Classical dispensationalism viewed Christendom as a perversion of sinful humanity which tries to substitute itself for the real church of God. Christendom, the human failure of this dispensation, will be judged at the return of Christ.” (Blaising and Bock, 25-26)

The Nature of the Church

- Blaising and Bock report that “the heavenly nature of the church’s salvation was interpreted by classical dispensationalists in an individualistic manner. Political and social issues were earthly matters which did not concern the church.” (26)
 - “The church was a spiritual unity founded in Christ. The unity manifested itself not only in the oneness of Christ but in the oneness of personal salvation—the individual nature of salvation. Issues in the church were individual, private, spiritual matters, not social, political earthly matters. . .

The heavenly, individualistic, and spiritual nature of the church could not be more distinct from the earthly, social, and political nature of Israel and the Gentile nations. The difference helped underscore the well-known classical dispensational belief that the church is a parenthesis in the history of redemption, the history of the earthly redemption that is. The church is not related to that earthly purpose and so is like a parenthesis inserted into history.” (Blaising and Bock, 26-27)

Biblical Interpretation

- CD sought to explain the Bible in accordance with its central dualism or difference between the earthly and heavenly purpose of God. Blaising and Bock point out that CD taught that the Old Testament, if interpreted literally, would reveal God's earthly purpose and people. Whereas the spiritual people of God were found literally in the New Testament.
- CD also had much to say about the literal interpretation of the Bible and spoke of the grammatical and historical interpretation of Scripture. By that they recognized the grammatical sense and structure of Scripture. Historical interpretation meant recognizing the historical references present in the text (i.e., rulers, geographical areas, chronology, etc.) or the text's dispensational setting. (27-28)

The Biblical Covenants

- According to Blaising and Bock, CD saw God's covenant with Abraham as the foundational covenant of Scripture.
 - "CD believed that this promise revealed God's earthly purpose for earthly peoples. It first of all promised physical descendants to Abraham that they would become a great nation in a territory which God specified. They would be blessed above all peoples and would mediate God's blessing and curse the Gentile peoples on earth. . .

The Mosaic, Palestinian, and Davidic covenants. They dealt with God's earthly purpose, not with the heavenly/spiritual purpose.

The new covenant (a covenant prophesied in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel) was interpreted primarily or solely as an earthly covenant, even though it promised that God would put his Spirit in His people. Darby believed that when it appeared in the Bible, the new covenant always referred to Israel and consequently had nothing to do with God's heavenly people. Chafer followed Darby as closely as possible, but had to recognize that the New Testament did speak of a "new covenant" which was in force for the church in this dispensation. He argued that this was a completely different "new covenant" than that which will be made with Israel. (In the same manner, he argued that the spiritual blessings which would be given to Israel under the new covenant of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, would be distinctly different from those given to the church today.) . . . So, even though there was general agreement about the covenants in classical dispensationalism, there were always differences in how the details worked together to support their overall position." (Blaising and Bock, 28-29)

The Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Heaven

- Blaising and Bock point out that, historically, CD made a distinction between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven. This distinction is largely due to the influence of Scofield.

Scotfield maintained that the term 'kingdom of God' found in all four gospels referred to the moral rule of God in the hearts of those who trust in him. Whereas, the kingdom of heaven, found only in Matthew was viewed as the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant. Moreover, Scotfield held that the kingdom of heaven had three forms: "The kingdom of heaven was present, or "at hand" in Jesus' preaching. He offered the kingdom to Israel. But Israel rejected it, so it was postponed to a future time." (Blaising and Bock, 30)

- "The kingdom of heaven is now present in mystery form. That mystery is Christendom, the earthly, political, liturgical reality which names Christ as its king. Two things should be noted here: for Scotfield, the mystery form of the kingdom is not the church, it is Christendom. Also when Scotfield speaks of the mystery form of the kingdom, he means a mystery form of the kingdom, that is of the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of the Davidic covenant. . . The kingdom of heaven will be fulfilled in the Millennium. . . Since God will rule morally in every heart in the eternal kingdom (the unsaved having been consigned to hell), the kingdom of heaven is said to merge with the kingdom of God." (Blaising and Bock, 30-31)

Works Cited

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