

Sunday, May 4, 2014—Grace Life School of Theology—*Grace History Project*—Lesson 137 The 1990s: The Development of Progressive Dispensationalism, The Extent and Varieties of Dispensationalism—Progressive Dispensationalism

### **Progressive Dispensationalism**

#### *Holistic Redemption in Progressive Revelation*

- Blaising and Bock summarize the implications of the collapse of Classical Dispensationalism (CD) as follows:
  - “CD advocated an eternal heavenly/earthly dualism in order to explain the different purposes of redemption. Revised Dispensationalism (RD) rejected this eternal dualism, which forced them to choose between a more heavenly and a more earthly view of eternity. Some chose one, some chose the other. The collapse of the heavenly/earthly dualism brought believing Israel from the Old Testament or Millennial Israel together. Believing gentiles were also brought together in one eternal redemption. However, Jews and Gentiles of the church dispensation were thought to be an entirely separate group of people. . .

Progressive dispensationalists (PD) 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.” (Blaising and Bock, 47)

- PD sees the church as part of a holistic and unified view of eternal salvation, not a single or secondary part of God’s redemptive plan.
  - “On the other hand, PDs believe that the church is a vital part of this very same redemptive plan. 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 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, PD 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)

- Mid-Acts Pauline Dispensationalism (MAD) has long held that the church of this dispensation was foremost in the mind of God before the world began. In other words, the church is not a

secondary redemptive plan but is the main vehicle through which the Godhead would spoil Satan's policy and evil and bring about the accomplishment of the eternal purpose of God.

- I Corinthians 2:7-8
- Ephesians 3:1-8
- Furthermore, MAD maintains that it is precisely the reconciling of Jews and Gentiles equally in one body by the cross, apart from national Israel, that is the key feature of the body of Christ. This arrangement is unsearchable in the Old Testament and is therefore the subject of the mystery; a heretofore unrevealed part of the Godhead's plans since before the world began. In short, PD may be viewed as answering CD and RD but it does not even begin to address the position set forth by MAD.

### *The Dispensations*

- PD sets forth the following purpose for the various dispensations, according to Blaising and Bock.
  - "PDists understand the dispensations not simply as different arrangements between God and humankind, but as successive arrangements in the progressive revelation and accomplishment of redemption. The plan of redemption has different aspects to it. One dispensation may emphasize one aspect more than another, for example the emphasis on divinely directed political affairs in the past dispensation and the emphasis on multiethnic spiritual identity in Christ in the present dispensation. But all these dispensations point to a future culmination in which God will both politically administer Israel and Gentile nations and indwell all of them equally (without ethnic distinctions) by the Holy Spirit. Consequently, the dispensations progress by revealing different aspects of the final unified redemption." (Blaising and Bock, 48)
- As the name suggests, not only do the dispensations progress across time but they also reveal a qualitative progression in the manifestation of grace, according to PD.
  - "The dispensations also reveal a qualitative progression in the manifestation of grace. . .Consequently, the dispensations are not simply different historical expressions of the same experience of redemption (as in some forms of Covenantalism), although they do lead to, and culminate in, one redemption plan.

In PD, the political-social and spiritual purposes of God complement one another. The spiritual does not replace the political nor do the two run independent of each other. They are related aspects in the holistic plan 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 related them together in a truly progressive fashion. It is in this form, this progressive

relationship of the dispensations to one another, that the name PD is taken.” (Blaising and Bock, 48-49)

*The Nature of the Church*

- PD views the church as a new manifestation of Grace that is in line with the promises of the Old Testament.
  - “Like earlier dispensationalists, PDists view the church as a *new manifestation* of grace, a new dispensation in the history of redemption. Earlier dispensationalists viewed the church as a completely different kind of redemption from that which had been revealed before or would be revealed in the future. . . PDists, however, while seeing the church as a new manifestation of grace, believe that this grace is precisely in keeping with the promises of the Old Testament, particularly the promises of the new covenant in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. The fact that these blessings have been inaugurated in the church distinguishes the church from the Jews and Gentiles of the past dispensation. But, only some of those blessings have been inaugurated. Consequently, the church should be distinguished from the next dispensation in which all of the blessings will not just be inaugurated, but completely fulfilled (which fulfillment will be granted to the saints of all dispensations through the resurrection of the dead). (Blaising and Bock, 49)
  
- Blaising and Bock define the church as follows:
  - “The church is precisely redeemed humanity itself (both Jews and Gentiles) as it exists in this dispensation prior to the coming of Christ. When Paul speaks of the church as “one new man” in Christ (Eph. 2:15), he means precisely redeemed humanity as opposed to the unsaved. Jews and gentiles outside of Christ are “the world,” the “old man” . . . the blessings of the Spirit which constitute the church as the new dispensation are given equally without ethnic, gender, or class distinction.

The prophetic promises envision Christ ruling forever over the nations of the redeemed. The church is not another “people-group” in that picture. Those Jews and Gentiles who compose the church prior to Christ’s coming join the redeemed Jews and Gentiles of earlier dispensations to share equally in resurrection glory. . .” (Blaising and Bock, 50)
  
- Blaising and Bock use Jewish Christians in this dispensation to illustrate the PD view of the church.
  - “We can illustrate this PD view of the church in the case of Jewish Christians. A Jew who becomes a Christian today does not lose his or her relationship to Israel’s future promises. Jewish Christians will join the Old Testament remnant of faith in the inheritance of Israel. Gentile Christians will be joined by saved Gentiles of earlier dispensations. All together, Jews and Gentiles, will share the same blessings of the Spirit, as testified by the relationship of Jew and Gentile in the church of this dispensation. The result will be that all peoples will be reconciled in peace, their ethnic

and national differences being no cause for hostility. Earlier forms of dispensationalism, for all their emphasis on the future for Israel, excluded Jewish Christians from that future, postulating the church as a different people-group from Israel and Gentiles.” (Blaising and Bock, 50)

- MAD rejects these notions and maintains a distinction between Israel, the Gentiles, and the Church. There is no longer Jew or Gentile today in this dispensation because Israel fell from her favored “time past” standing and was rendered in unbelief along with the Gentiles. This is why Paul’s message was so hard for the Jews of the first century to accept because Paul was teaching that in order for Jews to have a relationship with God during the dispensation of grace they had to come to God in the same manner as the Gentiles. PD does not acknowledge these facts. This is what happens when you drop the two-fold purpose from your dispensational paradigm. God has two agencies, Israel and the body of Christ; that He is using to accomplish his eternal purpose of centering all things in heaven and earth under the authority of Jesus Christ. PD does not recognize the church as a unique Pauline revelation and therefore seeks to run all these things together in the “ages to come.”

### *Biblical Interpretation*

- “These developments in Biblical interpretation (i.e., Biblical Theology) have been a major factor in the rise of PD. PDists are themselves RDists who, through more developed historical-literary interpretation, have come to what they believe is a more accurate understanding of certain Biblical issues. It should be noted that PD is not an abandonment of “literal” interpretation for “spiritual” interpretation. PD is a development of “literal” interpretation into a more consistent historical-literary interpretation.” (Blaising and Bock, 52)

### *The Biblical Covenants*

- PDists believe that the Abrahamic, Davidic, and new covenants are being fulfilled today in a spiritual sense, according to Blaising and Bock.
  - “PD offers a more unified view of the Biblical covenants than earlier dispensationalism. The Abrahamic covenant is seen as the foundation for all other covenants. The blessing of later covenants explicate the promise given to Abraham: “I will bless you.” The new covenant is the form in which the Abrahamic covenant has been inaugurated in this dispensation and will be fulfilled in full in the future. The Davidic covenant is both an aspect of Abrahamic blessing and the means by which the blessings are now inaugurated and will be bestowed in full.

PDists do not believe that the Abrahamic, Davidic, and new covenants are being fulfilled today in “a spiritual sense.” The spiritual blessings being given today are blessings actually predicted by the new covenant. These blessings are given in a partial and inaugurated form, which looks forward to complete fulfillment at the return of Christ.

The fact that new covenant blessings are being given to Gentiles as well as Jews today is consistent with the Abrahamic promise to bless not only the Jews but also the Gentiles. The humanity-wide scope of Abrahamic blessing directs the way the new covenant is being fulfilled today.

The present inauguration and future fullness of the new covenant fulfillment reveals another aspect in which the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants are being fulfilled today. All of these covenants will be fulfilled in a future dispensation consistent with the historical-grammatical sense of their promises. However, the progressive nature of the dispensations and the inter-connection between the covenants is such that present blessings are partial, not “allegorical,” fulfillment of those promises. They look forward to complete fulfillment at the return of Christ.” (Blaising and Bock, 53)

### *The Kingdom of God*

- PD views the kingdom of God in both unified and progressive terms.
  - “Instead of dividing up the different features of redemption into self-contained “kingdoms,” PDists see one promised eschatological kingdom which has both spiritual and political dimensions. . . The New Testament clarifies how the kingdom predicted by the Old Testament prophets is being revealed today, how it will in fact appear in a millennial form, and how these contribute to that everlasting kingdom in which all prophecies will be fulfilled.

PDists put primary emphasis on the eternal kingdom for understanding all previous forms of the kingdom including the Millennium. They make no substantive distinction between the terms kingdom of heaven and kingdom of God. And they see Christ’s present relationship to the church today as a form of the eschatological kingdom which affirms and guarantees the future revelation of the kingdom in all its fullness.” (Blaising and Bock, 54)

### *Conclusion*

- The major distinctive feature of PD according to Blaising and Bock, when compared with CD or RD, is its holistic and unified view of redemption.
  - “. . .Its major distinctive is found in its concept of the progressive accomplishment and revelation of a holistic and unified redemption. That redemption covers personal, communal, social, political, and national aspects of human life. It is revealed in a succession of dispensations which vary in how they stress the aspects of redemption, but all point to a final culmination in which all aspects are redeemed together. . . PD is a phenomena of change and continuity within the dispensational tradition. PDists will differ with each other on various points. . .” (Blaising and Bock, 56)

### Works Cited

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