

Sunday, May 18, 2014—Grace Life School of Theology—*Grace History Project*—Lesson 139
The 1990s: The Current Dispensation According to Progressive Dispensationalism

Introduction

- In Lesson 138 we discussed how Progressive Dispensationalism (PD) renders and accounts for the various dispensations. We observed that PD maintains the following four dispensations: Patriarchal (Adam to Sinai), Mosaic (Sinai to Messiah’s Ascension), Ecclesial (Messiah’s Ascension to Messiah’s Return), and Zionitic (Millennial and Eternal States).
- Next we compared the dispensational scheme of PD with that set forth by Pastor Richard Jordan in Grace School of the Bible (GSB). We saw that Richard taught that there were five dispensations, two in the Time Past (Promise, and Law), one during the But Now (Grace), and two in the Ages to Come (Kingdom and Fullness of Times).
 - Adam to Moses Dispensation of Promise
 - Moses Dispensation of The Law
 - Paul Dispensation of Grace
 - After Rapture Dispensation of the Kingdom
 - After Kingdom Dispensation of the Fullness of Times—Eternity (Jordan, 40)
- In this lesson we want to consider what PD teaches regarding the nature of the current dispensation.

The Current Dispensation According to PD

- Blaising and Bock state the following regarding the nature of the new dispensation spoken of by Paul in his letters.
 - “As Paul discusses this new dispensation in his letters, there are three things that stand out about it: 1) it is structured by certain features of a new covenant which God inaugurated to fulfill and replace the covenant He made with Israel at Sinai; 2) no distinction of race, gender, or class are being drawn in the bestowal of blessings from this new covenant—they are given to all who believe in Jesus Christ; and 3) the new dispensation is being revealed in the community that gathers in the name of Jesus Christ, the church.” (Blaising and Bock, 109)
- After setting forth five principles regarding the dispensations, Blaising and Bock state the following regarding the current dispensation.
 - “The church is the new dispensation which God has organized through the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. It differs in important respects from the dispensation that was in place prior to Christ. And yet it is not wholly different. This dispensation is the fulfillment of the previous one and, as we will see, it looks forward to

a future arrangement in which all the promises and covenants of God will be completely and eternally fulfilled.” (Blaising and Bock, 111)

- In a section titled, “Dispensations and Covenants” Blaising and Bock explain what they believe to be the relationship between the current dispensation and the covenants of Time Past. Regarding Ephesians chapters 2 and 3, they state the following:
 - “As Paul explains in Ephesians 3:4-10, the present dispensation (which he calls the dispensation of the mystery) relates Gentiles with Jews as “fellow-heirs and fellow-members of the body, and fellow-partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel” (Eph. 3:6). The word promise had been previously used in Ephesians 2:12 in a context in which Paul was developing the same thought about the co-relationship of Jews and Gentiles in Christ. In that passage he speaks of the covenants of promise to which Gentiles had been strangers but are strangers no longer (2:12, 19). These covenants belong to Israel as the parallel phrases in 2:11-12 make clear. This means that in Pauline dispensationalism, the past and the present dispensations are to be understood as ways of relating two covenants.” (Blaising and Bock, 123)
- Blaising and Bock view the current Ecclesial dispensation (their terminology) as being “a new arrangement in which blessings promised through the Abrahamic covenant are being bestowed.” (Blaising and Bock, 124)
 - “The connection between covenant and promise had been drawn in Galatians 3:17, where reference is made to the covenant that preceded the Law (Mosaic covenant) in which God granted a promise to Abraham. Paul sees the Gospel of Jesus Christ as rooted in the promise covenanted to the Patriarch (Gal. 3:8, 16). He also sees that covenant as encompassing Gentiles in its prophetic scope (3:8). Gentiles who now believe in Jesus Christ are heirs of that covenant promise (3:28-29).

The new dispensation then is a new arrangement in which blessings promised through the Abrahamic covenant are being bestowed. However, in order for the bestowal to take place in the present manner (being granted equally to Gentiles as well Jews), changes in other covenants had to take place.” (Blaising and Bock, 123-124)

- Next, Blaising and Bock elaborate on how the dispensational change described in Ephesians 2 and 3 came about. According to them it was through the “inaugurated blessings of the new covenant that the dispensational change” came about.
 - “In Ephesians 2:14-15, Paul argues that in order for Gentiles to be brought into an equal place of blessing with Jews, Christ “broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, abolished in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances.” The dividing wall was the portion of the temple which separated Jew and Gentiles. Its presence was a structural feat of the Mosaic covenant. In this passage, it

symbolizes that covenant as a whole, referred to as “the Law of commandments contained in ordinances.”

- In Biblical theology, the end of the Mosaic covenant correlates with the establishment of the new covenant. Paul presented himself as a minister of the new covenant (2 Corinthians 3:6). And it is through newly inaugurated blessings of the new covenant that the dispensational change in Ephesians 2-3 has come about.” (Blaising and Bock, 124)
- At this point we must offer our sternest objection. It was not the inauguration of the new covenant that ushered in a dispensational change, it was the fall of Israel from their favored standing in Time Past. On the basis of the cross work of Christ, God the Father is free to give to the church whatever aspects of the new covenant he so chooses (forgiveness of sins, indwelling Holy Spirit) without placing the body of Christ under a covenant God made with Israel.
- The Biblical Theology supporting the PD teaching regarding the nature of the current dispensation appears to be both suspect and selective in how it expounds upon the relevant passages.
 - “Paul writes that those who have believed the Gospel message have been “sealed in Christ with the Holy Spirit of promise” (Ephesians 1:13). The word promise here is picked up again in 2:12 as “covenants of promise.” The plural covenants indicates that more than one covenant is in view. We have already seen that the Abrahamic covenant is for Paul a covenant of promise. When we recall that the indwelling Holy Spirit was a specific promise of the new covenant (Isaiah 59:21; Ezekial 36:27), it would seem that the linkage of 1:13 and 2:12 through the word promise indicates that the new covenant is rightfully included among the covenants to which Gentiles have been brought near. Even more than that, though, the new covenant blessing inaugurated with Christ’s ascension is the blessing which characterizes the arrangement of the new dispensation. Ephesians 2:22 describes Jew and Gentile being built together in Christ as “a dwelling of God in the Spirit.” The peace by which the new dispensation is characterized (Ephesians 2:15) is the fruit of the indwelling Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22)—the fulfillment of the new covenant promise.” (Blaising and Bock, 125)
- Blaising and Bock also see the Davidic covenant as also being present in the book of Ephesians. For example, they view Paul’s statement in Ephesians 2:14-22 pertaining to the church growing into a holy temple in the Lord as “a Davidic covenant activity.” (Blaising and Bock, 125) In the end, PD sees the formation of the current dispensation as a byproduct of covenantal change, not change in the national standing of the nation of Israel.
 - “As we have seen, transition from the past dispensation to the present involves covenantal change. The past dispensation was characterized by the Mosaic covenant; the present dispensation is characterized by certain blessings of the new covenant which appears in an inaugurated form. Both dispensations are ways of relating to the promises

of the Patriarchal and Davidic covenants (given in a yet earlier dispensation). . . from this very fact of covenantal continuity and change, the progressive and advancing nature of dispensational transition can be seen.” (Blaising and Bock, 125)

- In the section titled “Dispensation and the Kingdom of God” Blaising and Bock argue that during the present dispensation the eschatological kingdom of God has been established in inaugural form. Moreover, they argue that this new dispensation began with the ascension of Christ in Acts 1.
 - “In Colossians 1:26, Paul speaks of the mystery of God which “has now been manifested to His saints.” It is evident from the context of Colossians 1 that this is the dispensation Paul speaks of in Ephesians 3. It is noteworthy that this arrangement is also referred to in Colossians 1:13 as “the kingdom of His beloved Son.” The words “beloved” and “Son” are used of Jesus in Ephesians, as we have seen, recalling the Father’s designations at His baptism and transfiguration and looking back to the promises of the Davidic covenant. (In fact, the designation “Thou art my beloved Son” in Luke’s account of the baptism of Jesus (Luke 3:22) is unmistakably a reference to the Davidic covenant promise quoted in Luke 1:32-33: “He. . . shall be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give unto Him the throne of His father David.) This of course, fits with what we have already said about the Davidic covenant fulfillment in Ephesians 1 and 2 (cf. Ps. 110:1). Jesus is seated at the right hand of God, “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion,” with “all things in subjection under His feet.”

This notion of the kingdom of God is tied directly to the person and work of Jesus, especially His ascension into heaven. As we have seen, this is exactly the point of dispensational change in the theology of Ephesians. . . The change from the past to the present dispensation is coordinated with an appearance of the eschatological kingdom of God. Certain features predicted of the eschatological kingdom are present in the new dispensation, including a ruling Messiah and the phenomena of peace among and between his Jewish and Gentile subjects (Eph. 2:15, 17).

In biblical theology, the eschatological kingdom is the arrangement in which all covenantal promises are fulfilled. The present dispensation, however, is only an inauguration, a down payment (Eph. 1:13) on those promised blessings. Consequently, just as covenant blessings are yet to be fulfilled in their fullness (v. 14), so likewise the kingdom of God’s Son has yet to receive its full revelation.” (Blaising and Bock, 126)

- 1992 saw the publication of *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition* of which Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock were the editors. This work was actually the first major book length publication to set forth some of the key ideas of PD. *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* is a collection of essays written by various authors on subjects related to PD. For our purposes in this lesson, in terms of understanding the nature of the current dispensation according to PD, I wish to comment briefly on a few of the essays contained in the books.

- Chapter 3 contains an essay by Carl B. Hock, Jr. titled “The New Man of Ephesians 2.” In this essay Hock makes many assertions regarding Paul’s teaching in Ephesians 2. Given the limitations of time and space we will limit our comments to his conclusions. Hock maintains that before the cross and the formation of the church the privileges mentioned in Ephesians 2:11-12 were restricted to Israel. Furthermore, Hock maintains that Gentiles in Christ now share with a remnant of Israel that still exists in the new man, i.e., the church according to Romans 11:5. (Hock, 125)
 - “Christ and this remnant carry redemptive history forward and form the bridge between the old and new covenants. The remnant of Israel together with Gentiles forms the ecclesiological one new man. This new man is a new creation in Christ because the death of Christ was absolutely necessary before the transfer from “in Adam” to “in Christ” could be made, before the cancellation of the enmity maintained by the Mosaic law could be accomplished, and before the Holy Spirit became the new standard for the ethical new man who walks “according to the Spirit” and “not according to the flesh.” The ecclesiological, anthropological, and ethical structures of the new man are so intertwined for Paul that no separation of the three is possible. The three are interrelated and imply one another.
- Hock sees the main argument made by Paul in Ephesians 2:11-22 is that during the current dispensation, the Gentiles were brought near to God and to Israel through the cross of Christ. (Hock, 126) Please note that he does not say anything about the fall of Israel from her favored position in Time Past. Hock sums up his exposition on Ephesians 2 by stating:
 - “If one asks whether “the one new man” connotes continuity or discontinuity between Israel and the church or between the Testaments, the answer is that both are found in this text. There is a strong emphasis on newness, and consequently on discontinuity. The new creation, new man, and new temple are discontinuous with Israel. But in terms of redemptive history there is continuity. The church is no accident or substitute for a failed kingdom program. Ephesians makes absolutely clear that God’s plan and purpose have always been centered in Christ. The past alienation of Gentiles was only a phase of redemptive history before “the fullness of time” arrived (Galatians 4:4). The believing remnant of Israel within the church share in promises that have Old Testament roots. Through the covenants, Messiah, and promises of Israel, they experienced promised blessings in which Gentiles also participate.” (Hock, 126)
- Chapter 4 of *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition* contains an essay written by Robert Saucy titled, “The Church as the Mystery of God.” In this chapter Saucy seeks to explain Ephesians 3 and how the church could be a mystery in the plan and purpose of God. In 1993, Saucy released his own book length work on PD titled *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* in which he wrote more extensively on the subject of the church as a mystery in Ephesians 3. For the sake of time and space we will limit our discussion of PD’s view on the mystery to Saucy’s 1993 work.

- Saucy identifies different uses for the word “mystery” in the New Testament.
 - “First, as we have seen, a mystery may be hidden in symbol or language with an inner meaning (Revelations 1:20; Ephesians 5:32). In this instance the revelation of the mystery consists of the unveiling of the meaning of the symbol or language that has already been given.
 - Second, a mystery may be hidden because its truth has never been the subject of objective revelation. That of the instant change of believers at the coming of Christ (I Cor. 15:51) is an example of this type.
 - A third kind of hiddenness is found in relation to Christ as the divine plan of salvation in him. There is no doubt that this use of mystery involves disclosure of details concerning the person and saving work of Christ that are absent from the Old Testament prophecies; yet it is impossible to see these additional truths as constituting all that is meant in the hiddenness and revelation of this mystery.” (Saucy, 148-149)
- After equating Paul’s statement in Romans 1:1-2 and Ephesians 6:19, Saucy uses Romans 16:25-26 to argue the following regarding the PD’s understanding of the mystery.
 - “If the mystery of Christ and the divine plan of salvation has already been the subject of Old Testament prophecy, then in what sense can it be said to have been hidden and only now revealed by the New Testament apostles and prophets? . . . A mystery may be hidden in the sense that its truth has not been realized. The corresponding revelation consists not in making the truth known in an objective propositional sense, but in bringing it to reality or existence. In this instance the truth of the mystery may be the subject of previous prophecy, but it is said to be hidden until, in God’s appointed time, it becomes a manifest event.” (Saucy, 150)
- Cutting to the chase, Saucy states the following regarding the mystery in Ephesians and elsewhere in the Pauline Scriptures.
 - “When we set these Old Testament predictions alongside Paul’s teaching about the union of Jew and Gentile in salvation through Christ, it seems difficult to believe that he intends no reference to these prophecies and that his use of “mystery” means previously unknown truth absolutely. We suggest, rather, that he refers to mystery in two of the senses we looked at earlier. . . Thus the “mystery” of the union of Jew and Gentiles in Christ that constitutes the church must be viewed as both bringing new truth to light and fulfilling Old Testament predictions pertaining to the coming of the Messiah and his ministry. In addition to the fact that the equal sharing by Jew and Gentile in the present spiritual salvation found in Christ is in accord with the Old Testament prophecies, this conclusion is supported by the fact, noted above, that the teaching of the relationship of Jew and Gentiles in Ephesians 3:6 is in reality part of the broad “mystery of Christ” that

is clearly related to the Old Testament prophecy. . . Our understanding of the term “mystery” and of Paul’s teaching about it leads us, therefore, to a mediating position concerning the place of the church in God’s plan and purpose in history. On the one hand, contrary to traditional dispensationalism, the church is involved in the fulfillment of the messianic promises of the Old Testament. Messianic days have dawned, albeit in a way not clearly seen in the Old Testament, but nevertheless in a way that Paul supports in various places by references to the Old Testament kingdom promises. On the other hand, as we have seen, this teaching of Paul related to the church is never said to be the complete fulfillment of these prophecies, nor does it in any way negate a fulfillment of the prophecies that speak of a future role for the nation of Israel among the nations. . . The present outworking of the mystery in the church is, therefore, not the completion of the mystery, which is to bring all things together under Christ. . . In short, the present working of the mystery in Ephesians 3 in the constitution of the church is the initial stage in the realization of the divine plan of salvation in Christ, which is the comprehensive mystery of God.” (Saucy, 163-166)

Conclusion

- It goes without saying that the *Grace History Project* completely rejects Saucy’s articulation of the mystery in Paul’s writings. It is however, important to note what happens when one fails to view the mystery as a distinct Pauline revelation.
- In the end, PD is found to be woefully lacking and in our estimation is grossly in error regarding the nature of the current dispensation. The body of Christ that comprises the dispensation of grace was a mystery that was hid in God until it was revealed to the Apostle Paul. It was the FALL of Israel that brought about the salvation of Paul as well as the revelation of the mystery committed to his trust.

Works Cited

- Blaising, Craig A., and Darrell L. Bock. *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992.
- 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.