

Sunday, June 8, 2014—Grace Life School of Theology—*Grace History Project*—Lesson 140 Progressive Dispensationalism and the Grace Movement

Introduction

- Over the past seven lessons (Lessons 133-139) we have sought to understand the nature of Progressive Dispensationalism (PD) as a new movement among academic theologians that came to fruition through a series of books written during the early 1990s.
- I first heard the term PD as an underclassman at Grace Bible College (GBC) during the late 1990s. I was walking to class after a chapel service when I struck up a conversation with Dr. Dale S. DeWitt. Dr. DeWitt told me that he considered himself a Progressive Dispensationalist and that he thought there were fewer dispensations than the seven traditionally articulated by Scofield. At the time I did not think much more about the matter.
- During my senior year at GBC I took Theology 414, the capstone theology course. Not only was Dr. DeWitt the professor for the class but his book (then in manuscript form) *Dispensational Theology in America During the 20th Century* was the textbook for the class. It was through reading Dr. DeWitt's book and taking his class that I became more acquainted with PD. That being said, I could not have said in the early 00 decade that I fully understood the arguments being made by PDists, only that I did not agree with some of their major suppositions.
- It was not until my recent studies to teach this material as part of the Grace History Project that I came to fully understand the PD position. Through Dr. DeWitt's book and teaching ministry many people have been exposed to the teaching of PD. It would not be unfair to say that Dr. DeWitt's teaching/writing ministry has served as an entrance point for PD into certain segments of the Grace Movement.
- DeWitt shared with me during one of our recent meal conversations that his career goal was to reconcile Grace Theology with the teaching of George Eldon Ladd on the kingdom of God. In my mind this largely took the form of PDism in Grace clothing as it were.
- In fairness to Dr. DeWitt, reading his book again some twelve years later has proved to be enlightening. My impressions of the book are much more favorable now than they were when I originally read it. That being said, there are, however, aspects of DeWitt's writings and theology that I reject.
- The purpose of this lesson is to begin a survey of the dispensational paradigm presented by Dr. DeWitt in his 2002 book *Dispensational Theology in America During the 20th Century*. In this lesson we will limit our comments to Chapter 7, titled "The Dispensations."

The Special *Oikonomia* of Ephesians and Colossians

- DeWitt argues that in Ephesians and Colossians Paul does not use the word *oikonomia* (dispensation) in a general sense of God’s management of the universe but to a specific “plan, arrangement or program—which has occurred in the history of redemption.” (DeWitt, 167) When one views the four major passages in these books where *oikonomia* figures heavily (Eph. 1:10, Eph. 3:2-5, Eph. 3:9-10, Col. 1:25) “a network of repeated, inter-connected themes emerges.” (DeWitt, 167)
- According to DeWitt, acknowledging this network of repeated and inter-connected themes reveals the following points regarding Paul’s use of the word dispensation.
 - “The historical reality represented in the texts is the mission to the Gentiles; the mission is under the leadership of Paul. However, he is not so exclusivist in emphasizing his own part in the mission that he thinks no one else has any direct knowledge of its meaning at all. He mentions a group of apostle/prophets in Ephesians 3:5 who also have direct revelation related to the Gentile mission. Nonetheless, Acts too knows only one head of the Gentile mission—Paul.” (168)
 - “The Ephesians texts use the word “grace” as the name of the plan to make God’s grace available to the Gentiles. . . This use of “grace” includes an explicit contrast with the Mosaic law that Ephesians 2:11-12 suggests and a connection with the life-giving power as in Ephesians 1:1-10.” (169)
 - “The texts (in Ephesians and Colossians) relate God’s “plan” to the revelation of the mystery to Paul. In three of the four passages he repeats the thought that this mystery was not made known to the previous ages of redemptive history, but that it was revealed to Paul in connection with his leadership of the universal Gentile mission. Two particulars are important in this connection: a) The idea of the revelation of mysteries has its roots in Daniel where revealing mysteries is an activity of God through some of His prophetic gifts. Already in Daniel, the mysteries revealed are God’s secret plans for the succession of Gentile empires, their particular histories and characters, their end and the establishment of God’s kingdom in history (Dan. 2:19-30); b) The mystery of Ephesians and Colossians was “hidden from ages and generations”. . . Paul does not mean that the mystery he refers to was simply hid in the Scriptures of the Old Testament in some mysterious or secret way. He does mean that it was kept out of history, i.e., the history of revelation, because it was “hid in God (Ephesians 3:9).” Thus, the church newly formed by this movement is also the subject of a new revelation; it was not known to the Mosaic or prophetic eras.” (169-170)
 - “The mystery is not that the Gentiles are now to be evangelized; nor is the mystery the gospel (DeWitt believes that there is only one New Testament gospel. In short, Peter and Paul were preaching the same gospel message). It is rather that believing Gentiles with believing Jews are formed into an egalitarian church as a “third humanity.” This

movement forms a fellowship of reconciliation with spiritual and social equality. Egalitarian reconciliation is stated in Ephesians 3:6 with the terms “joint-body, fellow-heirs, fellow-sharers.” (170)

- “The formation of the church of reconciliation is a manifestation of Christ’s headship of all things referred to in Ephesians 1:10. This is shown by the fact that Paul returns to the thought of headship in 1:22-23 where he says that Christ as head of the church has already begun to subject all things to Himself. He will continue this work even in the age to come. The church, which functions with Him as head, is the people formed from this subjection.” (171)
- “The *oikonomia* of Ephesians and Colossians, therefore, designates God’s arrangement for the origin and existence of His program of reconciliation and its mission to fill the spiritual and material world with the knowledge of Christ and thereby to advance the “fullness of times.” The “arrangement” or dispensation was not made known in previous stages of redemptive history until it was revealed in connection with the Gentiles mission. The Gentile mission, in turn, occasions the formation of the church as Christ’s body—a fellowship of world-wide reconciliation of men to God and to each other, in an egalitarian sense unforeseen in the Old Testament, i.e., without Israel’s dominion or the universal rule of its law (Isa. 2:1-4)”.
- An evaluation of the above points reveals that DeWitt does not agree with the definition of “the mystery” presented by Robert Suacy in *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*. DeWitt believes that the mystery of the church cannot be found in the Old Testament in any form because it was hid in God. Second, DeWitt does seem to see the dispensation of the fullness of times (DFT) as a reference to the current dispensation of Grace (more on this point later). Third, DeWitt sees the body of Christ as a “stage of redemptive history.”
- One point that DeWitt is very clear on is that the church did not begin in Acts 2 but in the middle portion of the book of Acts with the salvation of Saul of Tarsus and his subsequent mission to the Gentiles.
 - “Both dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists have dated the origin of the church to Pentecost (Acts 2); others have dated its origin to the time when the Gentile mission originated (Acts 11 or 13) or even to the time when the mission was first announced to Paul (Acts 9). The absence in Ephesians of any clear historical reference to Pentecost as the decisive historical moment of the church’s origin, the fact that the book emphasizes the church as a world-wide reconciliation fellowship with Paul as the revelator, and the fact that it calls the reconciliation fellowship a “new man” “created” by God shows that a mid-Acts origin, in tandem with the Gentile mission, is more consistent with Ephesians’ picture.

Dispensational theology, therefore, recognizes that the *oikonomia* of Ephesians and Colossians is that special plan of God which founds and activates the church of

reconciled Jews and Gentiles. The church was not revealed or activated before this *oikonomia* was made known in New Testament times. This means that the *oikonomia* of Ephesians and Colossians is a discrete one—an arrangement with its own distinctive features and its own special creation (the church) and, therefore, a new stage in the history of salvation and the people of God.” (171-172)

Grace and Law in Ephesians and Colossians

- In this section of Chapter 7 DeWitt contrasts the *oikonomia* set forth in Ephesians and Colossians with the previous one of Israel under the law. In addition, DeWitt presents his view of the DFT in Ephesians 1:10. Regarding the DTF he states:
 - “Ephesians 1:10 speaks of an “. . . *oikonomia* for the fullness of time. . .” Delling seems correct in observing that Paul’s meaning in Ephesians 1:10 is not that when God saw that just the right moment had come in history he sent Christ. Rather, when the plan of God for giving history its fullness came due, i.e., Christ and the gospel as now directed to the salvation of the Gentiles and the formation of the church, then God sent Christ whose person and work, especially in creating the church reconciliation, are history’s completion—not its end, but that which supplies its fullness of content and meaning.” (172)
- In setting forth the difference between the current dispensation and the previous one, DeWitt advocates for noting the contrasting time words in Ephesians 2:11-3:13.
 - “. . . Thus the church is a new stage of that history, and can be identified by the distinctive powers and provisions which move it beyond the former stage of Israel and law. It seems clear, then, that Ephesians contains a scheme of redemptive history, complete even with time concepts of contrasting then-and-now type. . . Grace is Paul’s regular term to contrast with law; it implies God’s special activity for the present phase of redemptive history, and in this is analogous to the names of the other phases in Paul’s usage (promise, law, kingdom). The newly created church of grace is contrasted in Ephesians itself (2:14-15) with another category of salvation history, i.e., the law. . . Thus, in Ephesians, two categories of the redemptive relationship are identified representing two eras in salvation history—law the former; grace the latter. The two are sequentially related by means of contrasts and differentia more or less specific in character. The Gentiles mission divides the sequence; through His cross Christ makes the New Covenant saving provisions needed for the dispensation of grace. Law is not called an *oikonomia* anywhere in the New Testament. But it does function as a category for an era analogous to grace which is called an *oikonomia* with its own discrete features: dispensational theology uses the term “dispensation” for law by analogy with grace. Two sequenced dispensations are thereby established. Thus, *oikonomia* in Ephesians and Colossians is the source of the idea of dispensational theology. But the word itself represents only the basic terminology.” (173-175)

- DeWitt views the Gentile mission of which Paul was the leader as “independent of the original mission” of the twelve apostles to Israel.
 - “The data harmonize without exception when understood in this way: the Gentile mission was a movement of the Spirit, independent of the original mission to Israel operated by the Twelve, and independent of Israel’s law; this reality is attested by the agreement on division of labor between Paul and the Twelve according to Galatians 2.” (177-178)
- In this section DeWitt exhibits thinking regarding the nature of the current dispensation that is consistent with PD’s teaching on the New Covenant. He views the dispensation of grace as enacting the “New Covenant” plan of salvation. DeWitt sees the New Covenant in effect to some degree with the present dispensation.
 - “Accordingly, the *oikonomia* of grace is to be seen as a humbly unexpected (because unprophesied), but divinely planned era of Gentiles salvation under the New Covenant salvation promise, created and brought into operation by God himself independently of Israel, its land, its law, or its theocratic offices and functions.” (179)

Promise, Law, Grace, Kingdom

- In this section of Chapter 7 DeWitt articulates four dispensations that are largely similar to those identified by Blaising and Bock in *Progressive Dispensationalism*. Having rejected Scofield’s scheme, DeWitt identifies the following four dispensations in this section.
 - Promise—Adam to Moses
 - Law—Moses to Gentile Mission (Paul)
 - Grace—Beginning of the Gentile Mission to the Rapture
 - Kingdom—Millennium and the Eternal State
- Since much of DeWitt’s reasoning for identifying dispensations is similar to what he had studied in the writings of Blaising and Bock, we will be limited on comment here to what he says regarding the nature of the kingdom. It is with his comments on the kingdom that DeWitt demonstrates the most affinity for PD.
 - “When one looks for a subsequent (future) era beyond grace, no other generic descriptive term appears than kingdom. . . The kingdom of the New Testament is no other kingdom than that exemplified in Israel’s history, foretold in prophecy as the eschatological Davidic-Israel kingdom of God, and embraced as such in the theology and synagogue prayers of first century Judaism though without particular form. That kingdom is a comprehensive theocratic monarchy including spiritual, social, governmental, economic, judicial and physical expression of God’s reign. Its earthly manifestation is segmented into a temporary (1,000 year) messianic phase and an eternal phase (the eternal kingdom), even the messianic phase has been subdivided into an initial manifestation in Jesus’ first advent, an expansion of its spiritual provisions during the church age, and

consummation with full realization of all dimensions at Christ's second advent. . . adopted recently by most dispensationalists, i.e., the kingdom manifested in Jesus ministry focuses on salvation, and this dimension continues through the church age. Therefore, the church too, by already experiencing the beginning of the subjection of all things to Christ, stands as a stage of the mediatorial messianic kingdom (Eph. 1:15-23), although most dispensationalists would wish to emphasize, a limited and preliminary one, without the personal presence of the ruling Messiah." (180-181)

- On page 183, DeWitt shares his affinity for the teachings of George Eldon Ladd regarding the kingdom of God with his readers. His comments regarding Ladd jive with statements DeWitt made during our personal conversations.
 - "In principle, it can be said that other differentia in evidence are appropriate, but distinction-drawing must end where other biblical concepts establish continuity and organic revelational development across dispensations. Studies like those of G.E. Ladd have the thoroughness and care necessary to persuade thoughtful, critical-thinking dispensationalists that the progressive enactment of the saving reign of God includes the era of grace-to-the-Gentiles—the church age—even though it also has distinctive elements as a dispensation." (183)

Dispensations and Covenants

- In this portion of Chapter 7, DeWitt once again demonstrates agreement with PD with respect to the New Covenant and the current dispensation. DeWitt views the current dispensation as moving the "provisions of the New Covenant into the Gentile world."
 - "One dispensation (grace) has no special covenant enacted directly associated with it, but rather is imposed over a prior covenant enactment (New Covenant) to actually move its provisions out into the Gentile world; this is a decisive redirection because the covenant in question was originally made only with Israel (Jer. 31). . . The dispensations are names for the policies and arrangements in which God structured the redemptive relationship in principle, while the covenants bring the relationship or phases of its progressive development to specific embodiment. . . the essential matter is that a dispensation is a divine arrangement by which the cultural-redemptive plan advances for a determined span of time, and within which a part of the planned redemption is provided and applied." (184-185)
- In the conclusion to Chapter 7, DeWitt states the following regarding the relationship between dispensations and covenants.
 - "Dispensational theology is rooted in the Pauline notion of *oikonomia* with its implications and nuances. This term implies four such arrangements in the process of the redemptive history: promise, law, grace, kingdom. These eras of redemption are not four ways of salvation with ever-growing fullness and application. Dispensational theology

views the covenants and dispensations differently than its parent covenant theology in that it believes these four arrangements are the primary administrations. This way of construing the history of salvation permits serious and meaningful distinction to be made in the history of the plan, but does not necessarily imply or require total discontinuity between the ages. This way of understanding the plan of God in history seems required by the significance given to the four terms for the respective eras in Pauline thought. Finally, the “dispensation of grace” as the name for this present era of the church gains meaning through Paul’s use of “grace” as the name for the powers of God to salvation without or beyond law, as the name for this era’s mission to the Gentiles without either Israel or its land and in spite of the Gentiles’ readiness for judgment, and as the name for God’s power by which the church experiences his gifts and graces for accomplishing its distinctive task of world evangelization, strengthening fellowship, enlarging education, and outgoing love.” (196)

- It is not hard to see that DeWitt is presenting a version of PD with a mid-Acts fare or bent. In short, he is doing exactly what he stated, seeking to combine Grace Theology with G.E. Ladd’s teaching on the kingdom of God.

Work Cited

DeWitt, Dale S. *Dispensational Theology in America During the 20th Century*. Grand Rapids, MI: Grace Bible College, 2002.