

Sunday, June 15, 2014—Grace Life School of Theology—*Grace History Project*—Lesson 141
Progressive Dispensationalism in the Grace Movement, Part 2

Introduction

- In Lesson 140 we began considering how the tenants of Progressive Dispensationalism (PD) gained access into the Grace Movement through the teaching and writing ministry of Dr. Dale S. DeWitt. To accomplish this we began considering Dr. DeWitt's 2002 book *Dispensational Theology in America During the 20th Century*. As I stated last week, I first read this book in manuscript form as the textbook for Theology 414 while I was a student at Grace Bible College.
- Last week we observed that DeWitt's book exhibited some common points with the writing of PD advocates such as Blaising, Bock, and Saucy. Some of these points include:
 - Four dispensation schemes: Promise, Law, Grace, Kingdom; a) millennium, b) eternal state.
 - The Dispensation of the Fullness of Times (DFT) is a reference to the current dispensation.
 - Christ is currently ruling thereby making the church an inaugural form of the prophetic Messianic kingdom.
 - The New Covenant is viewed as having been enacted in inaugural form for the benefit of the church.
 - The dispensation of grace is laid over the New Covenant that was enacted by Christ upon the cross.
- To be fair, we observed the following points from Dr. DeWitt's scheme with which we agree:
 - The dispensation of grace in Ephesians and Colossians is a discrete one, i.e., it was hid in God until he revealed to the Apostle Paul.
 - The body of Christ does not begin in Acts 2 but in the middle portion of Acts with the beginning of the Gentile mission.
 - DeWitt disagrees with Robert Saucy's definition of the mystery. DeWitt maintains that the mystery cannot be found in the Old Testament because it was hid in God.
- In this lesson, I want to make some summary comments on chapters 8 and 9. To be clear there are many details covered in these chapters that we do not have time to touch upon. Parties interested in knowing more are encouraged to seek out a copy of DeWitt's book for themselves.

Chapter 8: The Church as a Pauline Revelation in Dispensationalist and Other Recent Studies

- DeWitt begins his survey of the doctrine of the church as a Pauline revelation by quoting Scofield's comments attached to Ephesians 3:6 in the Scofield Reference Bible (*SRB*).
 - "The mystery 'hid in God' was the divine purpose to make of Jew and Gentile a wholly new thing—'the church, which is his (Christ's) body,' formed by the baptism with the

Holy Spirit (I Cor. 12:12-13) and in which the earthly distinction of Jew and Gentile disappears (Eph. 2:14-15; Col. 3:10-11). . .”

- Immediately following his quotation of Scofield, DeWitt characterizes C.R. Stam in *Things That Differ* as “extreme.”
 - “On the extreme end of the dispensationalists spectrum stands the treatment of C.R. Stam in *The Fundamentals of Dispensationalism* (1951) which makes the categories of prophecy (whole Bible except Paul) and mystery (Paul) absolute. Stam also seeks to increase the distinctiveness of Paul’s revelation by making even Paul’s gospel separate from that of Peter. He thinks these two gospels are referred to in Galatians 2:7 as “the gospel of the circumcision” and the “gospel of the uncircumcision.” This construction expands the notion of the “wholly new” to include both the church and the gospel. The most thorough-going forms of dispensationalism thus tend to the belief that virtually everything in the Pauline theology is a special (new) mystery revelation.” (DeWitt, 198)
- DeWitt also takes exception with the Classical Dispensational notion that the church is a parenthesis between two phases in the execution of Israel’s prophesied kingdom.
 - “Classical dispensationalism conceives of the church as a new creation in history, known to such by a related new revelation through Paul: it infers from this that the church is a “parenthesis” between the two phases of Christ’s confrontation with Israel. Invoking the parenthesis idea seems to dispensationalists both helpful and logically necessary; but it may be that the theological liabilities of this construct can be avoided by reducing dependence on the logic of categories (Israel/Church) and focusing rather on the interplay of unique dynamics in the creation of the church; its function, composition, time, organization, and revelator (Paul). These elements may show more varied aspects of continuity and discontinuity with Israel and its kingdom than the sharply divisive logic of categories has compelled.” (DeWitt, 199)
- Chapter 7 also contains a section on “The Origin of the Church.” In this section DeWitt discusses the historic role the Grace Gospel Fellowship (GGF) played in the promotion of the mid-Acts origin of the church. Moreover, he also discusses Charles Ryrie’s criticism of the GGF in his 1965 publication *Dispensationalism Today* in which he calls the mid-Acts position “Ultradispensationalism.” Regarding the GGF, Dewitt states:
 - “An inevitable question stares dispensational theology in the face if the church is a Pauline revelation, how is this manifest in the New Testament? Or more precisely, does the church as the “body of Christ (joint Jew-Gentile body)” begin at Pentecost or with the commencement of the Gentile mission and ministry of Paul? While the former view has been maintained by the classical dispensationalists, a minority position has arisen in support of the latter view. This step has been taken by the North American-based development known broadly as The Grace Movement. The main body of the movement, the Grace Gospel Fellowship, has emerged through various struggles and splintering off-

shoots from whom it has been dispensationally or fundamentally forceful enough, and the leading denomination advocate for this view. It has achieved significant theological articulation in the work of C.F. Baker, *A Dispensational Theology*, and an ecclesiastical expression of nearly 1500 congregations world-wide of which almost seven-eighths are abroad, while one-eight exists in North America—a testimony to its remarkable foreign missions commitment. The denomination has produced no history as yet, but there is a preliminary sketch of its background and early organization by R. Reich. In its early history, beginning about 1940, the movement was led by Rev. John C. O’Hair of Chicago, who published numerous popular booklets and pamphlets. The movement’s most potent popular tool, however, for most of its nearly fifty-year existence has been a small volume by C.R. Stam, *The Fundamentals of Dispensationalism*.” (DeWitt, 213-214)

- Next DeWitt turns his attention to Ryrie’s criticisms of the Grace Movement in *Dispensationalism Today*. DeWitt commences his analysis of Ryrie’s comments by considering the following statement made by Ryrie: “Is something distinguishably different being done since Paul came on the scene that was not being done from Pentecost to the time of Paul?” Ryrie essentially argues that the church began at Pentecost but God did not tell anyone about it until he revealed it to Paul. DeWitt offers the following in response to Ryrie:
 - “But substantial differentia of crucial importance are nonetheless involved in the before Paul/after Paul sequence in Acts. 1) The Israel first/Israel alone focus of the early apostolic ministry give way to the Gentile mission without regard for Israel, indeed in reaction to or in lieu of Israel, although even Paul’s witness to Israel continues. 2) The salvation of the Gentiles in egalitarian—without any regard to ethnic primacy (Acts 10:34-35; 15:78). 3) The Gentiles who have believed are free from the law which continued to be practiced with intense urgency by Judean Jewish Christians, and without judgment (Acts 21:20). These are quite substantial changes not merely in Acts, but more broadly in the history of religion generally; indeed, they are drastic changes from a Jewish point of view . . . the coming of the Spirit is followed by a long speech of Peter explaining and enlarging on it (Ch. 2); the healing of the lame man in the temple is followed by another correlated speech of Peter (Ch. 3), and so forth. One notices, however, the stark fact that neither of Peter’s first two speeches interprets the meaning of the events as the beginning of the church but as the messianic crisis of Israel (especially 3:18-26). On the other hand, the Pauline epistles show clearly that the events proximately behind the misterion revelation are neither Jesus’ ministry, the event of Pentecost, nor the ministry of the apostles to Israel, but Paul’s conversion and commission, the Gentiles’ salvation, and their freedom from the law.” (DeWitt, 215-216)
- In the end, DeWitt argues that Ryrie cannot prove that the church did begin at Pentecost for the following reasons: 1) it cannot be shown that the joint-body of Jews and Gentiles was formed then; 2) Pentecost and the mission of the twelve apostles had another purpose, i.e., Israel’s eschatological conversion as described in the prophets; 3) it cannot be shown that the presence of the newly manifested Holy Spirit is unique to the body of Christ; and 4) Jesus’ commission to

preach the gospel was understood by the Jerusalem apostles to be focused exclusively on Israel at the first.” (217) DeWitt offers the following four counter points:

- “There was no joint-body of Jews and Gentiles at Pentecost. There is a church i.e., an assembly of Jewish believers and proselytes (Acts 5:11; 8:1; 2:5, 9-11). Paul too refers to his Jewish church in Galatia the existence of the Body of Christ simply because the word “church” is not sufficient to establish the existence of the Body of Christ simply because the word “church” as such denotes only an “assembly” or “gathering” of the people of God, as it does through the Old Testament (the “congregation in the wilderness” in Acts 7:38, and use of the word for the town meeting at Ephesus in Acts 19:32, 41—he regular pre-New Testament Greek use).”
- “The events of Pentecost and following were prophesied to *the extent that the Jewish assembly of the growing remnant* (Paul actually uses *leimma* for this “true Israel”) already lived for the restoration and conversion of Israel . . . (commenting upon Acts 3:17-26 DeWitt writes) . . . All these major concepts are explicitly illustrated here: Israel’s eschatological conversion; and the world mission outcome of the Arian nations is contemplated in vss 25-26: “in your posterity shall all the families of the earth be blessed.”
- “The coming of the Holy Spirit to Israel was prophesied by the Old Testament in an appreciable number of passages (Isa. 32:12; 44:3; 59:21; Ezek. 36:26-27; 37:14; Jer. 31:31-33; Joel 2:28-32 which is the source of Peter’s quotation in Acts 2). These texts foretell the indwelling of the Spirit in Israel’s latter day redemption. But since the church came to share this work of the Spirit, it is easy to assume that when the Spirit came, the church began. This, however, is a *non sequitur*.”
- “It can be noted, however, that the sheet vision and its implications confirm in their own way precisely the point that is overlooked by Ryrie, i.e., that the ministry of the original apostles was in fact riveted to Israel and its latter day conversion, while the Gentile mission was a Pauline movement brought about by (a series of) direct revelations of the risen Christ.” (DeWitt, 217-219)
- Despite the fact that DeWitt argues that the Church is a Pauline revelation he is resistant to the notion that the church comprises a “parenthesis” between the first and second advents or that the kingdom has been “postponed” during the dispensation of grace.
 - “It is an easy step from the notion of the church as a new creation/new revelation to think of a church age—an interval era within the messianic age/eschaton. If dispensational theology does not want to be burned with the terms “parenthesis church” or “postponed kingdom” because they suggest discontinuity or surprise, it nevertheless has to accept the fact that if it keeps the idea of the church as a *mysterion* revelation of the apostolic age, it also will have to live with the idea of an unprophesied interval however one may try to explain its continuities with past or future dispensations.” (DeWitt, 219)

Chapter 9: The Church as Musterion

- The main focus of Chapter 9 is to argue that the church, not Christ or the gospel, is the mystery. In order to accomplish this purpose DeWitt surveys much of the contemporary scholarship with respect to the Greek word *musterion*.
 - “The foregoing discussion points to the conclusion that the mystery is neither Christ nor the gospel, but the church, which was nonetheless brought into existence by the preaching of the gospel of Christ; it is a newly revealed mystery in that it is a new creation (event) accomplished by Paul to show that the mystery-church initiative is entirely a matter of Christ’s apostolic revelations in resurrection; there is no reference to Jesus revealing it during His earthly ministry—no evidence that Paul is aware that he is carrying out explicitly concepts or commands of Jesus in his earthly ministry. This is natural in light of the fact that Paul was appointed the leader of the Gentile mission by a direct revelation of Christ from heaven (Acts 9, 22, 26; Gal. 1).” (DeWitt, 239)
- Streaming from the twin facts that the church is a Pauline revelation and that it was a mystery, DeWitt concludes that the church must have begun with the first announcement of the gentile mission in Acts 9. Consequently, the church is not found anywhere in the opening chapters of Acts.
 - “All three of these examples underscore early Acts’ attention to Israel. The simplest resolution of the problem is also the obvious one—that the church of the Pauline mission and revelation was not yet present here—a view wholly in keeping with the dispensationalist recognition of the church as a Pauline revelation. Classical dispensationalists are unwilling, however, to take this explanation. . . It appears rather that the revelation of the independent Gentile mission should be understood to start where Luke thought it started, i.e., with Paul’s conversion. This event bears the first announcement of the Gentile mission in a programmatic sense (Acts 9:15). Considered by itself, the announcement does not have to be understood quite so radically; however, with subsequent events, including repeated recounts of Paul’s conversion, it becomes ever clearer that Luke understood Paul’s conversion as the beginning of the sequenced revelation of the mission (Acts 22:6-21; 26:12-23). . . Paul’s conversion was followed by Peter’s dramatic sheet vision in which he was ordered to stop regarding Gentiles as unclean, and to go to Cornelius’ house. The sheet vision was followed in turn by an early Gentile ministry at Antioch (11:19). This followed in Acts 13 a revelation of mission to the apostles-prophets-teachers group at Antioch, then the initial Gentile itinerant evangelization mission, then in Acts 15 the Jerusalem Council to decide the freedom of Gentile converts from the Jewish law, and thereafter further Gentile evangelization successes. . . In conclusion, the dispensationalist view that the church is a Pauline revelation has remarkable support, and faces no insurmountable difficulties of a principled nature.” (DeWitt, 246-247)

- In summation, DeWitt believes that the church of the Pauline revelation began in Acts 9 with the conversion and commissioning of the Apostle Paul. With respect to these points we are in complete agreement with Brother DeWitt. He believes that the church is the subject of the mystery revelation committed to the Apostle Paul. As such the church is a unique Pauline revelation. Moreover, he maintains the body of Christ did not begin at Pentecost in Acts 2 but in Acts 9. On these points, DeWitt's theology can only fairly be viewed as in line with the mid-Acts Grace Message.
- One point that we disagree with Dr. DeWitt on in Chapter 9 is his view on the gospel. DeWitt maintains that Peter and Paul preached the same gospel and that the mystery only refers to or applies to the church and not the gospel. Regarding this point DeWitt writes the following:
 - “So long as one focuses on the normative definitional passages, all seems well and dispensational theology appears to enjoy biblical support; the texts seem clear that the mystery is the church. But another group of additional uses of *mysterion* shows itself in the same epistles where all is not so clear. This residue of text includes Ephesians 3:4 (the mystery of Christ); Ephesians 6:19 (the mystery of the gospel); Colossians 2:2 (the mystery of God namely Christ [NIV]); and Colossians 4:3 (the mystery of Christ).” (DeWitt, 233)
- For the sake of time and space we will limit our comments here to DeWitt's notions regarding Ephesians 6:19. DeWitt seeks to explain why Paul's reference to the “mystery of the gospel” should not be in the Bible by appealing to textual criticism.
 - “In Ephesians 6:19 Paul prays for boldness to “proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains.” The qualifying phrase “of the gospel” is omitted by Codex Vaticanus, Codes Boernerianus, some Old Latin and Copic manuscripts, Tertullian, Ambrosiaster, Victorinus of Rome, and Ephraem. Unfortunately, just at the point where the late second century Chester Beatty Papyrus of the Pauline epistles could have helped, there is a dreadful lacuna in the text: the corners of the leaves and the lower margins are badly deteriorated and the lines containing these words are lost as they occurred at the bottom f. 80 v. Careful measurements of the leaf of the ms suggest that inclusion cannot be ruled out by space considerations. But the problem of sufficient space for its thirteen characters and the Beatty's likeness to Vaticanus, makes exclusion more probable. This doubt about the reading requires that the phrase *tou euaggeliou* be disregarded on textual grounds.” (DeWitt, 235)
- In footnote 33, DeWitt explains how he determined that the characters *tou euaggeliou* could not have fit at the bottom of the leaf in question in the Chester Beatty Papyrus. At the conclusion of the footnote DeWitt states, “I conclude thus that “of the gospel” was probably not part of the original text of this early manuscript. At any rate, there is too much uncertainty from the improbability, plus the omission from Vaticanus, to include this text in the discussion.” (235) So DeWitt manages to remove the one clear verse that challenges his paradigm on textual grounds.

- It is also important to note what DeWitt says in footnote 34 by appealing to Bruce Metzger's *A Textual Commentary of the Greek New Testament*: “. . .(Metzger) that B (Siniaticus) may reflect Western contamination here and therefore should not be given much weight; and there are no other variations reflecting confusion.” (DeWitt, 235-236)
- The fact that Aleph (Vaticanus) and B (Siniaticus) do not agree demonstrates one of the major problems of modern textual criticism. These so called oldest and best manuscripts (mss) not only differ with Textus Receptus but also with themselves. What DeWitt's analysis fails to mention is which/what mss contain the reading as it stands in the King James Bible as well as most modern versions.
 - NKJV—and for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery **of the gospel**,
 - NLT—and pray for me, too. Ask God to give me the right words so I can boldly explain God's mysterious plan **that the Good News is** for Jews and Gentiles alike. Footnote: Greek *explain the mystery of the Good News*; some manuscripts read simply *explain the mystery*.
 - NIV—Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery **of the gospel**,
 - NASV—and *pray* on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery **of the gospel**,
 - ESV—and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery **of the gospel**,
- Only one of these modern versions (NLT) contains a footnote alerting the reader to the possibility of any “textual problems.” The rest of them contain the phrase “of the gospel” without any inkling of any textual variations. DeWitt maintains that based upon his reconstruction of an admittedly incomplete mss that the mystery does not extend to the gospel because the phrase could not have fit on the page. He then rules out the contrary witness of B (Siniatiucs) because Metzger says that it demonstrates “western contamination” in how it reads in Ephesians 6:19 when in almost every other case it is one of the two so-called oldest and best. Which is it, one of the “oldest and best” or a “western contamination?” All this demonstrates the completely arbitrary nature of modern textual criticism.

Works Cited

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