

Sunday, June 22, 2014—Grace Life School of Theology—*Grace History Project*—Lesson 142  
Progressive Dispensationalism in the Grace Movement, Part 3

### **Introduction**

- Over the past two weeks we have been looking at the subject of Progressive Dispensationalism (PD) in the Grace Movement by considering Dr. Dale S. DeWitt's 2002 book *Dispensational Theology in American During the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. In doing so, we have characterized DeWitt's version of dispensationalism as PD in Grace clothing. We have agreed with Dr. DeWitt on the following points:
  - The dispensation of grace in Ephesians and Colossians is a discrete one, i.e., it was hid in God until he revealed it 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.
  - The church was a unique Pauline revelation and historically had its origin in Acts 9 with the salvation and commissioning of the Apostle Paul.
  
- Areas where we have disagreed with Dr. DeWitt include:
  - 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.
  - The mystery has nothing to do with the gospel. DeWitt believes and maintains that Peter and Paul were both preaching the same gospel and that there is no difference between the gospel of the circumcision and the gospel of the uncircumcision.
  - DeWitt also views Stam's logical categories of prophecy and mystery as extreme.

- In this lesson we will focus our attention on Chapter 11 which is titled “Israel, Church, and Kingdom.” This will be done to flush out further what DeWitt believes regarding the relationship between the church and the kingdom. It is important to note yet again that we will only be summarizing the main arguments made in this chapter.

### **Chapter 11: Israel, Church, and Kingdom**

- Chapter 11 begins with the following statement:
  - “The chapter seeks to explain how dispensational theology understands the meaning of Israel, the church, and the kingdom. The issue of whether the future messianic kingdom is in principle and mediation Israel’s or the church’s cannot be decided by proof texts alone; it is rather shaped at every point by issues of the meanings and identity of ancient Israel, the present church, and the future kingdom. . . . In some dispensational thought, this idea yields great breaks in the flow of redemptive history and the unity of the people of God—absolute distinction between Israel and the future kingdom on one hand and the present church on the other.” (DeWitt, 293)
- After these introductory remarks DeWitt moves on to discuss “Israel in the Future” and “The Identity and Meaning of Israel.” Much of the information contained in these sections we have already considered elsewhere in this class. Consequently, we had decided not to comment on these sections at this time.
- In a section titled, “The Identity and Meaning of Church” DeWitt discusses Robert Saucy’s on Israel and the church found in *Continuity and Discontinuity*. Saucy argues that the identification of the church as distinct from Israel is not found in the presence of the Spirit in the church because that was promised to Israel in the Old Testament. Rather Saucy identifies the major difference in the fact that the church is not a nation. The church is a spiritually democratized body of believers in Christ from among all nations and social groups, including Israel, according to DeWitt. It has been formed by raising Gentiles into fellowship with Israel’s God apart from national Israel. (DeWitt, 304)
- The church does not identify with Israel in the Exodus from Egypt as its founding event but rather in the death and resurrection of Christ—its founding event is provisionally Jesus’ passion and the conversion of Paul in Acts 9. DeWitt sums up his view of the church as follows:
  - “It is clear, above all, that the church is not a monarchy; nor is it ordered to create such an organizational structure. It rather lives under the authority of the governments of this world (Rom. 13:1-8). The church is a fellowship of true believers who worship God together (as Israel did), live transformed lives, bear witness to the Savior, ameliorate the world with Good (Gal. 6:10), and educate themselves in the meaning and implications of their faith.” (DeWitt, 305)

- In a section titled “The Vocabulary of Differentiation” DeWitt again expresses his disapproval for the way classical dispensationalists had explained the relationship between Israel and the church.
  - “In the struggle for clarity and coherence, dispensational theology has mostly used the language of absolute separateness, distinction, and contrast; this vocabulary is characteristic of the mainline scholarly dispensationalists, but it is sometimes carried to more extreme lengths by more thorough-going dispensationalists, and at times to absurd extremes in populist and local pamphleteering.” (DeWitt, 310)
  
- Arguing for what he calls a functionalist understanding DeWitt states the following regarding the relationship between Israel, the church, and the kingdom.
  - “To pursue a more fully functionalist understanding of difference is certainly an interesting possibility. One might think of the categories Israel—church—kingdom as having progressively enlarged objectives, or as given progressively increasing gifts and resources to carry out those purposes, or as having varied but coordinated commands and orders to carry out, or as varied peoples with different organizational structures, perhaps even as developing spiritual organisms which are created anew in each stage of its growth. This way of thinking would imply one unified people of God, but distinguishable in each stage of its growth, even by different names as well as ethnic composition and redemptive actions.” (DeWitt, 312)
  
- In the section titled “Continuity” DeWitt begins to discuss the continuity between Israel and the church. He introduces the subject as follows:
  - “Despite resistance from the inner logic of differentia, dispensational theology faces indications of continuity across dispensations from several kinds of Biblical texts. Since for dispensational theology, Paul is the apostle to the Gentiles and the revelator of the church, his authority is the relevant one for determining its connections.” (DeWitt, 321)
  
- DeWitt points to passages in the Pauline scriptures where the apostle speaks of the church as the seed of Abraham as proof for of continuity between Israel and the church.
  - “The Gentile church as the “seed of Abraham” shows up in the inclusive apostolic use of this term for Israel (2 Cor. 11:22; Rom. 4:16), Christ (Gal. 3:16), and the church (Gal. 3:29). If this use of such a term for Israel were an isolated case, there might be room for doubt; but use of the language of Israel or its institutions for the church or its spiritual life is far larger; the elect, brethren, assembly, saints, my people, God’s temple, the true sacrifice, the true circumcision, the wife-bride, the flock—to name only some of the most obvious. All these terms have Old Testament roots: the obvious implication of this pronounced Pauline phenomenon is that there is a genre of persons which together form a homogeneous, continues “people of God.”” (DeWitt, 321)

- DeWitt also points to passages such as Romans 15:26-27 and II Corinthians 3 as proof of the continuity that exists between Israel and the church in that the church experiences spiritual blessings originally promised to Israel. According to DeWitt, “these texts do not equate Israel and the church; nor do they teach a single historical organism. But they do indicate that there is continuity of promised spiritual benefits of status and power in the plan of the one God. The new people is formed from the fusion of old promises with new revelation.” (DeWitt, 322)
- This continuity is also seen in passages such as Romans 4:13-16 and Ephesians 3:6 where Paul speaks about Jews and Gentiles being fellow heirs in the body of Christ. Prior to a lengthy passages on how the image of the olive tree in Romans 11:17-24 establishes continuity between Israel and the church, DeWitt writes:
  - “Paul clearly thought that the church was a new people of God beyond Israel. The language of inheriting the promises of Israel, however, shows that for Paul, it must also be true that the new church stands in the unbroken line of salvation history. The means that continuity is maintained by placing the salvation of the Gentiles in line of God’s movement toward man which comes out of Israel’s past; continuity is thereby assured with both the saving purpose more narrowly and the divine claim on the world more broadly.” (DeWitt, 323)
- In the most crucial paragraph of the entire chapter DeWitt spells out in detail not only how Israel and the church are related but also how the church relates to the kingdom of God.
  - “The continuity of the church with the future kingdom is a less complicating matter for dispensational theology since it has always had some advocate who thought the church would participate. The Pauline evidence for such a participation may be summarized simply: 1) The church already participates in Christ’s subjection of all things to himself (Eph. 1:22); the ultimate expression of the subjection is the kingdom (I Cor. 15:24-28). Thus the church is in a preliminary stage of Christ’s reign; no Pauline text teaches that the church does not participate in the future manifestation of Christ’s (earthly) kingship; 2) The church has already received the Abrahamic promise of inheriting the world (Rom. 4:13-17); this thought integrates the Abrahamic promises into the earthly destiny of the church; 3) The church will judge the world (I Cor. 6:2); 4) The church, because it consist of the justified-by-grace, will inherit the kingdom (I Cor. 6:9-11; 15:21-26; Eph. 5:5) just as in Jewish eschatology, the future kingdom is the reward of the righteous; 5) Paul states clearly that if we suffer with him we shall reign with him (II Tim. 2:12); 6) Several texts teach that Christ comes or appears with his glorified saints (I Thess. 3:13; 4:17; Col. 3:4); 7) In I Thessalonians 4:17 Paul indicates that resurrected believers will afterward be “with the Lord forever.” When the images of participation in these texts are coordinated, they yield a forceful statement of the church’s participation in the coming kingdom. Most of these types reappear in Hebrews and Revelation in various details; but it is worth noting that the dispensationalists’ Biblical source—Paul himself—reflects precisely the kind of relational thinking about the church and the kingdom in the future that he does about Israel and the church from the past.” (DeWitt, 325-326)