

Faith Pulpit

Progressive Dispensationalism: A Traditional Dispensational Critique

I. An explanation of Traditional Dispensationalism

As understood by this author, the essence of dispensationalism is that Israel and the Church, as well as God's program for each, are clearly and consistently distinguished. The revelation concerning God's program for each is not dealing with ways of salvation but ways of managing one's life. The resultant features of dispensationalism understood in this way are these:

A. Salvation, in the mind of God, always has been based upon the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. He was the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world (1 Peter 1:20). Salvation always has been unmerited as Old Testament animal sacrifices clearly illustrate. And salvation always has been through faith in God's provision, although the content of a believer's faith was determined by the extent to which the gospel had been revealed, as Romans 4:1–2 and Genesis 15:5–6 testify.

B. The Church which is Christ's Body did not begin until the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came to create this Body by Spirit baptism (1 Cor. 12:13). The Church will be complete when Christ comes for Her (1 Thess. 4:13–5:10). The Church which is Christ's Body will continue to exist throughout eternity as the Bride of Christ (Eph. 5:25–27), the dominant, though not the exclusive, inhabitant of the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb. 12:22–24; Rev. 19:6–8; 21:1–22:5).

C. The New Testament epistles possess the highest authority for a believer today. This does NOT mean that only the epistles are inspired or profitable, but it DOES mean truth for believers today found in other books of the Bible is recognized as such because it expresses a truth clearly taught in the epistles.

D. The message of the epistles concerning a believer's behavior is that he is "not under the law, but under grace" (Rom. 6:14; 7:4; Gal. 2:19; 4:4–7; 1 Tim. 2:8,9).

E. Included in this concept of grace is an emphasis on the eternal security of a true believer (John 10:27–29) rather than on a believer’s responsibility to persevere. Directly related to this idea is the concept of carnality, i.e., believers are capable of yielding to sinful desires within themselves without loss of their salvation (Romans 6:12,13; 1 Cor. 3:1–9).

F. Finally, the premillennial return of Christ and the pretribulational rapture of the Church are resultant features.

II. An explanation of Progressive Dispensationalism

Blaising and Bock summarize the views expressed by various authors in the book which they edited: “Ware, Bock, Hoch, Saucy, and Burns all speak of the new state of things in which Gentiles are included with equal standing alongside the remnant of Israel. Both receive blessings from the inaugurated new covenant, blessings that are emphasized as new in biblical theology, being differentiated as an advance over the old covenant. Yet, as Hoch, Saucy, Glennie, Barker, and Ware point out, these blessings are coming in fulfillment of promises about Israel and Gentiles made during the previous dispensation, the dispensation of the Mosaic covenant. Consequently, there is continuity from promises about Israel and Gentiles under the old covenant to the fulfillment of those promises upon Israel and Gentiles under the new covenant. It is continuity through progress [emphasis theirs]: the progress of promissory fulfillment.” (“Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: Assessment and Dialogue,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992, pp. 380,381.)

III. An evaluation of Progressive Dispensationalism

In this traditional dispensationalist’s thinking, the most serious problem of progressive dispensationalism is the blurring of the distinction between Israel and the Church. This can be seen in the following areas:

A. The Church’s Relationship to the New Covenant

Some, though not all, traditional dispensationalists have taught that the Church, along with Israel, shares in the new covenant (cf. Scofield Reference Bible at Hebrews 8:8), but they based this, NOT on the Church claiming a promise made to Israel, as Blaising does [cf. *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1993) p. 199], but on the new covenant being an amplification of the spiritual blessings promised to Abraham. These spiritual blessings were literally interpreted as being for “all families of the earth.” (cf. Scofield Reference Bible at Gen. 15:18).

B. The Church’s Relationship to Israel

One progressive dispensationalist describes this present relationship in the following way: “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 experience promised blessings in which Gentiles also participate.” (Carl Hoch, “The New Man of Ephesians 2,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, p. 126.) But what, in fact, does Ephesians 2 teach us? Note well the following facts:

1. Gentiles, who before Christ died were “far off,” are now brought near by Christ’s blood (v. 13);
2. by His death Christ broke down the law which was a wall that had divided Jews from Gentiles (v. 14,15);
3. by His death Christ created a new entity (v. 15) [I believe Lincoln is absolutely right when he states: “It must be underlined that the nature of Christ’s accomplishment is described as a creation and its product as something new. In its newness it is not merely an amalgam of the old in which Gentiles have been combined with the best of Judaism.” (A. Lincoln *The Church and Israel in Ephesians 2*,” *The Best in Theology Volume Three* [Christianity Today, Inc., 1989], p. 66);
4. the “saints” of v. 19 are all believers who comprise the Church, as Eph. 1:1, 15, 18; 3:8; 4:12; 5:3 and 6:18 show; and
5. Ephesians 3:1–6 indicate the Church was unknown in the Old Testament (cf. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, p. 629.)

Conclusion

Walter Elwell is right when he comments: “The new dispensationalism looks so much like nondispensationalist premillennialism that one struggles to see any real difference.”

(“Dispensationalists of the Third Kind,” in *Christianity Today*, September 22, 1994, p. 28.)

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Dr. Houghton was promoted to Heaven on July 13, 2020, leaving a legacy of service and faithfulness to the thousands of men and women who he impacted during his ministry.