

## **Progressive Dispensationalism**

*What follows is a summary of chapter one of Progressive Dispensationalism by Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock. This is followed by my personal reflection on the entire book.*

### **The Rise of Dispensationalism**

Dispensationalism first took shape in the Brethren Movement in early nineteenth century Britain. The Brethren Movement emphasized the unity of all believers in Christ and the freedom of Christians to gather in his name without regard for sectarian or denominational divisions.

The writings of the Brethren had a broad impact on evangelical Protestantism in the United States where they influenced prominent ministers who founded a new forum: the Bible Conference. Beginning with the popular Niagara Bible Conference in the 1870s, Bible conferences began to spring up in various parts of the United States, becoming what has been called the Bible Conference Movement by the early twentieth century.

C. I. Scofield, a participant in this movement, in 1909 produced a reference Bible which became famous throughout the United States and around the world. The *Scofield Reference Bible* was filled with expositional and theological annotations which put a “Bible Conference” into the hands of thousands of evangelical Christians. The interpretations presented in the notes formed a recognizable system of biblical interpretation. That system was soon tagged “dispensationalism,” a label which has come to mark the tradition which both led to and developed from the *Scofield Reference Bible*. The term *dispensationalism* comes from the word *dispensation* which refers to a distinctive way in which God manages or arranges the relationship of human beings to himself.

Through the Bible conferences and the *Scofield Reference Bible*, dispensationalism came to characterize the views and beliefs of a large constituency of American evangelicalism scattered throughout mainstream Protestantism.

### **Forms of Dispensationalism**

#### *Classical Dispensationalism*

Classical dispensationalism refers to the views of British and American dispensationalists from the writings of John Nelson Darby, the foremost theologian of the early Brethren Movement, to the eight volume *Systematic Theology* of Lewis Sperry Chafer, the founder and first president of Dallas Theological Seminary.

#### *Revised Dispensationalism*

Revised dispensationalism designates the views of dispensational theologians writing primarily between the late 1950s and the late 1970s. The designation *revised* is taken from the *revision* of the *Scofield Bible*, completed in 1967 and offering views much more compatible to writers of this second period.

### *Progressive Dispensationalism*

Progressive dispensationalism developed through the 1980s and 1990s and brought dispensationalism closer to contemporary evangelical biblical interpretation. Sufficient revisions had taken place by 1991 to introduce the name *progressive dispensationalism* at the national meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society that year.

### **Progressive Dispensationalism**

Progressive dispensationalism is the most modern form of dispensationalism that recognizes the Bible's presentation of a progressive accomplishment and revelation of a holistic and unified redemption. It understands the dispensations not simply as different arrangements between God and humankind, but as successive arrangements in the progressive revelation and accomplishment of redemption. The plan of redemption has different aspects to it. One dispensation may emphasize one aspect more than another, for example the emphasis on divinely directed political affairs in the past dispensation and the emphasis on multiethnic spiritual identity in Christ in the present dispensation. But all these dispensations point to a future culmination in which God will both politically administer Israel and Gentile nations and indwell all of them equally (without ethnic distinctions) by the Holy Spirit. Consequently, the dispensations progress by revealing different aspects of the final unified redemption.

The church is redeemed humanity itself (both Jews and Gentiles) as it exists in this dispensation prior to the coming of Christ. Those who during their dispensation had certain blessings only in promise or in an inaugurated form will all be brought to the same level of complete fulfillment when they are raised together from the dead. Redeemed Jews and Gentiles will share equally in the completed blessings of the Spirit.

A Jew who becomes a Christian today does not lose his or her relationship to Israel's future promises. Jewish Christians will join the Old Testament remnant of faith in the inheritance of Israel. Gentile Christians will be joined by saved Gentiles of earlier dispensations. All together, Jews and Gentiles, will share the same blessings of the Spirit, as testified to by the relationship of Jew and Gentile in the church of this dispensation.

Progressive dispensationalism offers a more unified view of the biblical covenants than earlier dispensationalism. The Abrahamic covenant is seen as the foundation for all other covenants. The new covenant is the form in which the Abrahamic covenant has been inaugurated in this dispensation and will be fulfilled in full in the future. The Davidic covenant is both an aspect of Abrahamic blessing and the means by which the blessings are now inaugurated and will be bestowed in full. The spiritual blessings being given today are blessings predicted by the new covenant. These blessings are given in a partial and inaugurated form, which looks forward to complete fulfillment at the return of Christ.

Progressive dispensationalists see one promised eschatological kingdom which has both spiritual and political dimensions. Progressive dispensationalists put primary emphasis on the eternal kingdom for understanding all previous forms of the kingdom including the millennium.

And they see Christ's present relationship to the church today as a form of the eschatological kingdom which affirms the future revelation of the kingdom in all its fullness.

### **Personal Reflection**

I was happy to read about the direction in which dispensationalism has evolved. Progressive dispensationalism incorporates the best of contemporary biblical scholarship, such as a modern understanding of typology and inaugurated eschatology, while also maintaining what I think are dispensationalism's necessary distinctives, namely, the restoration of an ethnic, national, and territorial Israel and futurist premillennialism.

Of all the theological systems out there currently, I am probably most aligned with progressive dispensationalism. Because of the influence of reformed teaching when I first became a Christian, I originally had an understanding of scripture shaped by covenant theology. I do think there is much good in covenant theology, and I do think the more modern form of covenantalism known as "progressive covenantalism" is an improvement on covenant theology. However, I align more with the progressive dispensationalism understanding of the covenants, kingdom, and Israel.

In terms of the covenants, progressive dispensationalism affirms the Davidic kingship of Christ's present activity but also believes that Christ's current place on the throne of David guarantees the fulfillment of the Davidic promise in the future, including the national and political dimensions of that promise. Christ will personally rule Israel and the nations from Jerusalem. Progressive dispensationalism also affirms that the blessing covenanted to Abraham comes to us in this dispensation as the inaugurated blessing of the new covenant mediated through Jesus the Christ. A remnant of Israel and remnants of the Gentile nations receive this inaugurated blessing equally, without distinction, by faith in God incarnated as Jesus. However, the present dispensation is not the end. It looks forward to a future dispensation in which the new covenant will be completely fulfilled and its blessing fully received. New covenant blessing (and thus Abrahamic blessing) will result in the spiritual restoration of Israel as well as physical resurrection and perfect holiness for all of God's people.

In terms of the kingdom, progressive dispensationalism affirms the inaugurated nature of the kingdom. The kingdom was present in the first coming of the messiah by virtue of the fact that the king himself is present ministering by the power of the Holy Spirit, manifesting in his works characteristics belonging to the eschatological kingdom of God. The kingdom is present now in the people of the kingdom who are ruled by the Christ from his heavenly and Davidic throne. However, progressive dispensationalism also affirms the future, earthly, and political reign of Christ from Jerusalem over Israel and all nations.

In terms of Israel, progressive dispensationalism affirms one unified plan of redemption that is revealed in stages with the church composed of both Jews and Gentiles being an integral part of that plan. However, progressive dispensationalism also affirms the unique role of Israel in God's future kingdom and affirms the ethnic, national, and territorial restoration of Israel in keeping with Old Testament promises.