

## PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM: A REVIEW OF A RECENT PUBLICATION

NORMAN R. GULLEY  
Southern College of Seventh-day Adventists  
Collegedale, TN 37315

Modern Dispensationalism has experienced four dispensations of its own since its rise in Ireland and England during the early decades of the nineteenth century. These may be designated as the Pre-Scofieldian, Scofieldian, Essentialist, and Progressive. Although the first three stages manifested some differences from one another, they were basically more similar than dissimilar in virtually all of their basic tenets and in their hermeneutic. The same cannot be said when comparing Progressive Dispensationalism with the others, for it has made some remarkable breaks away from a number of concepts that hitherto had been considered as a *sine qua non* of all Dispensationalism. These new views have been set forth in a recent publication entitled *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Block (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992). This is truly a landmark book; and it was considered to be precisely that by the evangelical scholars from various traditions who attended the annual Evangelical Theological Society meeting held in San Francisco, California, on November 19, 1992. Indeed, at that meeting half a day was devoted to studying and discussing it.

The volume includes a Foreword by Stanley N. Gundry (10-12), an Introduction by Blaising entitled "The Search for Definition" (13-34), followed by the main text (37-376), and a Conclusion by Blaising and Bock entitled "Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: Assessment and Dialogue" (377-394). The volume also includes two indexes: "Select Name and Subject Index" and "Scripture Index" (395-402). It is not my purpose to treat the volume's chapters individually, but rather to provide a broad sweep of the contributions that the book as a whole makes and to present some suggestions that I believe will be helpful for any future discussions by Progressive Dispensationalists. However, in order to furnish the reader who is unacquainted with this publication

an overview of its contents, I indicate here the Dispensationalist authors and the chapter titles for its ten chapters, plus the same for three "response" sections.

The Dispensationalist chapters are as follows: Darrell L. Bock, "The Reign of the Lord Christ" (37-67); Bruce A. Ware, "The New Covenant and the People(s) of God" (68-97); Carl B. Hoch, Jr., "The New Man of Ephesians 2" (98-126); Robert L. Saucy, "The Church as the Mystery of God" (127-155); W. Edward Glenny, "The Israelite Imagery of 1 Peter 2" (156-187); J. Lanier Burns, "The Future of Ethnic Israel in Romans 11" (188-229); David K. Lowery, "Christ, the End of the Law in Romans 10:4" (230-247); John A. Martin, "Christ, the Fulfillment of the Law in the Sermon on the Mount" (248-263); David L. Turner, "The New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:1-22:5: Consummation of a Biblical Continuum" (264-292); and Kenneth L. Barker, "The Scope and Center of Old and New Testament Theology and Hope" (293-330).

The response sections designated as "Response 1," "Response 2," and "Response 3," have the following authors and titles: Willem A. VanGemeren, "A Response" (331-346), Bruce K. Waltke, "A Response" (347-359), and Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "An Eangelical Response" (360-376).

Progressive Dispensationalism has issued out of an attempt to be "more accurate biblically" and "to re-examine biblically the distinction between Israel and the church" (15, 33). The result is a theological hermeneutic that I believe is truer to scripture than the hermeneutic found in the other three eras of Dispensationalism. This change over previous Dispensational contributions moves the possibility of dialogue with other evangelical traditions to a new level, for it (1) critiques some of the old positions that non-Dispensationalists also questioned, and (2) accepts a new christological hermeneutic that was absent in earlier Dispensationalist literature.

A key change which these Progressive Dispensationalist scholars have set forth is the concept of OT prophecies/promises being fulfilled in the church age, and thus it rejects the traditional Dispensationalist futurism (see 46-51, 224). This concept of progressive fulfillment of OT prophecies/promises during the Christian era involves, in turn, several other significant matters: (1) It includes an acceptance of the Christian church as implicit in the OT and recognition of the moral law (Exod 20) and the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) as being applicable in the church age rather than simply relegated to Israel in the millennium (253-254). (2) It also includes acceptance of the concept that OT prophecy can have multiple fulfillments during the church age, such as in the case of Joel 2 at Pentecost (Acts 2) and in the future (58). (3) Progressive

fulfillment involves, as well, an acceptance of an inaugurated eschatology that includes a rejection of the idea that the church age is only a "parenthesis" between the time of Israel in the OT and Israel during the millennium (39-43). In other words, the era of the present Christian church is not merely an intermission between God's past and future dealings with Israel. (4) Progressive fulfillment entails rejection of the idea of a "postponed kingdom" and postponed rule of Christ, focusing rather on his present rule from heaven's throne over all on planet earth (46-55). (5) It rejects also the notion that there are two new covenants—one for Israel and the other for the church (91). What it does set forth is that there is one new covenant that is sequentially fulfilled—at present spiritually in the church age; and later, physically to Israel in the millennium (93-97). (6) Progressive fulfillment rejects, as well, the concept of a final differentiation or separation between the earthly people of God (Israel) and the heavenly people of God (the church), opting rather for their dwelling together in the new earth (303).

These changes are substantial, and they clearly separate Progressive Dispensationalism from the other three forms. The Progressives have taken more seriously the christological fulfillment of OT prophecies/promises, and have come a long way toward responding positively to the biblical type/antitype hermeneutic, a hermeneutic that involves escalation in the NT fulfillment of the OT types.

This new volume documents the roots of Progressive Dispensationalism to (1) a rejection of the distinction in 1959 between the "kingdom of God" (as God's overall rule in the universe) and the "kingdom of heaven" (as an Israelite millennial kingdom) and (2) Ryrie's *Dispensationalism Today*, published in 1965. But these were only "roots," with the major new thrusts coming into being during the 1970s and onward. Thus, Progressive Dispensationalism, broadly speaking, has allegedly been developing for more than thirty years.

The special contribution made now in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* issues from the fact that the editors and authors of the ten chapters are for the most part NT scholars, who bring their expertise in this field to bear on traditional Dispensationalism, which overlooked the hermeneutical function of NT interpretation of the OT.

Although the three respondents are all OT scholars, they provide insightful questions and comments. VanGemenen, for instance, queries that if the older Dispensational distinction "between a new covenant for the church and another new covenant for Israel has been abandoned," how can a distinction still be maintained between Israel and the church (336-337)? But he also declares that "Covenant theologians" will

appreciate "the change in dispensational teaching regarding the church" (340). Waltke states that this new volume represents a "significant restructuring of dispensationalism within the framework of inaugurated eschatology" (347). But he points out, as well, that "no New Testament passage clearly teaches a future Jewish millennium" (353). And Kaiser feels that one of the "pleasant surprises" of this volume is that among its authors few, if any, "feel compelled to raise the topic once dear to this system; the postponed kingdom theory" (374).

However, when all is said and done, Progressive Dispensationalism still retains a significant *sine qua non* that is shared by the other three stages of Dispensational development: namely, the distinction between Israel and the church, even though this new book speaks of a "softening" of this distinction (224). The Progressive Dispensationalist authors of this volume still present the kingdom as (1) preliminary during the present inter-advent period, (2) intermediate during the millennium, and (3) eternal after the millennium. Along this progressive unfolding (or "fulfillment") of the kingdom the "parenthesis" or "intermission" (of the older Dispensationalism) is simply moved from the church age to the millennium. Although the church is given a proper place during the Christian age, there is still overly much separation between the church and Israel during the present era, rather than seeing Jews and Gentiles as together constituting the church (Eph 3:6).

Kaiser suggests that "in the next two to three years" another book should be written, perhaps "titled *Dispensationalism Tomorrow*" (373). Blaising and Bock suggest that future publications "need to carry the dialogue forward" (385). In view of the possibility of such a development, I submit here four specific suggestions that may be helpful in future discussions:

(1) It would be helpful to accept and set forth a more thoroughgoing christological hermeneutic, one which does full justice to the historical types with their biblical correspondence in Christ-centered fulfillment. For although the present Progressive Dispensationalists speak of Christ as fulfilling the covenants and promises given to Israel (38), it still clings to the older fundamental Dispensational assumption that the present fulfillment is only preliminary (84), that the church has not taken Israel's place (119, 188), that Israel did not forfeit national privileges (210-211), and that OT promises to Israel will ultimately be fulfilled in earthly terms (63-64). By contrast, a christological fulfillment is the focus of Scripture: Christ became the head (Col 1:18) of the new body (Eph 3:6, Jew and Gentile), which became the new "Israel of God" (Gal 6:16, NIV). "For no matter how

many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ" (2 Cor 1:20, NIV).

(2) Serious consideration should be given to thinking through the present reign of Christ on heaven's throne (e.g., in Hebrews and Revelation) in relation to the church as his body (Eph 5:30, Col 1:24), the one new man (Eph 2:11-15; cf. 3:6), the one olive tree (Rom 11), the one vine (John 15), the one chosen people, one holy nation, one royal priesthood (1 Pet 2:9), the one bride (Rev 19:7), and the one holy city that has names of both OT patriarchs and NT apostles on it (Rev 21:1-14). Although our Progressive Dispensationalist authors consider that there is coequality of Jews and Gentiles in Christ, Israel still remains distinct. These authors believe that Israel is to receive new-covenant political/territorial blessings which are not open to the church, for the two "remain separate in their identity" as "*differing peoples of God*" (96). By contrast, the NT presents "in Christ" as a present and future oneness of Israel with the church existentially and without distinctions. Furthermore, it should be noted that being "in Christ" is existential only, and not sequential.

(3) More thought should be given to the inaugurated-consummated eschatology of the NT, with its necessary escalation. Progressive Dispensationalists' commendable acceptance of this escalation is, in my opinion, seriously undermined by their returning to the local focus on Israel as receiving the kingdom at Christ's return. This part of their consummated eschatology ignores the fact that the new-earth escalation of the promised-land typology comes *after* the millennium (Rev 20-21), instead of being a return of Israel to Palestine during the millennium. I do not know of any example in Scripture where there is a reversal from an antitypical eschatological escalation to a local type.

(4) Finally, it would be well to give consideration to the biblical understanding of the millennium, which differs from the view given by Progressive Dispensationalism.<sup>1</sup> In fact, all four eras of Dispensationalism have held a view that is premillennial, but with the belief

<sup>1</sup>Progressive Dispensationalists believe that God's kingdom comes in three stages: (1) a stage inaugurated at Christ's first advent, (2) a millennial phase to begin at Christ's second advent, and (3) the eternal reign (see 290-291). They believe in a "greater continuity between the millennium and the eternal kingdom" (383) and that at his second advent Christ "will do all that the prophets of the Old Testament promised" (66). Hence, they look for a millennium with special significance for Israel. Concerning the land of promise they ask, "If Christ reigns from *Israel* and has authority over the whole earth, does this not solve the question about the land promises to Israel?" (390). These progressive Dispensationalists read into the millennium OT passages concerning the eternal state (see, e.g., 284), and in a similar way impose onto the millennium prophecies relating to ancient Israel (see, e.g., 392).

that the millennium is on the earth and for the Israelite. Contrary to this concept, the Bible gives no indication that the thousand years of Rev 20 will be on the earth. Several lines of evidence should be considered:

The word throne (Gr., *thronos*) is used 38 times in the book of Revelation, and it always refers to God's heavenly throne, except in three instances where the throne is on earth, but occupied by an enemy of God (Rev 2:13, 13:2, 16:10).<sup>2</sup> This biblical evidence suggests that those who will reign with Christ a thousand years (Rev 20:4) will do so at his heavenly throne, not in an earthly millennium.

Further biblical evidence that supports a heavenly millennium for God's saints is the typology of the OT "Day of Atonement" in the earthly sanctuary (Lev 16). This serves as a "type" for the "antitypical" Day of Atonement in heaven's sanctuary. The judgment and removal-of-sin process takes place in the sanctuary in both the type (Lev 16) and the antitype (Rev 20:4-6, 11-15). It is only after the millennium that completion comes to the heavenly sanctuary's process in the removal of sin and sinners on earth (Rev 20:7-10, 13-14).

Additional documentation is found in William H. Shea's analysis of the literary structures of Rev 12 and 20.<sup>3</sup> He has shown that both of these chapters follow an A-B-A' pattern, whose sequence indicates the textual flow to be earth (A) → heaven (B) → earth (A'). Since the millennium is in the B section of Rev 20, the locale is heaven.

In short, the Progressive Dispensationalists whose book I am reviewing have moved the dialogue to a new height by doing better justice to biblical inaugurated eschatology. It seems to me that the next step forward is to do justice to biblical consummated eschatology. Only thus can they come to a NT paradigm which is fully, not merely partly, christological. In doing this, they would also be more consistent in their questioning of traditional Dispensationalist hermeneutics, a task that they have nobly begun.

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<sup>2</sup>See Joel Badina, "The Millennium," in *Symposium on Revelation*, book 2, ed. Frank B. Holbrook (Silver Spring, MD: Biblica Research Institute, 1992), 240.

<sup>3</sup>William H. Shea, "The Parallel Literary Structure of Revelation 12 and 20," *AUSS* 23 (1985): 37-54.