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Critique of Progressive Dispensationalism (Blaising/Bock)

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CRITIQUE OF PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM

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Progressive Dispensationalism\(^1\) by Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock is the follow-up book to the initial work, Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition (edited by Blaising and Bock),\(^2\) which argues for significant revisions to the dispensational teachings that had united dispensationalists in past decades. Discussions about revising dispensational teachings and building bridges to non-dispersationalists began in the mid-1980s with the formation of the “Dispensational Study Group” which convened at the annual meetings of the Evangelical Theological Society.\(^3\) It was at these meetings from 1986-1992 that major revisions in dispensationalism were proposed, and Progressive Dispensationalism is a byproduct of those discussions. This seminal work has caused quite a stir among dispensationalists since its publication in 1993,\(^4\) and this paper will provide a summary of the arguments given in Progressive Dispensationalism.

In the opening chapter of the book, Blaising gives an overview of the extent and varieties of dispensationalism. He begins by sketching a brief history of the movement from its origins with Darby to its proliferation among American fundamentalists at the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. The influence of

\(^1\) Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, Progressive Dispensationalism (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993).

\(^2\) Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, eds., Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

\(^3\) A brief history of these meetings is given in Ron J. Bigalke, Jr., and Thomas D. Ice, “History of Dispensationalism,” in Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis of the Movement and Defense of Traditional Dispensationalism, ed. Ron J. Bigalke, Jr. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005), xxx-xxxiv.

\(^4\) The third major work on progressive dispensationalism was published that same by the so-called “father of progressive dispensationalism”, Robert Saucy. See Robert L. Saucy, The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational & Non-Dispensational Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).
dispensationalism was widespread due to the popularity of the *Scofield Reference Bible*, the establishment of dispensational institutions like Dallas Theological Seminary and the Moody Bible Institute, and the popular preaching ministries of men like Warren Wiersbe, J. Vernon McGee, and Chuck Swindoll. Blaising discusses some of the distinctive teachings of dispensationalism which include the uniqueness of the church, futurist premillennialism, the imminent return of Christ, and the future for the nation of Israel. These dispensational teachings cross denominational lines and are found throughout the world today.

Blaising also describes the three periods of dispensationalism as he sees them. The first movement is *classical dispensationalism* which began with Darby and ran through the time of Chafer and Scofield. Teachings of this phase include the belief that there are two peoples of God with two different purposes – one heavenly (church) and one earthly (Israel). The church is a *parenthesis of intercalation* in the history of redemption and is not related to the earthly purpose of God. The Abrahamic and New Covenants were interpreted literally for Israel and spiritually for the church, but the Mosaic, Palestinian, and Davidic Covenants were only for the earthly people of God (Israel). The *kingdom of God* refers to God’s overarching rule, and the *kingdom of heaven*

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6 Ibid., 14-21.

refers to the promised Davidic kingdom. The kingdom of heaven is now present in “mystery form” in Christendom with Christ as its king.  

The second phase of dispensationalism is what Blaising calls the revised dispensationalism of the 1950s and 1960s. The major writers in this period were John Walvoord, Alva McClain, and Charles Ryrie. They dropped the distinction between a heavenly people and an earthly people, although they kept the church and Israel separate all the way until the eternal state. They made some revisions in their understanding of the dispensations and the nature of the church, but the major distinctive of this era is Ryrie’s sine qua non with his emphasis upon consistent, literal interpretation. Blaising points out that this insistence upon literal hermeneutics as a distinctive of the dispensationalism is not characteristic of classical dispensationalism or even of the revised dispensationalists themselves at times. The revised dispensationalists also disagreed about whether there is a “mystery” form of the kingdom now or whether the kingdom is entirely futuristic.

The third phase of dispensationalism is called progressive dispensationalism (hereafter PD). Distinctive to PD is the belief that the church is not just a secondary redemption plan but that it is “a revelation of spiritual blessings which all the redeemed will share in spite of their ethnic national differences.” The dispensations are not just

8 Blaising and Bock, Progressive Dispensationalism, 23-31.


11 Ibid., 47 (emphasis original).
different arrangements but *successive* arrangements in the progress of revelation and in 
the redemptive plan of God (hence, the name *progressive* dispensationalism). The church 
is not an anthropological category separate from Israel and the Gentiles. “The church is 
precisely redeemed humanity itself (both Jews and Gentiles) as it exists in this 
dispensation prior to the coming of Christ.”

12 This body will continue in the future so that 
all the people of God, including the saved Jews and Gentiles before the church age and 
the tribulation saints after the church age, will enjoy the same level of blessing in 
fulfillment of God’s promises made to the Jews and to the church.

13 Ryrie’s literal 
hermeneutic is criticized as being overly simplistic, and PD employs typology and 
historical-literary hermeneutics in addition to grammatical-historical hermeneutics.

Blaising states that PD sees an initial fulfillment of the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New 
Covenants for the church, even though these covenants will find complete fulfillment 
with the Jewish people in the future. Finally, there is an inauguration of the kingdom of 
God in the church.

The second section of the book further discusses the hermeneutics of PD.

14 Bock 
notes that the reader must be aware of his/her own preunderstandings and worldview 
when approaching the Bible. He also argues that the original meaning of a biblical text 
may take on different meanings as later biblical writers were “influenced by the sequence 
of events growing out of the original event, as well as by the point of view brought to

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12 Ibid., 49 (emphasis original).

13 Ibid., 50-51.

14 Ibid., 57-105.
it.” Bock has in mind here the way that the New Testament (NT) writers use the Old Testament (OT). Biblical authors often reuse texts in a second way which often involves typology. This *complementary* relationship includes “the expansion of promise” but does not mean “the cancellation of earlier commitments God has made.” Additionally, Bock argues for a historical-grammatical-literary-theological hermeneutic. The historical and grammatical components are similar to revised dispensationalism. The literary-theological takes into account biblical genres for interpretations which might go beyond the literal interpretation. Bock allows for “already-not yet” tensions to exist in Scripture, such as the presence of the kingdom now (already) and in the future (not yet), and he uses the comparison of our salvation which has past, present, and future aspects to it. Finally, he promotes three levels of reading Scriptures. First is the historical-exegetical level which looks at a passage in its immediate context. Second is the biblical-theological reading which takes into account the entire book and usually yields the same meaning as the first level. Third is the canonical-systematic level in which a biblical text is read in light of the full revelation of God. Finally, he discusses some ways in which the NT authors use the OT (directly prophetic, typological-prophetic, analogical, cancellation, substitution, complementary).

15 Ibid., 66.


In chapter four, Blaising presents a detailed explanation of the biblical concept of “dispensations” (oikonomia) and the uniqueness of the church as a mystery previously unrevealed (Eph 3:1-11).\(^ {18}\) This section is helpful for those unfamiliar with the biblical teaching about dispensations and would be agreeable to all dispensationalists, whether progressive or revised. After examining the different ways in which past dispensationalists have divided history into various dispensations, Blaising proposes only four dispensations: Patriarchal to Sinai, Mosaic to Messiah’s Ascension, Ecclesial to Messiah’s Return, and Zionic: 1. Millennial, 2. Eternal.\(^ {19}\) His rationale for this scheme is that it begins with the structure of the NT dispensationalism, it is simple, and it is flexible with the idea of a dispensation to include continuities and discontinuities.\(^ {20}\) One can certainly appreciate Blaising’s goal of trying to align dispensations specifically with Scripture. Changes from dispensations, of course, require changes in covenants (e.g., from the Mosaic Law to the New Covenant). We are currently in the inaugural phase of the promised kingdom (Col 1:13), though we await the future kingdom as well (Col 3:4).\(^ {21}\)

In chapter five, Blaising looks at each of the major covenants, tracing biblical history from the Noahic Covenant to the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and New Covenants.\(^ {22}\) Again, his detailed discussion in this chapter is masterful. The chapter is really an extended Bible study, and most dispensationalists would heartily agree with the

\(^{18}\) Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 106-16.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 123.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 120-22.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 123-27.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 128-73.
majority of Blaising’s explanations here. He outlines the specific features of the covenants, including details such as the conditional experience of the blessings attached to the unconditional promises of the Abrahamic Covenant, and he rightly sees the Davidic Covenant and New Covenant as fulfillments of the Abrahamic Covenant. The Mosaic Covenant, like the conditions in the promises to Abraham, mediates the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant. Again, revised dispensationalists would appreciate Blaising’s exegesis in this chapter.

The controversial teachings of PD come out in chapter six. In discussing how Christ fulfills the biblical covenants, Blaising points out Christ was to fulfill the regal promises given to David (Luke 1:32-35). But where most former dispensationalists would see a future fulfillment of the reign of Christ from David’s throne in the millennium, Blaising believes that the apostles see Christ as already seated upon David’s throne in heaven (spiritually speaking) right now. He takes the many passages which speak of Christ’s present session at the right hand of the Father to be couched in terms that link back to the Davidic Covenant (e.g., “rule,” “seated,” “raised up”). This is where the literary-theological hermeneutics come into play. Even though there is no single verse which states that “Jesus is seated on David’s throne in heaven,” there are literary cues and allusions that clue the reader into this view. “[T]he Davidic nature of Christ’s present activity guarantees the fulfillment of all of the Davidic promise in the future, including the national and political dimensions of that promise.”

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23 Ibid., 174-85.

24 Ibid., 180.
yet” fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant.\textsuperscript{25} Similarly, Christ fulfills part of the Abrahamic Covenant since He is the Seed of Abraham (Gal 3:16) which has brought blessing to the church because the church is in Christ.\textsuperscript{26} The national and political aspects of the Abrahamic and Davidic Covenants await Christ’s return, though. Jesus fulfills the Mosaic Law as taught in the NT (e.g., Heb 8:13),\textsuperscript{27} and Jesus partially fulfills the New Covenant by mediating the blessings of the forgiveness of sins and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in the church.\textsuperscript{28} Like the previous covenants, the New Covenant also has a future fulfillment in which the promises in Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel will be fully realized.\textsuperscript{29}

Finally, Blaising discusses the concept of the kingdom of God in the OT and NT in chapters seven and eight before wrapping up with some concluding thoughts in chapter nine. The way in which he traces the idea of the kingdom of God throughout the OT, in both the overarching and the mediatorial senses, is very well done.\textsuperscript{30} Most dispensationalists will have no problem with his fine exegesis in this chapter. Much of his chapter on the kingdom of God in the NT is also argued well.\textsuperscript{31} He notes that Jesus’ kingdom was eschatological and political and that the kingdom was present (“at hand”)

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\textsuperscript{25} It is interesting to note that Saucy rejects the idea that Christ is presently “reigning”, even though he still thinks that the Davidic Covenant has been inaugurated (Saucy, The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism, 72-75).
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 187-93.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 194-99.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 199-208.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 208-210.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 213-31.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 232-83.
\end{footnotes}
when the King was present. It is also important to understand that there are both physical/material (e.g., healings, exorcisms) and spiritual components to the kingdom (e.g., Matt 6:33). However, “[Jesus] did not at that time institute the kingdom as an abiding structure for the world. It was only after the cross that He inaugurated certain aspects of the kingdom in an institutional sense.”32 The major difference between PD and revised dispensationalism is that PDs see the church age as an inaugural fulfillment of the kingdom promised to Israel, whereas the revised dispensationalists see the church as a “mystery” form of the kingdom that is not to be confused with the Israelite kingdom coming in the future. The main justification for the PD view is that Christ is now fulfilling the Davidic Covenant (partially) which is linked to the Davidic kingdom. This complements the OT promises to Israel instead of replacing them. It is about Gentile inclusion, not Israel’s exclusion.33 The present fulfillment of the kingdom and covenants is a down payment guaranteeing the future covenant blessings.34

In conclusion, the ideas set forth by Blaising and Bock in Progressive Dispensationalism do indeed mark a new movement in the history of dispensationalism. The major differences can largely be traced back to a shift in hermeneutics which opens up the door for literary-theological interpretations that are not obvious at first. However, the subjectivity involved in these interpretations calls the method into question. The fact that no one else before Blaising and Bock made the literary-theological connection

32 Ibid., 251.
33 Ibid., 267.
between Acts 2 and Psalms 110 and 132 to yield the interpretation that Christ is reigning on David’s throne in heaven highlights the subjective nature of this hermeneutic. These connections are obvious to Blaising and Bock, but they may not be obvious to others. The long explanation and the fact that there is no direct statement that Christ is ruling from David’s throne in heaven also cast doubt upon the interpretation here, not to mention the fact that Revelation 3:21 states that Jesus is currently seated on His Father’s throne in heaven. In my estimation, PD rises or falls on the legitimacy of its unique hermeneutic and its interpretation of Christ ruling on David’s throne at present. If this is proven to be unlikely or false, then PD would largely be deflated since the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant is linked to the present fulfillment of the promised kingdom.

The PD softening of the distinction between Israel and the church is also significant, but again, this is based on PD hermeneutics which allow for expansion of meaning to OT promises. This instability of meaning, though, violates the traditional principle of single meaning which leaves the interpreter in a sea of subjectivity. The other matters, such as the ways in which the church participates in the blessings of the Abrahamic and New Covenants through its relationship to Christ and the number of dispensations, are minor points in the debate. While it is always admirable for those within a tradition to seek to refine beliefs and better articulate interpretations, PD seems to be taking dispensationalism in a new direction. Revised dispensationalists have called into question whether PD should retain the name “dispensationalism”, and this subject will continue to be debated. PD has provided many critiques for revised dispensationalists to consider, and both groups will benefit from constructive criticism as
long as lines of communication stay open and as long as brothers in Christ do not part
company over these matters of secondary importance.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Bateman IV, Herbert W., editor. Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999. This book presents a debate format where traditional dispensationalists Elliott Johnson and Stanley Toussaint discuss hermeneutics, the nature of the covenants, and the relationship of Israel to the church with progressive dispensationalists Darrell Bock and Lanier Burns. The book is technical reading for those not familiar with the arguments, but the book highlights some of the differences, strengths, and weaknesses of the positions. Each of the chapters also has responses from the other side which show the reader exactly where the differences lie.

Bigalke, Ron J., Jr., editor. Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis of the Movement and Defense of Traditional Dispensationalism. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005. This volume contains sixteen chapters from fifteen contributors representing the traditional dispensational perspective in line with Ryrie, Walvoord, and Pentecost, among others. The authors critique the progressive view hermeneutics and the of the fulfillment of the covenants, and there are a few chapters which uniquely contribute to the discussion such as the chapters on cessationism and the rapture in progressive dispensationalism. This book is helpful in both understanding progressive dispensationalism and in delineating the differences between progressive and revised dispensationalism.

Blaising, Craig A., and Darrell L. Bock, editors. Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992. This is the initial book on progressive dispensationalism which officially gave birth to the movement. The authors discuss Christ’s present session on David’s throne in heaven, the unity of the church and Israel as one people of God, and the complementary hermeneutic. The book also contains three responses from non-dispensationalists.

Bock, Darrell L. “Charting Dispensationalism.” *Christianity Today* (September 1994): 26-29. In this brief but helpful article, Bock gives an explanation of what dispensationalism is to the general audience in American Christianity that may have only heard negative misconceptions of dispensationalism (e.g., that dispensationalists teach two ways of salvation for Old Testament and New Testament believers). Bock also walks the reader through a brief history of the movement and delineates the three eras of dispensationalism according to Blaising’s classification (classical, revised, progressive). In the end, he promotes his form of progressive dispensationalism.


_____. “Why I am a Dispensationalist with a Small ‘d.’” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41, no. 3 (September 1998): 383-98. In this article, Bock responds to some of the critics of progressive dispensationalism. He acknowledges similarities between his views and those of G. E. Ladd, but he points out the important difference that his own view does not include any loss of meaning for Old Testament promises when there are New Testament inaugural fulfillments. Ladd’s view was more in line with replacement theology which directly applied Old Testament promises to the church. Bock also reminds his critics that what we have in common as Christians is more important than our differences. Bock also lists some of the benefits of dispensationalism as well as some of the dangers dispensationalists face.

Saucy, Robert L. *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational & Non-Dispensational Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993. Written by the father of progressive dispensationalism, this book contributes many of the same ideas as the works by Blaising and Bock about progressive dispensationalism such as a present form of the kingdom and the unity in the people of God. The subtitle of the book really shows the purpose behind the movement of trying to build bridges to non-dispensationalists.

Willis, Wesley R., and John R. Master, editors. *Issues in Dispensationalism*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1994. This book is the response from traditional dispensationalists to the publications in 1992-1993 from progressive dispensationalists. Ice discusses the importance of hermeneutics to the discussion of dispensationalism. Hodges challenges the progressive interpretation of Acts 2. Johnson critiques the already/not yet concept of fulfillment of progressive dispensationalism. There are also three chapters dealing with the Rapture and the imminent return of Christ, and Walvoord discusses his view that the church age is the “mystery” form of the kingdom described in Matthew 13.