Critique of Progressive Dispensationalism (Bigalke)

Jordan P Ballard
CRITIQUE OF PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM:
AN ANALYSIS OF THE MOVEMENT
AND DEFENSE OF TRADITIONAL DISPENSATIONALISM

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Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis of the Movement and Defense of Traditional Dispensationalism\textsuperscript{1} represents one of the latest responses from traditional dispensational (TD) writers who see progressive dispensationalism (PD) as a radical shift or even a departure from dispensationalism altogether. This important book stands in the line of TD books\textsuperscript{2} and articles\textsuperscript{3} that have been written since the release of PD books in the early 1990s\textsuperscript{4}, and the book contains sixteen chapters from fifteen contributors.

Progressive Dispensationalism (Bigalke) presents scholarly critiques of various differences between TD and PD, and the importance of the discussion to TDs is seen in the seriousness with which they take the challenges of PD.

By way of summary, the main teachings of PD are that the Old Testament (OT) covenant promises to Israel (Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenants) are fulfilled in a progressive way throughout history, including today. Each of these covenants has

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\footnotetext[1]{Ron J. Bigalke, Jr., ed., \textit{Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis of the Movement and Defense of Traditional Dispensationalism} (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005).}
\footnotetext[2]{E.g., Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master, eds., \textit{Issues in Dispensationalism} (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994); Charles C. Ryrie, \textit{Dispensationalism: Revised and Expanded} (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996); Mal Couch, ed., \textit{Dictionary of Premillennial Theology: A Practical Guide to the People, Viewpoints, and History of Prophetic Studies} (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996); Tim LaHaye and Ed Hindson, eds., \textit{The Popular Encyclopedia of Bible Prophecy} (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2004). These books have been labeled as TD books because they favor the TD position on a number of issues, though the books in their entirety also contain chapters and articles that are agreeable to all dispensationalists, whether traditional or progressive. Another book written in a debate style between TDs and PDs is Herbert W. Bateman IV, ed., \textit{Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views} (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999).}
\footnotetext[4]{The three main books on PD are Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, eds., \textit{Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition} (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); idem., \textit{Progressive Dispensationalism} (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993); Robert L. Saucy, \textit{The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational & Non-Dispensational Theology} (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).}
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components which are “already” fulfilled in an inaugural sense in the present church
dispensation, while there are other components which are “not yet” fulfilled. The present
fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant includes the blessing to all nations through Christ
and the existence of the spiritual seed of Abraham in the church (Gal 3), but the land
promises of the covenant await a future fulfillment. The present fulfillment of the Davidic
Covenant is seen in Christ ruling from David’s throne in heaven, though His reign from
David’s throne of Jerusalem will take place during the Millennium. The present
fulfillment of the New Covenant includes the forgiveness of sins and the giving of the
Holy Spirit to the church, though the full covenantal blessings to Israel, which include
national and spiritual restoration for Israel, await the future. This form of realized
eschatology is similar to the covenantal premillennialism of G. E. Ladd, though it is a bit
more Israelitish.⁵ Because of the progressive view of the covenantal fulfillments (both
now and later), PDs do not see a radical distinction between God’s program for the
church in the present dispensation and God’s program for Israel in the future
dispensation. This is a major difference from TD and is more akin to covenantalism.

Most of the differences between TD and PD come down to hermeneutics, though. PD
rejects the consistent use of grammatical-historical (literal) interpretation in Ryrie’s sine
qua non⁶ and instead opts for a complementary hermeneutic which includes literary and
theological interpretations too. The complementary hermeneutic is key to arriving at the
viewpoints distinct to PD.

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⁵ Darrell L. Bock, “Current Messianic Activity and OT Davidic Promise: Dispensationalism,
Hermeneutics, and NT Fulfillment,” Trinity Journal 15NS (Spring 1994): 69-70; quoted in Ron J. Bigalke,
Jr., “Preface,” in Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis of the Movement and Defense of Traditional

⁶ Ryrie, Dispensationalism, 81-82.
Progressive Dispensationalism (Bigalke) presents a host of critiques of PD, and these will be examined and evaluated in order. In the introduction, Ron Bigalke and Thomas Ice write about the history of dispensationalism to challenge some of the claims made by PDs about the dispensational tradition. According to the authors, dispensationalism has been a growing and developing movement since its origins in the 19th century, so questioning the tradition and seeking to refine doctrines is nothing new in dispensationalism. In fact, Ice was present at the meetings of the Dispensational Study Group of the ETS in the mid to late 1980s when developments were being discussed. Among other things, Ryrie’s sine qua non, which had dominated discussions since 1965, was called into question. But according to Ice, PDs never did arrive at a destination in their search for destination. PDs have yet to produce their own sine qua non or essence of PD.

By avoiding essential and providing only descriptive patterns, Blaising has effectively made it impossible (using his terms) to evaluate whether or not one is truly a dispensationalist (e.g. a definition cannot be formulated if there are no discernable essentials).

Bigalke and Ice also critique Blaising’s contention that the essentialist dispensationalism of Ryrie’s sine qua non is a late development and the charge that PD is a return to Christocentricity that is missing from Scofield and Ryrie. The quotations provided in the chapter make it plain that Blaising’s arguments are unfounded. The question, then, is whether PD is really a part of the dispensational tradition.

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8 Bigalke and Ice, “History of Dispensationalism,” xxxiii.

9 Ibid., xxxiv-xxxix.
The first chapter examines the hermeneutics of PD. Robert Thomas compares the TD hermeneutic of grammatical-historical interpretation with the PD complementary hermeneutic of historical-grammatical-literary-theological. The bottom line is that PD violates the traditional principle of assigning a single meaning to Scripture promoted by Terry and Ramm, opting instead for *sensus plenior* interpretations at times. The major issue is how the New Testament (NT) authors use the OT, and Bock in particular believes that the NT writers expanded the meaning of the OT promises to include fulfillment for the church in the present age. Another example of this is Robert Saucy’s contention that Peter added meaning to Psalm 110 in his sermon in Acts 2. While this subject is vast and complex, Thomas rightly points out *sensus plenior* interpretations introduce subjectivity into the interpretative process. In summary, if one changes the rules of the game, then one is going to derive different interpretations of Scripture. While evangelicals need to rightly understand how the NT authors used the OT, objectivity in interpretation is only achieved if the interpreter upholds the single-meaning principle.


The second chapter examines and critiques the PD view of the dispensations. While there have been differences in how dispensationalists divided and labeled the dispensations, most TDs follow the sevenfold scheme of Scofield and Ryrie: Innocence (Gen 1:3-3:6), Conscience (Gen 3:7-8:14), Civil Government (Gen 8:15-11:9), Patriarchal Rule (Gen 11:10-Exod 18:27), Mosaic Law (Exod 19:1-John 14:30), Grace (Acts 2:1-Rev 19:21), and Millennium (Rev 20:1-15). PDs see the dispensations a little differently, though. Blaising sees only four dispensations: Patriarchal (Creation to Sinai), Mosaic (Sinai to Christ’s Ascension), Ecclesial (Ascension to Second Coming), and Zionic (First Part: Millennial; Second Part: Eternal State). But TDs Bigalke and Couch wonder why there are no distinctions in the first dispensation as in TD. They also question why PD makes the beginning of the Ecclesial dispensation the ascension of Christ instead of the birth of the church at Pentecost.

Chapters three through six in Progressive Dispensationalism (Bigalke) address the subject of the biblical covenants from a TD perspective. PDs believe that the church experiences an inaugural fulfillment of the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenants.

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14 Ryrie, Dispensationalism, 54.

15 Blaising and Bock, Progressive Dispensationalism, 123.

First, PD teaches that the Abrahamic Covenant is partially fulfilled in the church because Christians are called “Abraham’s seed” in Galatians 3:29. Even though the promise was originally intended for Israel and will find its future fulfillment with the nation, the promises are expanded to include those in Christ (sensus plenior). The TD view is that there are three different uses of “seed” in Scripture. There is the physical seed of Abraham in the nation of Israel (Isa 41:8). There is the promised Seed who is Christ (Gal 3:16). There is also the spiritual seed of Abraham, the church (Gal 3:29), who experiences salvation through faith in Christ. While PDs would also see these distinctions, the PD blurring of the distinction between Israel and the church into “one people of God” confuses matters when discussing the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant. Also, PD is inconsistent in seeing a fulfillment of the seed and blessing promises of this covenant but not the land promise. The distinction seems arbitrary. PDs also have a tendency to downplay the “land covenant” (or “Palestinian Covenant”) in Deuteronomy 29-30 since there is obviously no land fulfillment in the church age.

In response to the PD teaching that Christ is now ruling as a priest-king in the Melchizedekian sense like David, Cragoe argues that David was not a Melchizedekian priest. First, Melchizedek existed prior to David, so the Melchizedekian priesthood cannot be a part of the Davidic Covenant. Second, Melchizedek stood between God and Abraham, giving him superiority to Abraham (and David; cf. Heb 7:20-22). Third, the Melchizedekian priesthood of Christ is linked to the New Covenant in the NT (Hebrews

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17 Blaising and Bock, Progressive Dispensationalism, 187-93; Saucy, The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism, 134-35.


8:6; 13:20). Finally, while it is true that David assisted the Levitical priests in public worship (2 Sam 6:12-19), he never usurped their priestly authority (cf. 2 Chron 26:16-20). Thus, it is dubious whether the Davidic Covenant included a Melchizedekian component which is now being fulfilled by Christ.20

PD also sees an inaugural fulfillment of the New Covenant in the church. The key question here is whether the New Covenant has merely been ratified (TD) or whether it has been enacted (PD). In order for it to be enacted, PD must expand the meaning of the OT promises to include the church (sensus plenior). But Lewis offers several arguments as to why the New Covenant has not been inaugurated. First, Romans 9:4 states that the covenant pertains to Israel, not the church. Second, Hebrews 8:13b states, “now that which is growing old and aging is near disappearing.” If the old has not yet disappeared, then the new has not yet come. Nowhere does the NT state that the New Covenant has already come into existence. Third, both the OT and NT state that the New Covenant is made with “the house of Israel and the house of Judah” (Jer 31:31; Heb 8:8). Israel here does not mean “church.” Fourth, Romans 11:27 implies that the New Covenant will be established in the future when Israel experiences national conversion. Fifth, when the New Covenant is established, no one will need to teach his neighbor about the Lord (Jer 31:34). This is not true of today. The way that TDs have understood the New Covenant is in terms of ratification. The covenant has been ratified, but not enacted. Just as the Mosaic Covenant with Israel did not occur until Moses came down from the mountain, so the New Covenant will be enacted upon Christ’s return.21


The current reign of Christ and the concept of the kingdom are interrelated. PDs see Christ as currently reigning on David’s throne in heaven as an initial fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant, and they see the promised kingdom coming in two phases (“already/not yet”). The only difference between the present kingdom and the future kingdom is the political, nationalistic elements which are not present now. But what does it mean for the kingdom to be already fulfilled and yet to be fulfilled? This sounds like theological double-speak. As Criswell states, “The kingdom either exists on earth today or it does not. One cannot hope to arbitrarily pick and choose which prophecies are future and which are present.” TDs have typically argued that Christ’s promised kingdom was rejected by Israel and was thus postponed, even though a “mystery” kingdom is present in the church age. Others have argued for a strictly-futuristic view of the kingdom. PDs also think that Christ is ruling from David’s throne in heaven because of an exegetical link between Peter’s use of Psalm 110 (“sit” in 110:1) and Psalm 132 (“seat” in 132:11) in his Pentecost sermon. The argument is that being seated on


David’s throne is being seated at God’s right hand. But this connection is only made by supposed allusions and links. There is not a clear NT verse that states that Christ is seated on David’s throne in heaven. In fact, Revelation 3:21 states that Christ is on His Father’s throne at the present time.

Several chapters in *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Bigalke) address a variety of secondary matters in the TD-PD discussion. In chapter ten, Mal Couch argues that the “times of refreshing” in Acts 3:19 must go together with the “period of restoration” in Acts 3:21, grammatically speaking. If this is true, then there cannot be a present fulfillment of the “times of refreshing” for the church. Randall Price’s chapter on prophetic postponement in Daniel 9:24-27 is interesting but unrelated to PD. Bruce Baker makes a strong argument that cessationism, a longstanding belief among dispensationalists, is incompatible with PD. The miraculous healings in the Gospels were signs of the kingdom which was rejected and postponed according to TD, but if the kingdom has been inaugurated (as in PD), then the present age should also have these signs and wonders. If the church age does not, then the kingdom is not inaugurated. Another important consideration for PD is that if there is no clear distinction between the purposes of God for the church and for Israel, then the pretribulational Rapture of the church is pointless. This would mean that the church will both be raptured (present

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church) and will go through the Tribulation (church made up of Jews and Gentiles in the Tribulation). In reply, Blaising has recently stated, “For progressive dispensationalists, the rapture occurs at the beginning of the tribulation because God wills it so, as revealed by Paul in his Thessalonian correspondence, not because it is necessary to separate the program of the church.”

Finally, there are several important chapters in *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Bigalke) which call into question whether PD is truly dispensational. It is certainly true that dispensationalists of the past have held different opinions on things like the distinction between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven, the nature of the New Covenant (one or two), the heavenly (church) versus earthly (Israel) people, and the presence (or absence) of a “mystery” form of the kingdom in the church. But House argues that the distinction between the peoples of God is intricately linked to their purposes in God’s plan. The failure to distinguish between Israel and the church led to the amillennialism of the fourth century, and House is concerned that PD is leading students down a similar path. Even non-dispensationalists recognize that PD is moving towards covenantalism. Baker proposes a new title for the movement, “covenantal

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34 For examples, see Zeller, “Development or Departure?” 157-60.
dispensationalism”, which would more accurately describe PD as a midpoint between covenantal premillennialism and dispensationalism.\textsuperscript{35} What is more, PD seems to be in direct conflict with the Dallas Theological Seminary Statement of Faith. The DTS statement reads as follows:

We believe that three of these dispensations or rules of life are the subject of extended revelation in Scripture, viz., the dispensation of the Mosaic law, the present dispensation of grace, and the future dispensation of the millennial kingdom. We believe that these are distinct and are not to be intermingled or confused, as they are chronologically successive…. We believe that all who are united to the risen and ascended Son of God are members of the Church which is the Body and Bride of Christ, which began at Pentecost and is completely distinct from Israel.\textsuperscript{36}

It appears that PD teachings are in violation of the DTS Statement of Faith, even though PD proponents teach at that institution (e.g., Bock, Burns). If the DTS Statement of Faith is representative of dispensationalism as a whole, then PD is a departure.

In conclusion, PD has caused quite a stir in the dispensational community for over twenty years now. The heated debates seem to have taken place in the 1990s, and not much has been written from PDs on the subject in the past ten years. Written in 2005, \textit{Progressive Dispensationalism} (Bigalke) has the vantage point of looking back over the past decades to evaluate the teachings of PDs on hermeneutics, biblical covenants, the kingdom of Christ, and the people of God. In the opinion of this author, PDs have failed to make a convincing case. Their argumentation seems confused at times, and one wonders if any PD disciples will pick up the mantle in the next generation or whether students of PD will drift away from dispensationalism altogether.


\textsuperscript{36} Quoted in ibid., 168.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Beacham, Roy E. “Progressive Dispensationalism: An Overview and Personal Analysis,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 9 (2004): 5-32. In this article, Beacham gives an overview of the history and development of progressive dispensationalism, noting its affinities with non-dispensationalists like G. E. Ladd. After quoting and reviewing progressives and their distinct beliefs, Beacham rejects progressive dispensationalism because he does not accept the complementary hermeneutic. This shows that the bottom line of the debate is hermeneutics.

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 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.


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.

_____. *Progressive Dispensationalism*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993. This is the follow-up book to *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church* in which Blaising and Bock make their comprehensive case for progressive dispensationalism. Much of the book overlaps the ideas presented in the former book.


Compton, R. Bruce. “Dispensationalism, the Church, and the New Covenant.” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 8 (Fall 2003): 3-48. Compton’s article is a summary of his doctoral thesis. He examines each of the New Covenant passages in the OT and NT and explains the various approaches to understanding the relationship of the church to the New Covenant. Compton ends up taking the view that the church participates in the blessings of the New Covenant, but that the New Covenant is only ratified, not inaugurated. It will be inaugurated with Israel in the Millennium.


LaHaye, Tim, and Ed Hindson, editors. *The Popular Encyclopedia of Bible Prophecy.* Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2004. This encyclopedia contains alphabetical articles covering just about every subject related to a premillennial prophecy. Important articles for this paper include the critique of dispensationalism, the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy in Acts 2, and the New Covenant, all written from a traditional dispensational perspective.


Toussaint, Stanley D., and Jay A. Quine. “No, Not Yet: The Contingency of God’s Promised Kingdom.” Bibliotheca Sacra 164 (April-June 2007): 131-47. The authors make the case that the kingdom is postponed since it is contingent upon God’s sovereignty, the influence of the Spirit, and the response of Israel. The kingdom was at hand and was offered to Israel up through Matthew 12, but Israel’s rejection postponed the kingdom, and it was not described as being “at hand” after Matthew 12. Thus, there is no kingdom in the present time.
