

Dispensational Diversities  
by Grover Gunn  
pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church  
Jackson, TN

A Lecture given at the Bridwell Heights Presbyterian Church  
in Kingsport, TN, on October 18, 2008

My lecture tonight is on dispensational diversities. I need something as a basis for comparison, and I have decided to use our own Reformed theology for that purpose. The major issues involved in this comparison are three: the unity of God's people, the continuity of God's program and the rule of interpretation.

We will begin with the unity of God's people. Reformed theology teaches that there is one people of God through the ages. In terms of the invisible aspect of the church, these are the elect. On the last day, all the elect and only the elect will be in the Body of Christ and will be part of the Bride of Christ. There will be no second class citizens in heaven who are saved but who are not in union with Christ and not members of the body of Christ and the bride of Christ. Contrary to what many today teach, the only guests at the wedding of the Lamb will be the angels. All of humanity who are at the wedding of the Lamb will be part of the bride.

The second issue is the continuity of God's program. The New Testament church age is not a parenthesis in the kingdom program which God started in the Old Testament. The New Testament church age is a continuation of that program.

In Reformed theology, Old Testament Israel is the New Testament church in childhood, and the New Testament church is Old Testament Israel come to maturity. This analogy using the childhood and adulthood of the same man provides both continuity and discontinuity. There is discontinuity because a man is not today identical to the boy he was years ago. There is also continuity because the man and the boy are, despite their differences, the same person with the same DNA. Similarly, the New Testament church is not identical to Old Testament Israel, but both Old Testament Israel and the New Testament Church are God's one covenant people at different stages of development and in different ages.

In Reformed theology, there is also a continuity of the way of salvation through the ages. Salvation always has been by grace through faith in the Seed Redeemer. Under the old covenant, the people of God were looking ahead to the Seed Redeemer through prophecies and types. In the church age, the people of God are looking back at Jesus of Nazareth whose history is recorded in the inspired gospel accounts. Yet in both cases, the object of faith is the same person. What differs is not the object of faith but the degree of knowledge about the object of faith. This difference between the object of faith before and after the first advent of Christ is like the difference between the morning star and the evening star. The morning star is not the same as the evening star in that one appears in the morning at certain times of the year, and the other appears in the evening at other times of the year. Yet both the morning star and the evening star usually have the same referent, the planet Venus. Similarly the faith of the people of God has been directed toward the same object, Jesus, whether they were looking ahead in history through

prophecies and types or back in history through the gospel accounts.

First, there is the unity of God's people; second, the continuity of God's program; and third, there is the rule of interpretation. The very first chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith says, "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself." In other words, the best interpreter of Scripture, the only infallible interpreter of Scripture, is Scripture. We must sail the ship of interpretation in the wake of the apostles' hermeneutic. We must pattern our interpretation of the Old Testament after the example of the New Testament's interpretations of Old Testament passages. If we do that, then we learn that Old Testament prophecies giving in the contextual form of the old covenant find significant and substantial fulfillment in the contextual form of the new covenant in the church age. And the New Testament nowhere teaches that there is a coming future age when the distinctive forms of the old covenant era will be restored so that Old Testament prophecies can be fulfilled literally in terms of the old covenant form. In a dispensational sense, the new covenant church is no longer a child and has put away childish things. The New Testament nowhere teaches that the covenant people will have a second childhood with a return to something similar to the Mosaic ceremonial laws for the purpose of providing more literal fulfillments of prophecy.

Now I have given the understanding of Reformed theology on three issues: the unity of God's people, the discontinuity of God's program, and the rule of interpretation. Throughout most of its history, dispensationalism has strongly opposed the Reformed understanding of these three issues. That is why

Reformed theology has generally regarded dispensationalism as a serious error.

Reformed theology believes in the unity of God's people. Traditionally dispensationalism has believed in the disunity of God's people. Traditionally dispensationalism has believed in two peoples of God, two peoples with different purposes and different destinies. As I have said, Reformed theology sees old covenant Israel and the new covenant church as analogous to the childhood and the adulthood in the life of the same person. Dispensationalism traditionally sees old covenant Israel and the new covenant church as analogous to two distinct individuals. Dispensationalists have started criticizing Reformed theology as what they call replacement theology. They are thinking in terms of their own error even when they criticize Reformed theology. Dispensationalists criticize the Reformed teaching as replacement theology as if the Reformed understanding of the relationship of the New Testament church to Old Testament Israel is analogous to a coach taking one player off the field and replacing him with someone from the bench, or analogous to an employer firing one employee and then hiring a replacement. No, the Reformed understanding is analogous to adulthood replacing childhood in the life of an individual and is not analogous to one individual replacing another individual.

Second, Reformed theology believes in the continuity of God's program. Traditionally dispensationalism believes that the church age is an interruption in God's program for Israel, and that understanding is a rather radical discontinuity. God's program for Israel is like a clock which has stopped ticking until God's program for the church has finished. God's program for

Israel is like a train sitting still on a side track until another train representing God's program for the church has had an opportunity to pass on the track of history. Dispensationalists have traditionally viewed the church age as a parenthesis in God's program for Israel. This understanding of the church age is demonstrated graphically in the traditional dispensational interpretation of Daniel's seventy weeks prophecy found in Daniel chapter nine. In the traditional dispensational interpretation, the church age is an unforeseen parenthesis between week sixty-nine and week seventy of the seventy weeks. Week sixty-nine ended with the beginning of the church age on the Pentecost of Acts chapter two. Week seventy will start with the removal of the church from the earth through the rapture of the saints. Week seventy will be the last seven years of the recontinued old covenant dispensation with a rebuilt temple and renewed old covenant worship.

Also, because the church age is an unforeseen parenthesis in God's program for Israel, no old covenant prophecy can predict anything that happens in this period between Acts two and the rapture. All events in this prophetically unforeseen age are a previously unrevealed mystery and thus not the subject of any Old Testament prophecy.

First, the unity of God's people; second, the continuity of God's program; and third, the rule of interpretation. In Reformed theology, the ultimate rule of interpretation is to allow Scripture to interpret Scripture. Traditionally dispensationalism has emphasized strongly that the Biblical exegete must not read the New Testament back into the Old Testament. Rather one must interpret the Old Testament primarily based on one's understand

of literal language or normal language. Traditionally dispensationalists have claimed that when one does this, then the Scriptures naturally and obviously teach two peoples of God and a parenthetical church age. Or is it possible that the dispensational interpreter reads Scripture with his dispensational views on God's people and program as subconscious preunderstandings, and that these preunderstandings are the reason he regards certain interpretations as the literal or normal interpretation of the words? Is that a possibility? I think it is a probability.

Now that we have basically defined dispensationalism as it has been traditionally held and have contrasted it with Reformed theology, let's consider the development over the years over the years and some of the diverse opinions within dispensationalism.

John Darby is the father of dispensationalism. Around 1830, he came up with a new understanding of the church and prophecy based on these three new teachings: 1) there are two peoples of God through the ages, 2) the church age is a parenthesis between the sixty-ninth and seventieth week of Daniel's seventy weeks prophecy, and 3) the rapture of the saints will occur seven years before the second coming of Christ.

When Darby talked about the two peoples of God, he referred to them as the earthly people and the heavenly people. Dispensationalists stopped using that terminology for the two peoples of God a long time ago. For a long time, dispensationalists have been referring to the two peoples as Israel and the church. I remember a chapel speaker when I was a

student at Dallas Theological Seminary back in the 1970s. He was an older man, and he was introduced as some sort of patriarch of dispensationalism. As he spoke, he referred to the earthly people and the heavenly people. He said that the earthly people would become as numerous as the dust of the earth and the heavenly people would become as numerous as the stars in the heaven. I was surprised by his language because I had never heard it before. Yet this was the language used in some earlier dispensational writings.

Darby's explanation of the heavenly and earthly people is more complex than the later dispensational teaching on Israel and the church. At the time of the rapture, according to Darby, all the dead saints, both New Testament and Old Testament, will be resurrected. The resurrected saints go to the New Jerusalem as the heavenly people, and there the church saints alone are the Bride of Christ and have a prominent position over the other resurrected saints. On earth during the millennium, Israel is restored to the land promised to Abraham and is first among the nations then living on earth. These living on earth in natural bodies are the earthly people during the millennium. After the millennium, the New Jerusalem will come down to earth. The heavenly city will then be in an obvious connection with the earth but not on the earth.<sup>1</sup> In eternity, the earthly people will be the saved humans in natural, unresurrected bodies, and the heavenly people will be the saved in resurrected bodies. In eternity, the church will continue to have a place of distinction, but Israel will no longer be in a place of preeminence over the

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<sup>1</sup>Darby, John Nelson. *Synopsis of the Bible*. Vol. 5, *Colossians - Revelation*, 423.

other nations.<sup>2</sup> I think you will find that most dispensationalists today aren't familiar with Darby's definition of the earthly and heavenly people and might not believe you if you told them. I think even many dispensationalists today would regard it as far fetched and strange.

The dispensationalism taught from Darby through Lewis Sperry Chafer, who died in 1952, is sometimes called classic dispensationalism. This teaching stressed this eternal dichotomy between the earthly and heavenly destinies of the two peoples of God. It also had a tendency to describe Old Testament salvation in a way which sounded legalistic. Both of these qualities are present in this quotation from Lewis Sperry Chafer's **Systematic Theology**:

The fact that revelation concerning both Israel and the Church includes truth about God, holiness, sin and redemption by blood, does not eliminate a far greater body of truth in which it is disclosed that Israelites become such by natural birth while Christians become such by a spiritual birth; that Israelites were appointed to live and serve under a meritorious, legal system, while Christians live and serve under a gracious system; that Israelites, as a nation, have their citizenship now and their future destiny centered only in the earth, reaching on to the new earth which is yet to be, while Christians have their citizenship and future destiny

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<sup>2</sup>Elmore, Floyd S. "Darby, John Nelson." In *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, Mal Couch, 84. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1997; Blaising, Craig A. "Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition." In *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*, editor Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, 24. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992; Blaising, Craig A., and Darrell L. Bock. *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 23–24. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Bridgepoint Books, 1993.

centered only in heaven, extending on into the new heavens that are yet to be . ...<sup>3</sup>

Another distinctive of classic dispensationalism was the teaching that there is a significant distinction between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God. This distinction was taught by Darby, Scofield, Chafer and the early Ryrie.<sup>4</sup> This distinction is found in the notes of the 1917 **Scofield Reference Bible**. In his note on Matthew 3:2, Scofield defined the kingdom of heaven as "the Messianic earthly rule of Jesus Christ, the Son of David." According to Scofield, the kingdom of heaven is present now in mystery form and will be openly manifested in the millennial rule of Jesus on earth. In his notes on Matthew 6:33, Scofield defined the kingdom of God as a heavenly kingdom consisting of the saints of all ages. This distinction between an earthly kingdom of heaven and a heavenly kingdom of God supported both the dispensational distinction between an earthly people and a heavenly people<sup>5</sup> and the dispensational postponement theory. The earthly kingdom of heaven was offered to Israel at His first advent and then postponed. It exists today only in mystery form and will not be manifested until the earthly millennial rule of Jesus in the future.<sup>6</sup>

This distinction between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven is largely rejected today. The term "kingdom of heaven" is found only in Matthew's gospel. Most Bible scholars

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<sup>3</sup>Chafer, Lewis Sperry. *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 4, 30. Dallas, Texas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948.

<sup>4</sup>Bateman IV, Herbert W. "Dispensationalism Yesterday and Today." In *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views*, General Editor Herbert W. Bateman IV, 30. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1999.

<sup>5</sup>Bateman IV, Herbert W. "Dispensationalism Yesterday and Today." In *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views*, General Editor Herbert W. Bateman IV, 36. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1999.

<sup>6</sup>Bateman IV, "Dispensationalism Yesterday and Today," 27–31.

regard the term "kingdom of heaven" as simply a synonym for the term "kingdom of God." Most understand Matthew's gospel to be written initially for a largely Jewish audience, and the Jews often avoided using the word "God" and preferred using a metonymy for the word "God" such as heaven. Thus the two terms "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven" are entirely synonymous. This is confirmed by the fact that some statements made by Christ are quoted in Matthew and in another gospel with the Matthew quotation using the term "kingdom of heaven" and the quotation in the other gospel using instead the term "kingdom of God" in the very same quotation.

Before leaving classic dispensationalism, I want to comment on an important development which set the dispensational dichotomy between Israel and the church in concrete. I earlier mentioned that John Nelson Darby believed that all the dead saints, Old Testament and New Testament, would be resurrected at the time of the rapture. In 1937, Alexander Reese wrote a book entitled **The Approaching Advent of Christ**. In that book, Reese argued that if the dead Old Testament saints are resurrected at the time of the rapture of the saints, then the rapture must be a post-tribulational event occurring at the approximate time of the second coming and not a pretribulational event occurring seven years prior. His strongest text on this point was Daniel 12:1-2:

- 1 "At that time Michael shall stand up, the great prince who stands watch over the sons of your people; and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation, even to that time. And at that time your people shall be delivered, every one who is found written in the book.

2 And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt.

This text mentions a time of unprecedented trouble for the nation Israel and then next speaks of the physical resurrection of the dead as if it occurs after that time of national tribulation and not before. The dispensational response to this criticism was to agree with it. The dispensational futurists agreed with Reese that Daniel 12:1-2 teaches that the dead Old Testament saints will be resurrected after the tribulation and not before it. Yet the dispensationalists did not give up their pretribulation rapture. Here is how they managed this. Here is the classic passage on the rapture, 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17:

16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.

17 Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.

This New Testament passage says that the "dead in Christ" will rise first at the time of the rapture. The dispensationalists argued that this is a reference only to the dead New Testament saints because the Old Testament saints do not have a covenant union with Christ. So the dead New Testament saints, who are "in Christ" will rise at the time of the rapture before the tribulation, and the Old Testament saints, who are not "in Christ," will rise seven years later at the time of the second coming after the

tribulation.<sup>7</sup> In order to save the pretribulation rapture doctrine from Reese's criticism, the dispensationalists maintained with a new consistency and clarity that only the saints between Acts 2 and the rapture are in covenant union with Jesus. Dispensationalists become dogmatic that the saints of all other ages are not "in Christ" saints.

At this point, I also want to comment on the dispensational understanding of the relationship of the Jeremiah 31 new covenant to Israel and the church. The Jeremiah 31 new covenant prophecy was a prophecy regarding the nation Israel. Yet the New Testament Scriptures repeatedly refer to the Jeremiah new covenant prophecy and relate it directly to the New Testament church. Dispensationalism teaches that there is a strong dichotomy between old covenant Israel and the new covenant church and that the church age is an unprophesied parenthesis in God's program for Israel. Explaining how the New Testament data on the new covenant can be consistent with these dispensational teachings is one of dispensationalism's biggest challenges. During the era of classic dispensationalism, three of the leading figures were John Nelson Darby, the father of dispensationalism; C.I. Scofield, the editor of the **Scofield Reference Bible**; and Lewis Sperry Chafer, the founder of Dallas Theological Seminary and the author of the first dispensational systematic theology. All three of these men had a different explanation of the relationship of Israel and the church to the Jeremiah 31 new covenant.

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<sup>7</sup>Bell, Jr., William Everett. "A Critical Examination of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology." Ph.D. diss., 15–16. New York, New York: School of Education of New York University, 1967.

Let's begin with Darby's theory. Darby taught that the Jeremiah 31 new covenant is only for national Israel, and that the new covenant will be formally established for Israel in the millennium. The New Testament Christian is not under the new covenant, but he is a beneficiary of blessings based upon the blood which Jesus shed to establish the new covenant. That is Darby's theory: the Jeremiah 31 new covenant is only for national Israel and the Christian church is not under any covenant. The obvious problem with this explanation is the many passages in the New Testament which relate the Jeremiah 31 new covenant to the Christian and to the New Testament church.

Next, let's consider Chafer's theory. Chafer agreed with Darby that the Jeremiah 31 new covenant is only for national Israel. Yet Chafer also recognized that he needed an explanation for the passages in the New Testament which related the Christian church to the new covenant. Chafer argued that these references are to a new covenant made with the Christian church, but this new covenant made with the Christian church is not the Jeremiah 31 new covenant. It is a different and distinct new covenant. Chafer taught that one should classify each reference to a new covenant found in the New Testament Scriptures and decide if it is a reference to the Jeremiah 31 new covenant with Israel or to the distinct new covenant with the Christian church. Here is a quotation in which Dr. Chafer explains his theory:

There remains to be recognized a heavenly covenant for the heavenly people, which is also styled like the preceding one for Israel, a "new covenant." It is made in the blood of Christ ... and continues in effect throughout this age,

whereas the new covenant made with Israel happens to be future in its application. To suppose that these two covenants -- one for Israel and one for the Church -- are the same is to assume that there is a latitude of common interest between God's purpose for Israel and His purpose for the Church.<sup>8</sup>

So Darby says that the Jeremiah 31 new covenant is only for national Israel, and there is no new covenant for the Christian Church. Chafer says that the Jeremiah 31 new covenant is only for national Israel, but there is also another new covenant patterned after the Jeremiah 31 new covenant which is for the Christian church.

The third view is that of C.I. Scofield. He taught there is only one new covenant, the new covenant prophesied in Jeremiah 31. Yet this new covenant is applied to both national Israel and to the Christian church. It is applied to national Israel in a primary and more literal sense and to the Christian church in a secondary and less literal sense. Dr. Charles C. Ryrie expressed his reservations about the Scofield view of the new covenant:

"If the Church is fulfilling Israel's promises as contained in the new covenant or anywhere else in Scripture, then premillennialism is weakened. One might well ask why there are not two aspects to one new covenant. This may be the case, and it is the position held by many premillennialists, but we agree that the amillennialist has every right to say of this view that it is 'a practical

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<sup>8</sup>Chafer, Lewis Sperry. *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 7, 98. Dallas, Texas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948.

admission that the new covenant is fulfilled in and to the Church."<sup>9</sup>

Dr. Ryrie is here using the word "premillennialism" to refer to dispensational premillennialism. This is a quotation from Dr. Ryrie's 1953 book **The Basis of the Premillennial Faith**. Dr. Ryrie made this statement first in his master's thesis at Dallas Theological Seminary in 1947. The only difference is that in that work, instead of saying that "premillennialism is weakened," Dr. Ryrie made the much stronger statement that "premillennialism is condemned" if the church is fulfilling Israel's promises as contained in the new covenant.<sup>10</sup>

The next major event in the development of dispensationalism is the rise of revised dispensationalism. This is a reference to the views of the dispensational writers who wrote from the 1950s through the 1970s. The name comes from the revision of the **Scofield Reference Bible** which was published in 1967 as the **New Scofield Reference Bible**.

At this point, some dispensationalists were not comfortable with the teaching of different eternal destinies for a heavenly people and an earthly people. Dispensationalists stopped referring to the two peoples and spoke exclusively of Israel and the church. They also put all the people of God in the same eternal destiny, identified either as the new earth or heaven. Dispensationalists continued to teach the everlasting uniqueness of the New Testament church as the body and bride of Christ even though they taught a common destiny for the saints of all ages.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Ryrie, Charles Caldwell. *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, 118. New York: Oxford University Press, 1953.

<sup>10</sup>Bell, "A Critical Examination," 178–79.

<sup>11</sup>Blaising, "The Search for Definition," 25; Blaising, and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 31–32.

At this time in history, dispensational theologians wanted to make clear that they did not hold to a legalistic understanding of old testament salvation. They clearly stated that Old Testament salvation was by grace through faith. They did not come over completely to the Reformed perspective and say that Old Testament salvation was by grace through faith in Christ. They taught that the Old Testament saints did not understand the redemptive significance of the Old Testament prophecies and types enough to justify our saying that they were saved by grace through faith in Christ. There is an extended explanation of this view in the last paragraph of Article V of the Dallas Theological Seminary doctrinal statement.<sup>12</sup>

Even though the revised dispensationalists recognized that the law in the Old Testament could function in a context of grace, they continued to deny that God's moral law can be a guide to righteous living for the Christian in the church age.

Also, the editors of the **New Scofield Reference Bible** made a significant admission regarding literalism and the interpretation of Old Testament prophecy. They acknowledged that the animal sacrifices in Ezekiel's temple vision do not need to be interpreted literally but may be validly regarded as a general prophecy of future worship in terms of the Old Testament economy with

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<sup>12</sup>We believe that it has always been true that “without faith it is impossible to please” God (Heb. 11:6), and that the principle of faith was prevalent in the lives of all the Old Testament saints. However, we believe that it was historically impossible that they should have had as the conscious object of their faith the incarnate, crucified Son, the Lamb of God (John 1:29), and that it is evident that they did not comprehend as we do that the sacrifices depicted the person and work of Christ. We believe also that they did not understand the redemptive significance of the prophecies or types concerning the sufferings of Christ (1 Pet. 1:10–12); therefore, we believe that their faith toward God was manifested in other ways as is shown by the long record in Hebrews 11:1–40. We believe further that their faith thus manifested was counted unto them for righteousness (cf. Rom. 4:3 with Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:5–8; Heb. 11:7).”

which the original recipients of the prophecy were familiar.<sup>13</sup> This is a very significant admission. Once this principle is acknowledged in regard to one element of Old Testament worship in a Messianic prophecy, it is arbitrary to deny it in regard to other elements of Old Testament worship and other Messianic prophecies. The more this principle is applied in dispensational interpretation of prophecy, the less Judaistic will be the dispensational millennium and the closer dispensational interpretation will come to traditional Reformed prophetic interpretation.

Also during this period, many dispensationalists abandoned Scofield's rigid distinction between the terms "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven." The 1967 **New Scofield Reference Bible** no longer identifies the term "kingdom of heaven" as a specific reference to the earthly millennial rule of Jesus. The **New Scofield Reference Bible** acknowledges that the terms "kingdom of heaven" and "kingdom of God" are sometimes used synonymously. Yet the **New Scofield Reference Bible** does not totally abandon Scofield's theory that the terms are distinct. According to the **New Scofield Bible**, the two terms in some contexts still have contrasting meanings with the term "kingdom of heaven" referring to the "earthly sphere of profession" and the term "kingdom of God" referring to "the sphere of salvation entered only by the new birth."

Not all dispensationalists in this period stopped halfway. Some dispensationalists, such as Stanley Toussaint and the later

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<sup>13</sup>Scofield, C.I., editor. *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, 888. New York: Oxford University Press, 1967.

Charles Ryrie, accepted that the two terms "the kingdom of heaven" and "the kingdom of God" are entirely synonymous.<sup>14</sup>

The next development in dispensational theology is progressive dispensationalism. This occurred in the mid-1980s largely as a result of dispensational discussions at meetings of the Evangelical Theological Society. The word "progressive" in progressive dispensationalism doesn't mean that these are dispensationalists who are progressive in the sense of theologically liberal. The word "progressive" here refers to the fact that these dispensationalists recognize the church age as a stage in the progression of God's kingdom program which began in the Old Testament. This is a radical departure from the traditional dispensational teaching that the church age is a parenthesis in God's program for Israel begun during the Old Testament era. Dispensationalists are today debating whether progressive dispensationalists are really dispensationalists at all.

In my next lecture, I will look at progressive dispensationalism.

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<sup>14</sup>Bateman IV, "Dispensationalism Yesterday and Today," 23–31.

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