

Progressive Dispensationalism
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In his 1965 book **Dispensationalism Today**, Dr. Charles Ryrie referred to the older and the newer dispensationalists.¹ More recent dispensationalists have used the designations classical dispensationalism and revised dispensationalism. The designation classical dispensationalism is used to describe the dispensational teaching found in the works of 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. The designation revised dispensationalism is used to describe the dispensational teaching taught by certain dispensational theologians starting in the late 1950s and embodied in the revised notes of the 1967 **New Scofield Reference Bible**.² These were probably the two varieties of dispensationalism which Dr. Ryrie was referring to when he spoke of the older and newer dispensationalists. We discussed the differences between classical dispensationalism and revised dispensationalism in a previous lecture.

In the mid-1980s, a third variety of dispensationalism arose, and it has come to be called progressive dispensationalism.

¹Ryrie, Charles Caldwell. *Dispensationalism Today*, 207. Chicago: Moody Press, 1965.

²Blasing, Craig A., and Darrell L. Bock. *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 22. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Bridgepoint Books, 1993.

Dispensational critics of progressive dispensationalism have questioned whether progressive dispensationalism is a modification of dispensationalism or an abandonment of dispensationalism. The designation "progressive dispensationalism" was chosen to signify the progressive dispensationalists' belief that the church age is not a parenthesis in God's program for Israel but rather a stage in the progression of God's program for Israel. This raises the question as to whether a dispensationalist can reject the traditional dispensational belief that the church age is a parenthesis in God's program for Israel and still be a dispensationalist.

One traditional dispensationalist recently wrote regarding the progressive dispensationalists, many of whom he regards as personal friends, that he "believes they have truly ceased to be dispensationalists except by using an elastic sense of the word."³ Dr. Charles C. Ryrie has given the following evaluation of progressive dispensationalism:

"Progressive dispensationalism appears to be a change from rather than a development within normative dispensationalism. Where it will lead or what significance it will have cannot be predicted."⁴

I found another evaluation of progressive dispensationalism from a respected non-dispensationalist scholar who has friends who are progressive dispensationalist scholars. This evaluation

³House, Wayne. "Dangers of Progressive Dispensationalism." In *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis of the Movement and Defense of Traditional Dispensationalism*, editor Jr. Bigalke, Ron. J, 329. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 2005.

⁴Ryrie, Charles C. "Dispensationalism." In *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology: A Practical Guide to the People, Viewpoints, and History of Prophetic Studies*, General Editor Man Couch, 97. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1996.

implies that the term "progressive dispensationalism" is used so broadly at the present time that the theology of progressive dispensationalists needs to be evaluated on a case by case basis. This nondispensational scholar is Dr. Greg Beal, who received his Th.M. at Dallas Theological Seminary in 1976, which is when I also was studying there, and who is now professor of New Testament at Wheaton College. Here are two statements from a lecture Dr. Beal gave on October 15, 2007:

"I have very good friends who are scholars who are dispensational, and we get along great. And one reason we do is because we agree with the database, that the Bible is inerrant."⁵

"Progressive dispensationalists ... you never know. Everybody kind of has a different definition among progressive dispensationalists. Some are very much like regular dispensationalists, and some are very much like me. Believe it or not, it's kind of strange."⁶

Let me give you a little history of this movement. In the 1980s, some dispensationalists wrote articles in which they disagreed with interpretations and views of older dispensationalists. Perhaps foremost among these was Dr. Robert Saucy of Talbot Seminary in southern California. Some regard him as the father of progressive dispensationalism. In 1985, the Evangelical Theology Society meet at Talbot. At that meeting, a group that met informally formed the Dispensational Study Group. The

⁵Beal, Greg K. "The Temple and the Church's Mission." Lecture, 1:28:50. Anaheim, California: Christ Reformed Church (URCNA), 2007, 30 March. <http://links.christreformed.org/realaudio/20070330a.mp3>.

⁶Beal, "The Temple and the Church's Mission," 1:34:20.

Dispensational Study Group had its first official meeting in conjunction with the 1986 meeting of the Evangelical Theology Society. At that meeting, Dr. Craig Blaising read a paper in which he discussed the changes in dispensationalism over the years. At the 1987 meeting of the Dispensational Study Group, Dr. Darrell Bock read a paper which argued that the ascended Jesus' present reign at the right hand of God the Father is a fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant. This was a significant departure from previous dispensational teaching which insisted that Christ could not begin to fulfill the Davidic Covenant until He is reigning on earth from earthly Jerusalem. Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock were at the time both on the faculty of Dallas Theological Seminary. They were the major influence in these discussions at the Dispensational Study Group meetings and in the development of this new variety of dispensationalism.

In the 1991 meeting of the Dispensational Study Group, the term "progressive dispensationalism" was introduced for the developing new view.⁷ At the 1992 meeting, Bock and Blaising presented their new book **Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition**. The introduction was an edited version of the paper Craig Blaising had read at the first meeting of the Dispensational Study Group in 1986.⁸ The first chapter was an edited version of the paper which Darrell Bock had read at the second meeting in 1987. The book included articles by nine other dispensationalists and responses by three non-dispensationalists.

⁷Blaising, and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 22–23.

⁸Bigalke Jr., Ron J., and Thomas D. Ice. "Introduction: History of Dispensationalism." In *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis of the Movement and Defense of Traditional Dispensationalism*, editor Jr. Bigalke, Ron. J, xxx-xxxii. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 2005.

In 1993, Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock published a second book called **Progressive Dispensationalism**. Also in 1993, Robert Saucy published the book **The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Theology**. These three books are at this point the major resources on explaining progressive dispensationalism. I want to share with you and comment on some quotations from these sources as a basis for examining progressive dispensationalism.

Let's begin with a statement Dr. Saucy makes about the pretribulation rapture doctrine:

"While most dispensationalists probably hold to a pretribulation rapture of the church as being in certain respects more harmonious with dispensationalism in general, many would not desire to make this a determining touchstone of dispensationalism today. For these the broad dispensational interpretation of biblical history does not ultimately stand or fall on the time of the rapture."⁹

Craig Blaising has stated that progressive dispensationalists regard the tribulation saints as members of the body of Christ and part of the New Testament church.¹⁰ It does seem contradictory to teach that the church is removed from earth before the rapture but then continues to have members on earth during the tribulation period following the rapture. Yet Craig

⁹Saucy, Robert L. *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Theology*, 8–9. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993.

¹⁰Zeller, George. "Development or Departure?" In *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis of the Movement and Defense of Traditional Dispensationalism*, editor Jr. Bigalke, Ron J., 171. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 2005.

Blaising, Darrell Bock and other progressive dispensationalists still hold to a pretribulation rapture.¹¹

I think you will agree that this downplaying of the pretribulation rapture is not typical for dispensationalists. They are usually very dogmatic on this and regard it as a necessary deduction from their understanding of the church age as a parenthesis between weeks sixty-nine and seventy of Daniel's seventy weeks prophecy combined with their strong dichotomy between Israel and the church.

Progressive dispensationalism also downplays the dispensational view of the church age as a parenthesis. This is not surprising since this is the implication of the word "progressive" in the term "progressive dispensationalism." Here are some more quotations from Dr. Saucy's book on progressive dispensationalism:

"Israel and the church are no longer viewed as representing two different purposes and plans of God, as some earlier dispensationalists taught; they are now seen as sharing in the same messianic kingdom of salvation history."¹²

"The historical plan of God ... is one unified plan. Contrary to traditional dispensationalism, it does not entail separate programs for the church and Israel that are somehow ultimately unified only in the display of God's glory or in

¹¹Blaising, and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 317 footnote 15; Swindoll, Charles R. "Foreword." In *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views*, General Editor Herbert W. Bateman IV, 9. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1999; Alifano, John A. *The Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine and the Progressive Dispensational System: Are They Compatible?* 2002 thesis, 17–18. Boca Raton, Florida: Dissertation.Com, 2004.

¹²Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 8–9.

eternity. The present age is not a historical parenthesis unrelated to the history that precedes and follows it; rather, it is an integrated phase in the development of the mediatorial kingdom. It is the beginning of the fulfillment of the eschatological promises. Thus the church today has its place and function in the same mediatorial messianic kingdom program that Israel was called to serve."¹³

I would have to say that progressive dispensationalism appears to join with Reformed theology in rejecting the traditional dispensational parenthesis theory. I could say this with more confidence if I could find a progressive dispensationalist affirming that there is no parenthesis between the sixty-ninth and seventieth week of Daniel's seventy week vision. So far I have not found any comments in progressive dispensational books on this vision found in the ninth chapter of Daniel. Daniel's seventy weeks vision is a key passage in the traditional dispensational defense and explanation of their parenthesis theory.

Let's next consider the progressive dispensational view of Israel and the church. Progressive dispensationalist Craig Blaising teaches that the elect of all ages will have in eternity the same full salvific benefits and will be a part of the one people of God:

"... progressive dispensationalism advocates a *holistic and unified* view of eternal salvation. God will save humankind in its ethnic and national plurality. But, He will bless it with the same salvation given to all without distinction; the same, not only in justification and regeneration, but also in

¹³Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 28.

sanctification by the indwelling Holy Spirit. These blessings will come to all without distinction through Jesus Christ, the King of Israel and of all the nations of redeemed humanity."¹⁴

"Those Jews and Gentiles who compose the church prior to Christ's coming join the redeemed Jews and Gentiles of earlier dispensations to share equally in resurrection glory. Those who during their dispensation had certain blessings only in promise or in an inaugurated form will be brought to the same level of complete fulfillment when they are raised together from the dead."¹⁵

The saints in this age do receive greater spiritual blessings than the saints under the old covenant who lived before Christ completed His atoning work and before Christ poured out the Holy Spirit in new covenant fullness. Yet the time of the full application of Christ's saving work is still future, and the saints of all ages will receive the full application at that time. This is the teaching of Hebrews 11:39-40:

- 39 And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise,
40 God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us.

I want to share with you a quotation from progressive dispensationalist Dr. Saucy which expressed this conviction that

¹⁴Blaising, and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 47–48.

¹⁵Blaising, and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 50.

there is ultimately only one people of God. Here is what Dr. Saucy says:

"The crucial distinction between dispensational and non-dispensational interpretations of Scripture centers on the meaning of Israel and the church. ... Even on the crucial issue, many dispensationalists see much greater unity than that taught by their forerunners. Instead of asserting a radical dichotomy of purpose and destiny, they see both Israel and the church as belonging to the one people of God and serving one historical purpose."¹⁶

This progressive dispensational emphasis on the ultimate unity of the people of God is all very encouraging. Their understanding on this point may indeed have more in common with Reformed theology than it does with more traditional dispensationalist. Yet the progressive dispensational teaching is not identical with the Reformed understanding. I think I can best show this by summarizing and distinguishing the three views on the people of God in eternity.

1. The Reformed understanding is that in eternity all the elect from all ages will be the one people of God. They will all have the same full salvation. They will all be members of the universal church, which will be the body and bride of Christ for eternity.
2. The traditional dispensational view is that the church in its most possible universal sense is limited to the saints who were saved at some point between the first Pentecost after

¹⁶Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 187.

Christ's death and the rapture at the end of this age. In this view, only the church so defined will ever be in covenant union with Christ, and the church so defined will be a distinct group from the elect of all other ages for eternity.

3. Progressive dispensationalism agrees with the Reformed view that the elect from all ages will all have the same full salvation and will all equally be God's people in eternity. Yet progressive dispensationalism is not saying that the elect saints from all ages are all members of a universal glorified church. Progressive dispensationalism continues to think of the church as only the elect from this present age. Dr. Blaising thinks of the people of God in eternity in terms of three levels of identification. First, all the elect in eternity are members of the one people of God who all have the same full salvation. Second, all the elect in eternity are divided into nations or ethnic groups which consist of the nation Israel and multiple Gentile nations. Third, the elect within each such nation consist of church saints, old covenant saints, millennial saints and tribulation saints. The progressive dispensationalists are still maintaining a dichotomy between Israel and the church; they are not giving it the same significance and priority that more traditional dispensationalists do.

Here is Dr. Blaising's position in his own words:

"The prophetic promises envision Christ ruling forever over the nations of the redeemed. The church is not another 'people-group' in that picture. ... Redeemed Jews and Gentiles will share equally in the completed blessings of

the Spirit. The church in this dispensation testifies to this aspect of redemption. The same redeemed Jews and Gentiles will be directed and governed by Jesus according to their different nationalities. The national identities and political promises of Israel and the Gentiles in the last dispensation [last in the sense of previous, the age of the Old Testament - Gunn] testifies in turn to this aspect of redemption.

"We can illustrate this progressive dispensational view of the church in the case of Jewish Christians. A Jew who becomes a Christian today does not lose his or her relationship to Israel's future promises. Jewish Christians will join the Old Testament remnant of faith in the inheritance of Israel. Gentile Christians will be joined by saved Gentiles of earlier dispensations. All together, Jews and Gentiles, will share the same blessing of the Spirit, as testified to by the relationship of Jew and Gentile in the church of this dispensation. The result will be that all peoples will be reconciled in peace, their ethnic and national differences being no cause for hostility."¹⁷

My evaluation is that the progressive dispensational view as represented by Dr. Blaising is neither a traditional dispensational view nor a consistently Reformed view. Dr. Blaising's view is somewhere in between.

Another area of interest is the progressive dispensational view of Old Testament salvation. Based on Dr. Saucy's view on this subject, here is an area where progressive dispensationalists

¹⁷Blaising, and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 50.

remain within the dispensational camp. Dr. Saucy agrees with the revised dispensational view that salvation under the old covenant was by grace through faith but not by grace through faith in Christ. Here is what Dr. Saucy says in his book on progressive dispensationalism. He first refers to "the distinctions between the preChristian era and that of the new covenant following Christ's redemptive work," and then he says this:

"One such distinction that is often noted is the change in the specific object of faith which took place as the revelation of God's salvation unfolded. According to dispensationalists, the Old Testament saints could not have expressly placed their faith in Christ and the saving work of his death and resurrection in the same way believers could after those events took place."¹⁸

Dr. Saucy states here that the object of faith changed "following Christ's redemptive work." He then misrepresents Reformed theology as teaching that the old covenant saints had as much knowledge of the historical Jesus as do new covenant believers. That, of course, is not the case. The point is that God's promises starting with the promise of a Seed-Redeemer in Genesis 3:15 have had Jesus as their ultimate reference. We don't deny that the old covenant saints understood much less about the object of their faith than do new covenant saints. Contrary to Dr. Saucy, what has changed is not the object of faith but the degree of knowledge concerning the object of faith.

Let's now consider another area where progressive dispensationalists have diverged from more traditional

¹⁸Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 16.

dispensationalism. Dispensationalists have traditionally been dogmatic that the current reign of the ascended Christ at the right hand of the Father in heaven is not a fulfillment of the Davidic covenant. In contrast to that, Dr. Darrell Bock says the following:

"... Jesus' resurrection-ascension to God's right hand is put forward by Peter as a fulfillment of the Davidic covenant, just as he allusion to Joel fulfills the new covenant. ... The throne on which Jesus is said to sit is the one promised to David's descendant through the Davidic promise of 2 Samuel, which was initially passed on through Solomon. Jesus sits here as David's promised Son on David's promised throne. This fits Old Testament imagery as well. The idea of sitting describes the idea of rule, as the parallelism of Jeremiah 22:30 shows. As the Davidic heir, Jesus sits in and rules from heaven."¹⁹

Traditional dispensationalists teach that Jesus will not sit on the throne of David and fulfill the Davidic covenant until he returns to earth and sits on an earthly throne in earthly Jerusalem. Progressive dispensationalists, in agreement with Reformed theology, believe that Jesus is already fulfilling the Davidic covenant and is already sitting on the throne of David.

I now want to consider the progressive dispensationalist view of interpretation. Here is what progressive dispensationalist Darrell Bock says:

¹⁹Bock, Darrell L. "The Reign of the Lord Christ." In *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*, editor Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, 49–50. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992.

"There are differences between progressives and earlier expressions of dispensationalism, but they are not a dispute over spiritualizing, nor are they about serious deviations in the historical-grammatical method. They are debates over how to read the Bible in a normal literary-theological manner and as a canonical whole. The dispute is about the most appropriate way to synthesize vast amounts of biblical material. Both approaches respect the Scripture and seek to read it faithfully. They simply disagree on how this is best and most consistently done."²⁰

Dr. Bock then says that some more traditional dispensationalists

"set forth certain fundamental rules that must be present for interpretation to be valid or consistent and then argues that passages must be read accordingly. ... the rules of the game are determined principally before one reads the text. In effect, competing readings are ruled out by definition before the passages are looked at in their exegetical and canonical contexts."²¹

Dr. Bock later explains the distinctives of his progressive dispensational hermeneutic:

"When progressives speak of a complementary relationship between the Old Testament and New Testament texts, they are claiming that a normal, contextually determined reading

²⁰Bock, Darrell L. "Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism." In *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views*, General Editor Herbert W. Bateman IV, 85–86. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1999.

²¹Bock, "Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism," 86.

often brings concepts from the Hebrew Scripture together in the New Testament in a way that completes and expounds what was already present in the older portion of God's Word. As revelation proceeds, the texts themselves, New and Old Testament, are brought together in a way that links concepts together, so that both old and fresh associations are made (Matt. 13:52). Such fresh associations, canonically determined and defined, have a stable meaning because they emerge from within a normal reading of the text. In sum, if there is a difference between progressives and more traditional dispensational readings, it is that progressives are asking dispensationalists to work more integratively with the biblical text ..."²²

In the quotations above, Dr. Bock mentions reading the Bible "in a normal literary-theological manner and as a canonical whole." I think that is a pregnant statement full of meaning. In modern times, there have been significant advances in the science of language, and some theologians have used these new linguistic and literary insights in their study of Scripture. In the light of these developments in the understanding of language and literature, the older dispensational emphasis on literal or normal interpretation seems simplistic. In the wake of these developments, progressive dispensationalists are more open to varying literary options in reading a text. They are no longer willing to define literal interpretation in such a way that it greatly restricts the possible meaning of a text before one has even examined the text. By reading the Bible "as a canonical whole," I believe Dr. Bock is referring to allowing the teaching of Scripture as a whole to help illuminate the meaning of an

²²Bock, "Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism," 89.

individual passage. One's understanding of the teaching of Scripture as a whole is his theology, and this is what I refer to as theological interpretation. The New Testament can shed light on the meaning of an Old Testament passage by expounding and completing what is already there. The New Testament can develop an Old Testament passage without contradicting it by revealing new specifics about its meaning. An Old Testament passage can have a fulfillment in the New Testament church age. The passage does not have to be interpreted so narrowly in terms of its original broad context that it can have no further fulfillments after the Old Testament until the Old Testament context is re-established in a future dispensational millennium.

This progressive dispensational hermeneutic sounds very much like a Reformed theology hermeneutic. Therefore we need next to examine how the progressive dispensationalists distinguish their hermeneutic from nondispensational hermeneutics.

Herbert Bateman says this about progressive dispensationalist Darrell Bock:

"Bock ... simply acknowledg[es] that dispensationalists and nondispensationalists alike attempt to interpret Scripture literally when exercising a historical-grammatical hermeneutic. The primary difference comes in how one relates the results of canonical integration. The nondispensationalist argues that Israel becomes subsumed in the church. The dispensationalist argues that Israel retains an identity in God's plan."²³

²³Bateman 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, 37–38. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1999.

Dr. Bock says this:

"We have posited this approach as an alternative to two other ways of integrating texts, namely substitution (e.g., church for Israel), which is what covenantal readings do, and repetition (e.g., Israel must mean ultimately only millennial application), which is what other expressions of dispensationalism tend to do. It is the difference in integrating texts that serves as our point of discussion."²⁴

"It is our refusal to substitute with regard to these ultimate meanings that makes our approach dispensational in orientation. There is maintained here a distinction between Israel and the church, even though it is less distinct than other dispensational expressions of the difference."²⁵

At this point, I want also to quote for you Dr. Saucy's explanation of how progressive dispensationalism differs from nondispensational systems. Here is Dr. Saucy's explanation:

"The question may be raised as to whether such a revised dispensationalism is still legitimately 'dispensationalism.' We have chosen to keep this terminology because of its association with dispensationalism's traditional interpretation of the prophecies concerning the nation of Israel. Anyone who asserts not only the restoration of Israel as a national entity but also a future role for that nation in God's kingdom program has been generally identified as

²⁴Bock, "Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism," 90.

²⁵Bock, "Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism," 113 footnote 16.

dispensationalist. The new dispensationalism retains such a future for Israel.²⁶

Dr. Saucy here says that he has a continuing right to categorize himself as a dispensationalist because he believes in the national restoration of Israel. I could give you quotations where Dr. Bock has said basically the same thing.²⁷ Also, my previous quotation about Dr. Bock stated that he regards the distinguishing mark of dispensational interpretation to be "that Israel retains an identity in God's plan."

I both agree and disagree with Dr. Saucy and Dr. Bock on this point. I disagree with them in that I do not believe that this belief in a future national restoration for ethnic Israel is by itself enough to distinguish progressive dispensationalism from all forms of Reformed theology. I agree with Dr. Saucy and Dr. Bock that there are distinctives about their belief in a future for Israel which are distinctively dispensational.

First, a belief in a prophetic future for the Jews is not enough by itself to distinguish progressive dispensationalism from all forms of Reformed theology. There were some Reformed theologians who believed in a prophetic future for ethnic Israel centuries before John Nelson Darby and the origin of dispensationalism. In the sixteenth century, Martin Bucer, Peter Martyr and Theodore Beza, Calvin's successor at Geneva, all believed that the Bible teaches a future calling of the Jewish people to Christ.²⁸ In Romans 11, Paul had said that "all Israel will be

²⁶Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 9.

²⁷See also Bock, "Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism," 98,109 footnote 7.

²⁸Murray, Iain H. *The Puritan Hope: A Study in Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy*, 41. Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1971.

saved," and later editions of the *Geneva Bible*, such as the 1599 edition, had a note on Romans 11 stating that the Old Testament predicted the future conversion of the Jews as a nation to Christ.²⁹ In the seventeenth century, this was a common expectation among English Puritans.³⁰ Not all Puritan interpreters expected a Jewish revival, and not all Puritan interpreters who expected a Jewish revival expected a Jewish restoration to the land of Palestine. Yet many Puritan interpreters did believe in a coming Jewish revival or in a coming Jewish revival and restoration. This conviction held by many Puritans was primarily based on their understanding of Paul's statement in Romans 11 that "all Israel will be saved." They interpreted "all Israel" to refer to a future generation of Jews who will predominately come to faith in Jesus.

This history of Puritan interpretation demonstrates that a belief in a future national restoration for ethnic Israel is not by itself enough to distinguish progressive dispensationalism from all forms of Reformed theology. My second point is that there are distinctives about the progressive dispensational belief in a future for Israel which are still dispensational.

Many Reformed interpreters do not believe there are any unfulfilled prophecies regarding ethnic Israel. They believe that all unfulfilled prophecies about God's people refer to the

²⁹Toon, Peter. "The Latter-Day Glory." In *Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel: Puritan Exchatology 1600 to 1660*, editor Peter Toon, 24. Cambridge: James Clark & Co., 1970.

³⁰Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 43–44,49–50,52–53; Toon, "The Latter-Day Glory," 23–41; Toon, Peter. "The Question of Jewish Immigration." In *Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel: Puritan Exchatology 1600 to 1660*, editor Peter Toon, 115. Cambridge: James Clark & Co., 1970; Toon, Peter. "Conclusion." In *Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel: Puritan Exchatology 1600 to 1660*, editor Peter Toon, 126. Cambridge: James Clark & Co., 1970; A.R. Dallison. "Contemporary Criticism of Millenarianism." In *Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel: Puritan Exchatology 1600 to 1660*, editor Peter Toon, 107 footnote 4,113–114. Cambridge: James Clark & Co., 1970.

Christian church, not as a replacement or substitute for Israel but as Israel come to maturity in the age of the new covenant. In contrast to that, more traditional dispensationalists believe that all unfulfilled Old Testament prophecies about the people of God refer to ethnic Israel and that none of these will be fulfilled until the church has been removed from the earth at the end time rapture. In the middle we have the Reformed theologians who interpret the "all Israel" of Romans 11 to be the ethnic Jews, and also in the middle we have the progressive dispensationalists. They both believe in a prophetic future for ethnic Israel, and they both believe that the church fulfills Old Testament prophecies in this age.

Are these final two views substantially the same? I have to say no on two levels. First, in terms of general principles, these two views still have substantial differences. These Puritans regarded these Old Testament prophecies about the people of God in the age of the Messiah as referring primarily to the Christian church because they regarded the Christian church as spiritual Israel in this age. They also were largely postmillennial and had the optimistic conviction that all nations will one day be discipled to Christ. They also believed that this fulfillment of the Great Commission will include the ethnic Jews in spite of their history of rejecting Jesus as the Messiah. They also believed that some Old Testament prophecies could be interpreted as referring either secondarily or exclusively to this future regrafting of ethnic Israel onto spiritual Israel, which is in this age the Christian church. They believed that they could apply Old Testament prophecies to this coming national conversion of the Jews because Paul did this very thing in Romans chapter 11:

Romans 11:26-27

- 26 And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob;
- 27 For this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins."

Paul here quotes Old Testament Scriptures as proof texts for his statement that "all Israel will be saved," and these Puritans understood the term "all Israel" here to be referring to a future generation of Jews.³¹

Now let's contrast with that understanding the progressive dispensational understanding. They still talk disparagingly of Reformed interpretation as a replacement theology which substitutes the church for Israel. Yet contrary to more traditional dispensationalists, they also believe that the church does fulfill Old Testament prophecies in this age in some sense. Here is my theory about what they are thinking. You might remember that dispensationalists have three major theories about the relationship of the Christian church to the Jeremiah 31 new covenant. The most popular view is the one associated with Scofield. This is the view that the Jeremiah 31 new covenant will have a fuller, more literal fulfillment through Israel in the millennium, but it also has a more limited spiritual fulfillment through the church in this age. More traditional dispensationalists limit this approach to the new covenant. The progressive dispensationalists appear to have applied this approach to the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants as well. Applying this approach to the Davidic covenant affected their

³¹Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 73–76.

interpretation of Christ's present reign and decisively compromised the parenthesis theory. Applying this approach to the Abrahamic covenant affected their understanding of the seed of Abraham and blurred the distinction between Israel and the church.

As I said in an earlier lecture, fitting the dispensational system with Scripture is like trying to put a square peg in a round hole. What Scofield did was to whittle a bit off the square peg so that it would fit better in the round hole. The dispensational purists object to the whittling.

I think the progressive dispensationalists, for the same reason, have been whittling on the dispensational understanding of biblical covenants in addition to the new covenant. They have treated the Abrahamic covenant and the Davidic covenant in a way similar to how Scofield treated the new covenant. As a result, the progressive dispensationalists have moved away from a traditional dispensationalist theology and have moved toward a Reformed theology. Yet they have not gone all the way. They are still somewhere in the middle.

In progressive dispensationalism, the church fulfillments of Old Testament prophecy in this age are secondary spiritual fulfillments. The future more literal fulfillments through Israel are more substantial fulfillments which only Israel can fulfill. This approach is certainly not substantially the same as the Puritan view I explained earlier. This approach is still somewhat dispensational.

The Puritans who expected a future Jewish revival and restoration had a different general approach from the progressive dispensationalists. They also differed from dispensationalists in general on certain specific conclusions. They held 1) that the converted Jews will become a part of the Christian church, 2) that there will be no re-establishment of any Jewish ceremonial laws such as the Passover or burnt offerings, 3) that the Jewish temple in Jerusalem will not be rebuilt, and 4) that the converted Jews will not be given any special privileges such as ruling the Gentile nations from Jerusalem.³²

Let me try to express these hermeneutical differences from another perspective. The progressive dispensationalists are still thinking in terms of more literal and less literal fulfillments. They expect a more literal fulfillment of Old Testament covenants and prophecies in the Jewish millennium and a less literal and more spiritual fulfillment in the present church age. I instead think of a fulfillment in substance first in the contextual form of the old covenant and then in the contextual form of the new covenant. There will never be a re-establishment of the old covenant environment in the future for the sake a more complete literal fulfillment. For the covenant people in redemptive history, the old covenant was dispensational childhood, and the new covenant is dispensational adulthood. The covenant people will not have a second childhood. As Paul said, when he became an adult, he put away childish things.

³²Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 77–79; a Brakel, Wilhelms. *The Christian's Reasonable Service in Which Divine Truths Concerning the Covenant of Grace Are Expounded, Defended Against Opposing Parties and Their Practice Advocated as Well as the Administration of This Covenant in the Old and New Testaments*. Editor Joel R. Beeke. Translator Bartel Elshout. *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, Vol. 4, pages 530–31. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformation Heritage Books, 1995.

In progressive dispensationalism, the church fulfillments of Old Testament prophecy in this age are secondary spiritual fulfillments. The future more literal fulfillments through Israel are more substantial fulfillments which only Israel can fulfill. This approach is still somewhat dispensational.

This evaluation is confirmed by occasional statements by progressive dispensationalists. For example, Dr. Saucy seems to believe that there will be a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. He says this about his understanding of the millennium:

"[Both Gentiles and Israel] will worship together in God's temple at Jerusalem ..."³³

At one place, Dr. Bock comments on "a reference to the Passover meal, an Israelite feast, at the eschatological banquet table."³⁴ The Passover is not only a religious meal but also a bloody sacrifice and a redemptive type, and Reformed theology regards these as abrogated by the finished sacrifice of Christ. Elsewhere Dr. Bock says this:

"One can have a future for national Israel without being required to reinstitute all of the practices of the Mosaic Law, something Hebrews 8-10 is quite clear was altered by the coming of Christ."³⁵

This statement is certainly a significant step in the right direction, but I believe a Reformed theologian would have said,

³³Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 124.

³⁴Bock, "The Reign of the Lord Christ," 59.

³⁵Bock, "Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism," 93.

"One can have a future for national Israel without being required to reinstitute *any* of the practices of the Mosaic *ceremonial* Law."

Dr. Saucy believes that there will be a Jewish national supremacy over all other nations during the millennium³⁶ and Dr. Bock believes that millennial Israel will have a central and decisive role.³⁷ In contrast, those Puritans who believed in a national restoration for a revived ethnic Israel believed that there is no longer any Jew or Gentile in regard to special privileges or exalted prominence. They believed that a restored national Israel would be simply one nation among the many nations disciplined through the Great Commission and devoted to Jesus, and would not have a special standing and significance as it did under the old covenant.³⁸

In spite of these vestiges of more traditional dispensationalism in progressive dispensationalism, we have seen that there are also senses in which progressive dispensationalism has more in common with Reformed theology than it does with traditional dispensationalism. In spite of its shortcomings, progressive dispensationalism is a step in the right direction.

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³⁶Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 62–63.

³⁷Bock, "Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism," 92.

³⁸Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 78–79.

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