

Progressive Dispensationalism

Introduction

In 1992, two professors from Dallas Theological Seminary released a book called *Dispensationalism, Israel and The Church: The Search For Definition* (hereafter *DIC*). In this book, professors Bock and Blaising called into question several foundational principles of Normative Dispensationalism. They also attempted to develop a new kind of dispensationalism which has been labeled by its advocates as “Progressive Dispensationalism” (hereafter PD). PD is often critical of Normative Dispensationalism and has adopted elements from other theological systems such as Reformed/Covenant Theology and Covenant Premillennialism which are often opposed to Normative Dispensational interpretations of God’s Word.

A Definition of PD

PD can be hard to define. Dr. Thomas Ice agrees:

It is hard to define exactly what PD is for a number of reasons. First, it is still in the development stage. Second, it is easier to say what they don’t believe and how they are different than older dispensationalists, than what they actually believe since it appears that some of their thought is tentative. Third, even though the final chapter of *DIC* includes a section called “Progressive Dispensationalism” (380-85) there is not really a definition or a list of things that are essential to this new brand of dispensationalism. There is only a listing of “patterns” (379) of those who claim to be dispensationalists.

Even though *DIC* is said to be “The Search for Definition,” apparently the journey has not yet reached its destination. Blaising does not think that anyone can isolate essentials of dispensationalism, instead they can only observe patterns which those calling themselves “dispensationalists” have put forth (379). By avoiding essentials and providing only descriptive patterns, Blaising has in effect made it impossible (using his terms) to evaluate whether or not one is truly a dispensationalist. (How can a definition be formulated if there are no discernible essentials?) Therefore, an issue becomes whether or not to accept Blaising’s terms

for the discussion or not. If one uses an older form of dispensationalism as a standard, then there would be a reasonable basis to question whether or not PD is really a modified form of dispensationalism or whether or not it is closer to a modified form of Covenant Theology, thus not really dispensationalism at all.¹

Since PD still seems to be searching for a definition, it is probably easier to describe than it is to define.

A Description of PD

Dr. Ice offers a description of PD:

PD's tell us they are using the word "progressive" to refer to a progressive fulfillment of God's plan in history (380-82). They see a progressive relationship of past and present dispensations as well as between the present and future dispensations. PD sees a greater continuity than did older forms of dispensationalism. This continuity is viewed as progress between the dispensations, thus the term PD. "It is continuity through progress: the progress of promissory fulfillment." "This continuity is variously expressed in terms of one (new) covenant that unifies both dispensations" (381).²

We considered some of these continuity issues in *Going Beyond the Allegorical Debate*. For example, Dr. Gary Gilley stated:

Traditional and moderate dispensationalists believe that the Old Testament text has one meaning which could never be changed by the New Testament, although the New Testament could further explain its meaning. Progressives, leaning toward Reformed theology, accept that the New Testament can expand or alter the meaning of the Old Testament. The resultant consequence is that an Old Testament passage means one thing for now and something else in the future.... This is a denial of grammatical/historical hermeneutics.³

¹ Ice, Thomas. What Is Progressive Dispensationalism? Pre-Trib Research Center. <http://www.pre-trib.org/articles/view/what-is-progressive-dispensationalism> (accessed March 6, 2018).

² Ibid.

³ Gilley, Gary. "Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism by General Editor: Herbert W. Bateman IV." Think on These Things. <http://tottministries.org/three-central-issues-in-contemporary-dispensationalism-by-general-editor-herbert-w-bateman-iv/> (accessed July 14, 2017).

One of the major differences between Normative Dispensationalism and PD has to do with hermeneutics.

The Hermeneutics of PD

Dr. Ryrie and other Normative Dispensationalists insist that a key feature of dispensationalism is a consistent use of the literal, plain or normal principles of interpretation. However, PD does not accept this claim of Normative Dispensationalism as Dr. Ice notes:

Blaising is clear in his rejection of Ryrie's insistence that an essential element of "dispensationalism claims to employ principles of literal, plain or normal, interpretation consistently."⁴

Instead, PD proposes what they call a "complementary hermeneutic." They say that "complementary hermeneutics" means that previous revelation has an added or expanded meaning alongside the original meaning. In other words, an Old Testament passage can mean one thing when it was written and something else later. As Dr. Gilley correctly noted, this is a denial of literal, historical-grammatical hermeneutics which is the foundation of Normative Dispensationalism. Complementary hermeneutics is nothing more than a compromise with the spiritual/allegorical hermeneutics of Covenant Theology. PD represents a step toward Covenant Theology from Normative Dispensationalism.

Realized Eschatology

Complementary hermeneutics results in an "already/not yet" interpretation of Scripture. This is known as "Realized Eschatology."

Normative Dispensationalists have always seen the Church Age as having a distinct purpose and administration from the future Millennial Kingdom. They have made a distinction between Christ's current reign at the right hand of the Father in the Church Age in which we live, and His future earthly reign on David's Throne in Jerusalem during the Millennium when the blessings of the Davidic Covenant will be fulfilled.

⁴ Ice. What Is Progressive Dispensationalism?

In contrast, non-dispensationalists have claimed that the present Church Age is a “realized” form of the Kingdom. They make no distinction between Christ’s current reign at the right hand of the Father and His future rule on David’s throne during the Millennium.

For example, George Eldon Ladd was a non-dispensational professor at Fuller Theological Seminary. He held to Covenant Premillennialism which is similar to Covenant Theology in how it views the Church. Ladd blurred the distinctions between Israel and the Church with his “already—not yet” concept of the Millennial Kingdom. He taught that the Millennial Kingdom began at the time of Christ in an inaugurated form (already). However, it will be fully realized when Christ begins His thousand-year reign on earth (not yet). Ladd’s “already—not yet” theory has also been called “realized eschatology.” It is this “already—not yet” concept that PD has adopted as their own.

Dr. Gilley explains:

Traditional (and modified) dispensationalists, while affirming that Christ now sits at the right hand of the Father, reject that He is now reigning from David’s throne. Progressives argue that the Old Testament texts teach that Christ will sit on David’s throne in the millennial kingdom, but that the New Testament has altered that meaning to allow for Christ to do so now. As a result, progressives have embraced Ladd’s “already—not yet” understanding of the kingdom. We are in the kingdom now, but there remains a future kingdom on earth. The more traditional dispensationalists would say the “already—not yet” theory disregards the mystery and distinction of the church, as revealed in the epistles. This is one of the major differences between the two schools of thought....

The concern of more traditional dispensationalists is that progressives are so blurring the distinction between Israel and the church as to virtually eliminate that distinction.⁵

As PD blurs the distinctions between Israel and the church, they find themselves sliding down the slippery slope of their complementary hermeneutics toward the camp of Covenant Theology.

⁵ Ibid.

Single Meaning

The single sense of Scripture is a consistent component of the Literal-Grammatical-Historical Method. In other words, each author of Scripture wrote with a single meaning in mind. This concept is summarized by the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy:

We affirm that the meaning expressed in each biblical text is single, definite and fixed. We deny that the recognition of this single meaning eliminates the variety of its application.⁶

While there may be many applications drawn from a passage of Scripture, there can only be one interpretation of the text. The author had only a single meaning in mind.

Single meaning has been a major principle of Normative Dispensationalism. In contrast, PD rejects the concept of single meaning. Their complementary hermeneutics allows for more than one meaning to a passage of scripture. Abandoning the traditional view of hermeneutics, they make a distinction between the author's intent and divine intent.

Normative Dispensationalists maintain that interpretation should be limited to the author's original intent. While the human author may not have understood all that he was writing, this does not mean there is a difference between divine intent and human intent.

For example, Peter wrote:

Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow (1 Pet 1:10-11).

Complementary hermeneutics and the abandonment of the principle of single meaning are examples of PD's departure from Normative Dispensationalism.

Conclusion

The main problem with PD revolves around hermeneutics. They have rejected the hermeneutics of Normative Dispensationalism. Dr. Ron Bigalke correctly summarizes the error of PD:

⁶ The Chicago Statements. Defending Inerrancy. <http://defendinginerrancy.com/chicago-statements/>. (accessed March 6, 2018).

Clearly, PD is not the historical antecedent of pretribulational, premillennial dispensationalism. The real issue is whether the Bible is inerrant, whether it is verbally inspired, and whether it should be interpreted literally. The concept of literal interpretation is the real issue in the interpretation of prophecy today. Consistent, literal interpretation is the *sine qua non* of any theological system since it allows no fuller or extended meaning beyond the original intent of Scripture. The current trends in evangelical hermeneutics, as followed by progressive dispensationalists, will inevitably lead away from dispensational conclusions. In contrast, a consistent, grammatical-historical interpretation will naturally lead to dispensational conclusions.⁷

While it is difficult to define PD, it is obvious that the hermeneutic principles they follow are neither progressive nor are they dispensational. In many ways, they have regressed back into the hermeneutics of Covenant Theology. While they still call themselves dispensationalists, they have actually abandoned their dispensational heritage.

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⁷ Bigalke, Ron. Problems with Progressive Dispensationalism. Pre-Trib Research Center. <http://www.pre-trib.org/articles/view/problems-with-progressive-dispensationalism> (accessed March 6, 2018).