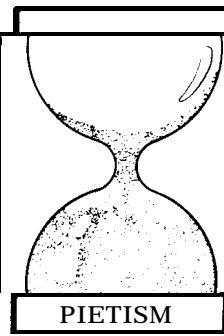


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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THE PROGRESSIVE NATURE OF PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM

by Kenneth L. Gentry, Th.D.

There is a vital task for the intelligent student of theology who wants to remain relevant to the world round about him. It is to keep informed of theological developments going on in that world. We ought to strive for theological excellence through keeping current in our research. Remember: only the mediocre are always at their best

We are quite interested in the changes that have occurred in the dispensational school of eschatology. Over the last few newsletters I have been comparing the view known as "progressive dispensationalism" with the older, more broadly held "revised dispensationalism." Perhaps I need to make clear *why* the new form of dispensationalism is called "progressive" The adjective can cause confusion. This I will do shortly, but first:

The Importance of Categorization

Distinctions are important. In spoken language dialects of any given language reveal much about the speaker and his culture. (Remember Max Weinreich's definition of language: "A language is a dialect with an army and navy.") It is as important to be aware of the internal distinctions within dispensationalism as it is to be aware of the system differences between amillennialism and postmillennialism. Apparently this has been difficult for some, such as John Walvoord who called Warfield's eschatology (which is most definitely postmillennial) a "new type of amillennialism" ("The Millennial Issue in Modern Theology," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 106:44 [January, 1948] 106).

Dallas Seminary professor Darrell Bock correctly notes that his progressive dispensational views are not necessarily being critiqued or harmed if one challenges the positions of dispensationalists such as Ryne (*Christianity Today*, 38:10 [September 12, 1994] 26-29). In essence, to charge Bock, Blaising, or Saucy with theological error on the basis of the views of Ryrie, Walvoord, or Pentecost is to attack a straw man. Such straw man attacks should be left to Tommy Lee and Hal Lindsey; they have developed it into a fine art.

Charles Ryrie is perhaps the leading figure in spearheading significant revisions within dispensationalism. His brand of dispensationalism is called "revised dispensationalism," by those in the know. But having allowed his own revisions, he and his followers want all such revision to cease. The problem is the more things change, the less they remain the same. "Progress might have been all right once, but it has gone on too long," charge the revised dispensationalists.

But revised dispensationalism has been weighed in the balance and found wanting, whether its adherents want to hear that or not. As Dick Cavet wisely observed: "It's a rare person

who wants to hear what he doesn't want to hear."

Nevertheless, the evolution of dispensationalism is now undergoing the stress of punctuated equilibrium giving rise to a new creature. Let us recount briefly the history of the three views, as outlined by Blaising in his and Bock's *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Bridgepoint, 1993).

Historical Categorization

Classic dispensationalism is the oldest form of dispensationalism. It was popularized by John Nelson Darby and the Brethren movement in England, having been created sometime around 1830.¹ This brand of dispensationalism had its heyday from the times of Darby through C. I. Scofield to Lewis Sperry Chafer, founder of Dallas Theological Seminary.

It is virtually an irrelevance today, though Loizeaux Brothers still reprints some of the early dispensational writings of C. H. Macintosh, John Nelson Darby, William Kelly, and others. Apparently there are some dinosaurs still swimming the ocean depths with this tag (or millstone, in my opinion). Miles J. Stanford seems to be such; he certainly seems upset with what is going on within dispensationalism, even citing such heavies as William Kelly in his primal scream publications. His view seems to be that of Groucho Marx: "When ideas fail, words come in very handy."

Revised Dispensationalism. Though shorter lived, this version of dispensationalism has had a great impact paralleling that of the antiquated classic variety. Revised dispensationalism had its heyday from the late 1950s through the 1970s. Blaising latched onto the label "revised" on the basis of the revision work on the New *Scofield Reference Bible* of 1967. Besides Ryrie, representatives of revised dispensationalism include John Walvoord and J. Dwight Pentecost

Revised dispensationalist works are still being published, but the number of adherents is diminishing due to old age. Unfortunately though, it takes about ten years to get used to how old you are. So we will have to wait for these writers to shuffle off the scene before they realize they are irrelevant. But you can recognize them by their old age: "(Old age is when your liver spots show through your gloves."

Progressive dispensationalism. A little over twenty years ago dispensationalism began to experience the first stages of mutation. As with all mutations they at first are small. Unfortunately for revised dispensationalism, they are also deadly. Perhaps the first clear sign of this change was the 1972 publication of Robert Saucy's *The Church in Gods Program* (Moody).

Gradually Increasing discussion of the issues in Dallas Seminary's *Bibliotheca Sacra* eventually led to the establish-

ment of a new and distinctive division within dispensationalism "Sufficient revisions had taken place by 1991 to introduce the name *progressive dispensationalism* at the national meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society that year" (Blaising, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 23)

But now we come to the question broached earlier: Why is it called "progressive dispensationalism"?

The Progressiveness of Dispensationalism

Although when properly understood, the designation "progressive dispensationalism" is insightful and descriptive, it probably is not a wise choice when uttered among people of such notorious naivete as classic and revisionist dispensationalists. Who wants to be a "progressive"? In morals, politics, and all else, such is a dreaded chimera for conservatives.

But for those of us willing to look behind the labels, "progressive dispensationalism" is an apt description. It touches the very heart of the "dispensational" idea. Historically the idea of successive dispensations in the outworking of redemption involved what virtually amounted to hermetically-sealed historical capsules. Chafer defines a dispensation as follows: "As a time measurement, a dispensation is a period which is identified by its relation to some *particular* purpose of God - a purpose to be accomplished within that period" (Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 1:40; emphasis mine).

Ryrie concurs: "A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose. The word *distinguishable* in the definition points out the fact that there are some features which are distinctive to each dispensation and which mark them off from each other as different dispensations" (Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 30; emphasis his).

Ryrie goes on to admit: "Do not these characteristics seem to dissect history and compartmentalize its eras? From one viewpoint dispensationalism does appear to do so. This cross-sectional perspective of the dispensational scheme is the view usually presented in dispensational charts. While *there is nothing erroneous about it*, it is not the whole story" (I bid., 39-40, emphasis mine). "The once-for-all yet progressive character of dispensational distinctions prohibits that they should be intermingled or confused as they are chronologically successive" (I bid., 41-42). The dreaded fear of '(mixing law and grace)' in the present is due to the distinction between the dispensations of law and the Church and their particular purposes and distinguishable elements.

But it is right here at the very term labelling of this eschatology - "dispensationalism" - where the change is occurring. Progressive dispensationalism is no longer committed to the "concrete dispensationalizing" of history. The

adjective "progressive" does not indicate a progressive or loose spirit among its promoters. Rather it speaks of the developmental progress of the dispensations through time. That is, it comes close to a more covenantal understanding of development of God's purpose in redemptive history.

Bock, employing a particular illustration related to the work of the Holy Spirit, comments in this regard: "This qualitative progression from David's experience of the Holy Spirit to that of our own and then to that of the future dispensation shows how the dispensations do not simply follow or replace on another [as in classic and revised dispensationalism, KLG] but actually progress forward to a future eschatological goal" (*Progressive Dispensationalism*, 17). There is the seed in one dispensation for the fruit in the next, throughout all dispensations, according to this progressive viewpoint.

Darrell Bock notes in this regard:

Progressive dispensationalists understand the dispensations not simply as different arrangements between God and humankind, but as successive arrangements in the progressive revelation and accomplishment of redemption.

Because they all have the same goal, there is a real, progressive relationship between them. As each leads to the goal of final redemption, Scripture draws various connections between them which relate them together in a truly progressive fashion. It is from this progressive relationship of the dispensations to one another that the name progressive dispensationalism is taken. (Progressive Dispensationalism, 47-49; see also Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church, 380-385)

Thus as you can see, the descriptor "progressive" is most appropriate for the new brand of dispensationalism. Progress is being made toward a more covenantal view of Scripture. Now if we could only get them to replace "dispensationalism" in their title by the word "covenantalism" This explains also the shock and dismay of revised dispensationalists in publishing *Issues in Dispensationalism* (Moody, 1994). Revised dispensationalists fear that progressive dispensationalists are so confused on dispensations and covenants that they must have written the poem: "Roses are red, violets are blue, I'm a schizophrenic, and so am I." (But, hey!, schizophrenia beats dining alone!) They are trying to get their house in order and are discovering the truth enunciated by Erma Bombeck: "Housework can kill you if done right."

1 For intriguing evidence of its possible heretical origin, see Dave MacPherson's *The Incredible Cover-up* and *The Great Rapture Hoax*. This work and other related studies may be purchased from him at Box 44, Monticello, UT 84535.

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