

# CHANGING PATTERNS IN AMERICAN DISPENSATIONAL THEOLOGY

([http://wesley.nnu.edu/wesleyan\\_theology/theojrnl/26-30/29-10.htm](http://wesley.nnu.edu/wesleyan_theology/theojrnl/26-30/29-10.htm))

by  
Craig A. Blaising

Just a few decades after the Wesleyan revivals and the establishment of Methodist societies, the Brethren Movement began in Ireland and England. Like Methodism, Brethrenism arose out of discontent with status quo Anglican church life. As such, both the Methodist and Brethren movements share a common heritage in that creative history of religious renewal and dissent that has characterized Anglo-Christianity.

Like Methodism, the religious impact of Brethrenism quickly spread to the New World where its ideas and contributions went beyond the structural forms of the original movement. Out of early Methodism came the Wesleyan tradition which has expressed itself in multiple ecclesial forms and has contributed to the overall shape of American Evangelicalism. Out of the original Brethren movement came the dispensational tradition which is represented in several ecclesial groupings today and has impacted many more, thus making its own contribution to the developing history of American Evangelicalism.

The histories of these traditions are not parallel in every respect. Methodism built up a strong denominational structure from which it impacted American Christianity ideologically and from which it generated new denominational structures. Brethrenism remained denominationally small in the United States. Its conflicts and inner tensions weakened it rather than proving to be creative outlets for strong denominational expressions.

Dispensationalism, however, spread transdenominationally. Key American clergy reshaped the ecclesiological dynamic of early Brethrenism into a transdenominational affirmation of evangelical unity. This allowed them to add dispensational theology to their existing traditions, reinforcing and spreading dispensationalism in interdenominational Bible and Prophecy conferences.<sup>1</sup> Dispensationalism got its greatest boost through the interdenominational Fundamentalist movement.<sup>2</sup> As a result, dispensationalism came to be widely influential in twentieth century American Evangelical thought.

What is dispensationalism? In my own work, I have come to see dispensationalism as a tradition of Biblical interpretation that has undergone various modifications through its less than 200 year history. Certain themes and emphases give continuity to this tradition, such as an emphasis on the authority of Scripture and the practicality of its exposition for personal and corporate edification. Other emphases include a belief in the relevance of Biblical prophecy and apocalyptic for theological work today and an appreciation of diversity in Biblical theology as it relates to the history of revelation. These emphases have led dispensationalists to explore the significance of the church as a new manifestation of grace in redemption history and to affirm a future for national, political Israel.<sup>3</sup>

The changes that have occurred in dispensational interpretation are just as much a part of the identity of the dispensational tradition as the themes and emphases that characterize its continuity. This is most clear in the relationship of these changes to the dispensational emphasis on Biblical authority. The dispensational tradition began by appealing to the authority of Scripture as the basis for reconstructing a theological interpretation of

redemptive history, especially in relationship to Biblical prophecy. Inevitably, that same emphasis on Biblical authority over church tradition has functioned as the basis for internal revision in dispensationalism. As a result, the history of dispensational thought exemplifies the dynamic of a hermeneutical process, namely the critical appropriation of an existing theological tradition in a fresh interpretation of the Biblical text, in turn leading to doctrinal reflections which open new directions, new stages of tradition.

It will be my purpose in this article to survey some of the changes in American dispensational thought as they reflect this hermeneutical process.

## **Classical Dispensationalism**

I use the phrase *classical dispensationalism* to refer to that form of dispensational thought stemming from the writings of John Nelson Darby and like-minded Brethren in the mid-nineteenth century, to the publication of the *Scofield Reference Bible* in 1909 (and again in 1917) and the *Systematic Theology* of Lewis Sperry Chafer in 1948.<sup>4</sup> Since we are focusing our attention on American dispensationalism, the *Scofield Reference Bible* and Chafer's *Systematic Theology* can be taken as primary representatives. Although differences of interpretation can be found among classical dispensationalists, all are united in the themes and emphases noted earlier (i.e., Biblical authority, emphasis on prophecy, the uniqueness of the church, etc.). However, what especially marks classical dispensationalism is its advocacy of the *two purposes/two peoples* theory. This is the theory that Scripture reveals two different divine purposes—one for heaven and one for the earth-envisioning two different humanities, a heavenly people, and the other, an earthly people.<sup>5</sup>

To understand this proposal, one should recall the social and religious context in both Britain and the United States into which this theory was first proposed and in which it flourished.

The Wesleyan revivals of the eighteenth century contributed to a in evangelistic and missionary endeavor. The relative political tranquility of the times, combined with evangelistic expansion and the spread of missions, seemed to support the Whitbyan interpretation of Christianity as the millennial kingdom. Dispensational thought, however, arose in the early nineteenth century context of political and religious turmoil. Political revolution, anarchy, and war on the continent brought a renewed interest in prophecy and Biblical apocalyptic. Discontent with government control of the Anglican church was also high, inducing a desire for an apolitical, ideally spiritualized Christianity. These two viewpoints came together in a decisive rejection of the postmillennialism so much in vogue only a few decades earlier. Brethren dispensationalism not only reaffirmed premillennialism (expecting the millennial kingdom to come through the apocalyptic judgment of Christ's personal return), but did so as part of an overall critique of Christian culture.

Culture-Christianity, Christendom, or Anglicanism (along with existing non-conformist traditions) was not viewed by the Brethren as Christianity at all, but rather its ruins. The true church, it was believed, must be entirely spiritual, having nothing to do with earthly political matters, either political matters as they existed in nineteenth century England or as predicted in Biblical prophecy for the end times. Consequently, it was deemed illegitimate for the state to interfere in the operation of the church and it was considered inappropriate to view either state or church in terms of a millennial kingdom.

Dispensationalists, appealing to a common sense understanding of Old Testament texts, argued that Biblical prophecy regarding a kingdom of glory referred to the Jews, and had

nothing to do with the church. The church, on the other hand, was a completely new kind of humanity in accordance with a completely new purpose of God revealed by Christ and his Apostles. Its members were a heavenly people destined for a heavenly inheritance. Biblical prophecy, however, was thought to refer to God's judgments on earthly peoples and structures (such as governments) in accordance with the divine plan for a future kingdom for Israel.

Classical dispensationalism was promoted in the United States in the aftermath of the Civil War by evangelical Christians (primarily Presbyterian, Congregational, and Baptist) who were disenchanted with the identification of Christianity and national progress. The *two purposes/two peoples* theory of Brethren dispensationalism was found to be just as useful against American postmillennialism as against its British original. It allowed American evangelicals to affirm a highly spiritual, revivalist and individualist Christianity distinct from millennialism.<sup>6</sup> This had several advantages. On the one hand, they could offer an application for kingdom texts that did not conflict with revivalist Christianity, safeguarding the necessity of individual salvation in even the most progressive of cultural situations. On the other hand, the application which they made of these kingdom texts seemed quite relevant to the "apocalyptic" aspects of the Civil War in the nineteenth century and the two World Wars in the twentieth century. As the crisis with modernism entered its full sway, classical dispensationalism helped to provide many fundamentalists and other conservative Christians with a sense of true Christian identity and an explanation for an apostate Christendom which improperly relegated to itself Biblical kingdom teachings.

In the twentieth century, as non-dispensational fundamentalists and evangelicals turned away from millennialism or strengthened their non-millennial versions of Christianity, classical dispensationalism used its *two purposes/two peoples* theory to affirm millennialism alongside God's program for the Christian church. Once again, matters regarding the kingdom of God were relegated to God's plan for Jews, not Christians. This seemed agreeable with a more literal reading of Old Testament prophecies about Jews, the rise of Zionism, the apocalyptic features of the World Wars, and the eventual founding of the state of Israel in 1948.<sup>7</sup>

The *two purposes/two peoples* theory allowed classical dispensationalists to solve to their own satisfaction the age-old problem of relating the Old and New Testaments. Dispensationalists postulated the divine sanction of two religions, rather than just one as had been traditionally perceived in Christianity. These two religions, which L. S. Chafer called Christianity and Judaism, are not simultaneously legitimate except in the eschaton.<sup>8</sup> Prior to the return of Christ, the two religions are separate dispensationally, which meant both that they were distinguished historically, as different religions pertaining to different historical periods, and distinguished intrinsically, essentially as earthly versus heavenly, law versus grace.<sup>9</sup>

For eternity, however, the *two purposes/two peoples* theory meant that God had two redemptive purposes which will be accomplished in tandem, forever conjoined but never consolidated. The heavenly purpose envisions a heavenly people in a grace religion. The earthly purpose envisions an earthly people in a political, theocratic and legal religion. The heavenly purpose and people concern the true Christian church which is destined for the heavens forever. The earthly purpose and people concern the Jewish nation (and subordinate Gentiles) who inherit the earth forever. We have here a neo-platonic mystical Christianity conjoined with a radically nationalistic and particularly Old Testament view of Judaism set side by side and affirmed as equally and eternally legitimate, though historically (dispensationally) distinct religions of the Bible.

Some of the most memorable aspects of classical dispensational teaching came from the use of the *two purposes/two peoples* theory to interpret teachings of Jesus and the early church on the kingdom of God. Here classical dispensationalists affirmed the continuity of Old Testament and New Testament kingdom doctrines by assigning the focus of both to the hopes of Israel. They were then able to advocate a national prophetic and apocalyptic context for Jesus' teaching on the kingdom prior to the epoch-making study of Johannes Weiss.<sup>10</sup> At the same time they also affirmed the substance of an ethical kingdom in the teaching of Jesus. Instead of treating these themes as mutually exclusive, classic dispensationalists affirmed them both. Furthermore, they claimed the two concepts could be identified in a lexical and exegetical distinction between the terms *kingdom of heaven* and *kingdom of God*.<sup>11</sup>

The teaching of Jesus on the kingdom of heaven (a Matthean term) related to the political, theocratic kingdom promised to Israel and the house of David. Classical dispensationalists acknowledged that sometimes the term *kingdom of God* was used with this meaning (as in Synoptic parallels), but taught that in other texts, kingdom of God referred to God's ethical and moral rule in the human heart. This ethical and moral rule was always manifest, though in different dispensational forms. But the political, Davidic kingdom, the kingdom of heaven, underwent a history of fulfillment. The kingdom of heaven appears in the teaching of Jesus as he offered the prophesied political kingdom to Israel. Israel refused his offer. Jesus then revealed two stages of the kingdom of heaven, a mystery form to appear after his ascension and a final and complete fulfillment of the kingdom of heaven postponed until the time of his return. The final fulfillment of the kingdom of heaven will take place at Christ's return when he will rule over Israel and all Gentile nations. The three stages of the eschatological kingdom of heaven, offered and postponed, mystery, and fulfillment, became popularly known through the widespread use of the *Scofield Reference Bible*. In conjunction with the three stages of the kingdom of heaven was the overarching kingdom of God, present at all times in the rule of God in the hearts of God's people.

As interesting as this attempt was to relate the ethical and political aspects of New Testament kingdom teachings, the *two purposes/two peoples* theory required that the structures as a whole be primarily identified with God's earthly purpose. The church was distinguished a priori from the kingdom. The immediate result was the separation of the large majority of the teachings of Jesus from God's plan and purpose for the church.

Exploring further, the logic of classical dispensational interpretation is most consistent and most vulnerable on the matter of the mystery form of the kingdom of heaven, The form of the kingdom between the ascension and the parousia. Here the mystery of the kingdom of heaven was identified with Christendom, the nemesis of dispensational ecclesiology. This Christendom exists under the lordship of Christ (Scofield saw it as an aspect of his David rule), but it is inherently mixed with evil in its confusion of the earthly and heavenly plans of God. The church gives Christendom its legitimacy as a mystery of the kingdom, but is not itself the kingdom nor ever will be. It is incumbent on the citizens of Christendom to recognize God's purposes and enter the heavenly purpose, for the earthly aspects of Christendom will be judged by Christ when he comes to fulfill the kingdom of heaven. Thus, postmillennial Christendom was seen to be totally mistaken in thinking itself to be the fulfillment of millennial prophecies.

At the present time, while the kingdom of heaven is in mystery form, the kingdom of God is manifest in God's moral rule in the church. But the *two purposes/two peoples* theory required classical dispensationalism to posit only an *analogy* between the moral rule of God

in the heavenly people and the moral rule of God intended for the kingdom of heaven, the rule of life for God's earthly people. By virtue of this analogy, classical dispensationalism could find a "moral application" for the church of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. But it was only an analogy. The Sermon on the Mount was kingdom teaching, legal religion for an earthly people, not for the church.<sup>12</sup>

## Revised Dispensationalism

In the 1950s and 1960s a new form of dispensationalism came on the scene. I call it *revised dispensationalism*, taking the title from the revision of the Scofield Reference Bible of 1967. Revised dispensationalism presents a modification of classical dispensationalism in response to several pressures and criticisms. One was the dispute with covenantalism which had flared up in the 1930s and 1940s centering on the soteriological implications of the *twopurposes/two peoples* theory, as well as its implications for the church's relationship to Old Testament law and the ethical teaching of Jesus.<sup>13</sup> Revised dispensationalists maintained most of the structure of classical dispensationalism but reworked the *eternal dualism* of the two purposes theory. Revised dispensationalists proposed a common goal of eternal salvation for the two peoples of God and attempted to support the historical outworking of classical dispensationalism's two purposes on that basis.<sup>14</sup>

This seemed to solve the problem of two kinds of salvation in the ultimate sense.<sup>15</sup> But it essentially destabilized the classical dispensational system. Once the divine purpose was declared to be ultimately one, there was no reason why that purpose should not work its way back into the interpretation of Biblical history, thus dissolving the dualism which classical dispensationalism had postulated. In order to prevent this from happening, revised dispensationalism maintained an *eternal anthropological dualism* within the now unified redemption purpose. There would be one purpose, but still two peoples, specifically known as Israel and the church, two classes of humanity sharing essentially the same salvation.

In order to maintain the distinction of two peoples, however, some aspect of salvation had to be differentiated. This distinction was thought to be found in the New Testament description of the church as the Body and Bride of Christ, metaphors thought to denote an eternal blessing unique to the church and serving to distinguish it from the eternal salvation given to saints from other dispensations (notably redeemed Israel).<sup>16</sup>

Another factor leading to the revision of dispensationalism was the impact of the developing field of Biblical eschatology, especially as the issues raised in that international discussion were brought into a critique of dispensational eschatology by George E. Ladd.<sup>17</sup> The most interactive response to these issues came from Alva J. McClain, founder and first president of Grace Theological Seminary, who offered a revised dispensational eschatology drawing upon the ideas of Consistent Eschatology.<sup>18</sup> McClain rejected Scofield's and Chafer's lexical distinction between the kingdom of heaven and kingdom of God, not to mention the use of that distinction to organize the New Testament teaching on the eschatological kingdom. Instead, he suggested understanding the Biblical teaching on God's kingdom in relation to its *universal* and *mediatorial* aspects. These he simply called the universal and mediatorial kingdoms. The universal kingdom is God's unchanging sovereignty. The mediatorial kingdom is the accomplishment of that sovereignty through a political ruler on earth. He then postulated a succession of mediatorial kingdoms from Abraham to the future reign of Christ. In keeping with the two peoples theory, however, he disassociated the church from that kingdom succession. The kingdom which Jesus preached is said to be entirely apocalyptic, not envisioning the present age of the church. Rather than being a mystery

form of the kingdom, this age is the interregnum, devoid of any mediatorial kingdom manifestation.

Revised dispensationalism was not able to agree on any one interpretation of the kingdom of God. Although appreciative of McClain, competing views were offered by John Walvoord, Charles Ryrie, and J. Dwight Pentecost, all of Dallas Theological Seminary and disciples of Lewis Sperry Chafer.<sup>19</sup> In each of their proposals, they tried to include the spiritual reality of the church today as a form of divine kingdom (in contrast to Scofield, Chafer, and McClain). However, their precommitment to the two peoples theory made it impossible for them to integrate this insight into a *unified* kingdom doctrine. In their thinking, the kingdom which is the church today stands isolated as an independent reality unrelated to the kingdom (or rather kingdoms) of past and future dispensations. Of the three, Pentecost comes closest to the elusive goal by including the church in a historical succession of *theocratic kingdoms*. However, the church as a theocratic kingdom is only *nominally* related to theocratic kingdoms in other dispensations. Subverting the similar terminology is the same old two peoples theory.

And yet, recognizing the church as a divine kingdom reality (even to the point of giving it the same name) was an important change in dispensational thought. The rigid distinction of classical dispensationalism was softening. Similarities and even relationships were beginning to be recognized. A key example is the Biblical theological theme of the new covenant. Chaferian dispensationalism had so differentiated the two peoples/two purposes as to deny the New Testament teaching that the church is a fulfillment of the new covenant predicted by the Old Testament prophets. Chafer claimed that the new covenant mentioned in 2 Corinthians and in Hebrews is an entirely different covenant than that predicted by Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.<sup>20</sup> Revised dispensationalists, however, had to recognize that certain blessings of this covenant predicted for Israel were in fact taught by New Testament writers as being fulfilled in the church today.<sup>21</sup> Under this covenant, eschatological Israel and the New Testament church share the same common spiritual blessings. With the blessings in common, dispensationalists began to find it impossible to maintain the eternal distinction between Israel and the church in either its classical or revised forms.

Why did vestiges of the two peoples theory last so long? One reason of course is the sheer momentum of classical dispensationalism's vast influence, a tradition not easily altered once it has achieved institutional form. Another is the political, social, and cultural context of the 1950s-1980s. The events of these decades seemed to support the popular speculations of classical dispensationalists concerning modern Israel on the one hand and the moral and religious deterioration of Western society (Christendom) on the other.

In the 1960s and 1970s, social unrest, the cold war with its nuclear confrontation, various conventional wars, rising tensions in the Middle East, along with Israel's military successes and territorial expansion appeared to be confirming signs of the two peoples theory. God seemed to be preparing the world for a return of divine favor to God's earthly people. During the 1970s Hal Lindsey became the most well-known of a group of popular apocalyptic writers working with dispensational presuppositions. Their work and themes were caught up in the evangelical revival of the early 1970s, appearing in films and the new Christian rock music as well as in popular paperback books.<sup>22</sup> This popularized apocalypticism, which among other things was very specific in identifying the events of that decade as *the* fulfillment of Biblical prophecy and apocalyptic vision (even going so far as to predict the date of Christ's return by the fortieth year of Israel's statehood), came to be the

public meaning of dispensationalism by the decade of the 1980s. The momentum of this popular movement retarded, but did not completely prevent the critical assessment of the two peoples theory. However, by the early 1980s, the exegetical problems of the theory and the number of modifications being made were too numerous to ignore.

## Progressive Dispensationalism

In 1986 the Dispensational Study Group, a colloquy of dispensationalist and other interested Biblical scholars and theologians, had its first annual meeting.<sup>23</sup> It began by considering changes and developments in dispensational thought and the problems of definition for the term dispensationalism.<sup>24</sup> Through such meetings it became clear that the hostilities and polarizations that defined dispensationalism in the 1940s and 1950s were not shared by younger dispensationalists. Their hermeneutical methods and concerns were common to evangelical Biblical scholarship generally, and many already had come to the point of expressing their dispensationalism as a modified form of redemption history, seeing interconnections between the dispensations just as much as difference and change.

After several years in the making, the book *Dispensationalism. Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition* was published in 1992.<sup>25</sup> Following an introduction on the problem of defining dispensationalism in light of developments and changes in the dispensational tradition, the book presents ten exegetical and Biblical essays on the relationship of Israel and the church in New Testament theology. Through these essays a new kind of dispensationalism comes to light and is interpreted in the book's conclusion. This is what we call *progressive dispensationalism*. It is addressed in two books released in 1993.<sup>26</sup>

Progressive dispensationalism shares with classical and revised dispensationalism a high regard for Biblical authority, but it manifests a greater interest in the historical and literary interpretation of Scripture. Progressive dispensationalists affirm the relevance of Biblical prophecy and apocalyptic and continue to affirm a future for Israel nationally in the plan of God. But they reject the excesses of popular apocalypticism that frequently mishandle the literary genre of apocalyptic and often presume prophetic authority for itself in proclamations on how and when Biblical prophecy will be fulfilled. Progressive dispensationalists view Biblical history as a succession of divine dispensations and believe that the sequence of the dispensations do mark significant changes in God's relationship to the human race. However, progressive dispensationalists reject the *two purposes/two peoples* theory in both its classical and revised forms and see the changes in redemption history as progressive stages toward the accomplishment of a unified, holistic plan of redemption.

The most significant difference between earlier and progressive dispensationalism is the rejection of the two peoples theory. Progressive dispensationalists do not see the church as a separate people group existing in eternity *alongside* redeemed Jews and Gentiles. But neither has the church replaced Israel in redemption history as a substitute people fulfilling the promises of God. In progressive dispensationalism, the church is not an ethnic, political category to be put alongside or substituted for other ethnic, political groups.

The church is a stage in the progressive revelation of God's salvation for humankind. Humankind is characterized by both individual and corporate existence, with the latter expressing itself in ethnic, cultural, political, and social structures. In the past dispensation, God revealed concern for both individual justification and blessing as well as national and

political redemption. Also, a principle of mediation was transferred to the king of Israel by which he was to mediate God's blessing to Israel and to the Gentiles.

In this dispensation, God has revealed Jesus as his Son, the heir of Israel's kingly office, and mediates through him certain aspects of eternal salvation in inaugural form to both the Jews and Gentiles who believe in him. These aspects include blessings of the Holy Spirit, a down payment on new covenant promises (the same new covenant predicted by the Old Testament prophets). In their inaugural form they are, and in their final fulfillment they will be given equally to Jews and Gentiles. The phenomenon of Jews and Gentiles being blessed in Christ during the time of his ascension and prior to his return is what is called the church.

Both redeemed Israel and Gentiles of the past dispensation and the church of the present dispensation look forward to the culmination of redemption in which Jews and Gentiles will be blessed individually and nationally (here is the hope offered to Israel and Gentile nations in the past dispensation) and united by the Holy Spirit as an eternal dwelling place for God (the culmination and perfection of what in this dispensation is called the church). There will be one redeemed humanity existing in individual and corporate plurality. Its corporate plurality is its ethnic and national reality: Israel and Gentiles. The church of this dispensation is not a third group alongside them but that part of this very same redeemed humanity which has come into final salvation from the present dispensation. The blessing of their relationship to Christ will then be shared in its completed form by all the redeemed from all dispensations. Furthermore, they will enter into the dimensions of multiethnic, multinational blessing along with the rest of redeemed humanity, in fulfillment of the holistic promises of God made and reaffirmed through the history of redemption. The controlling motif is eternal redemption that blesses human reality both individually and in all its corporate structures (national, ethnic, and political) with equal sanctification by the Holy Spirit and intimate communion with the triune God. To summarize:

In progressive dispensationalism, the political-social and spiritual purposes of God complement one another. The spiritual does not replace the political nor do the two run independent of each other. They are related aspects in a holistic plan of redemption. The final dispensation will reveal all these aspects in complementary relationship to each other. Prior to that, different dispensations may reveal more of one aspect or more of another, but each dispensation is related to the final dispensation in which the plan culminates. 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.<sup>27</sup>

On the matter of the eschatological kingdom, progressive dispensationalism accepts the basic framework of inaugurated eschatology common in evangelicalism today.<sup>28</sup> Contrary to classical dispensationalism, no substantive distinction is made between the phrases *kingdom of heaven* and *kingdom of God*. Against revised dispensationalism, progressive dispensationalism argues that the eschatological kingdom predicted by the prophets and typified by the Davidic theocracy is *one* kingdom with that which Jesus preached and about which his apostles taught. It is the historical fulfillment of past revelations of God's kingdom (in the theocratic monarchy of Israel). But it is qualitatively greater than those past revelations as seen first of all in the relationship between God and the Davidic king. Now God has become incarnate in the Davidic house. As a consequence, the eschatological kingdom begins the history of its fulfillment in the first appearance of Jesus and moves toward its consummation in both its millennial and final phases at his



return. Most importantly for progressive dispensationalism, the revelation of the church between the advents is a vital stage in the revelation of the kingdom affirming and guaranteeing that kingdom's fulfillment in the future.

Progressive dispensationalism is still young in the dispensational tradition, but it carries important implications which need to be explored further. Progressive dispensationalism represents a more profoundly Christocentric theology than has been seen in dispensationalism heretofore, one which is directly related to its holistic anthropology. It draws upon both divine and Davidic aspects of Christ's person for understanding the church today and in the future. From this perspective progressive dispensationalism should be able to address the social and political aspects of redemption as revealed in the current dispensation without falling into the problem of simply equating Christianity and culture. It should seek a ministry of social renewal tied directly to individual renewal in the corporate and social transformation of the Christian community itself—a ministry of renewal in preparation for the coming of Christ. It should be carried out in view of the holistic redemption yet to be received at Christ's return.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

Dispensationalism is a theological tradition undergoing development in the form of a changing hermeneutical process, proposing, critiquing, and reformulating an initial interpretive grid—the *two purposes/two peoples* theory. In the process of testing, reformulating, and even abandoning this theory, a pattern of themes, concerns, and emphases have unfolded which mark the direction of this theological tradition. They include a high regard for the exposition of Scripture, a developing sense of the diversity revealed in redemption history, an emphasis on Biblical prophecy, the uniqueness of the church, and a future for national Israel in the plan of God.

Through controversies in times past, dispensationalists have sometimes been guilty of a stridency and even a gnostic-like arrogance regarding what they have called "dispensational truth." I believe there is a new openness today in dispensational theology to affirm the necessity of the role of the full body of Christ in the search for theological knowledge. In fact, I believe this was an insight that, though perhaps only dimly seen, nevertheless motivated the spread of dispensational theology in the Bible conferences in the mid- to late nineteenth century. We now are recapturing and refining that perspective. To that end I cite a few sentences from the conclusion of *Dispensationalism, Israel and the*

### *Church:*

Knowledge about Christ and the dispensations of his blessings are the property of the church universal (Eph. 4:11-16 in the context of 1:10, 15-23 and 3:9). This means that dispensational theology should be a dialogic phenomenon inclusive to the extent of all who are in Christ. It is aided by an inclusive hermeneutic that is reflected upon for improvement in its deployment. It is in fact a hermeneutic that is aware of the communal and dialogic nature of understanding. It is carried forward by the practical steps of offering our proposals and studied conclusions to others in Christ for critical evaluation and then reversing the procedure as we hear back from them. The key point is listening, hearing: hearing the Scripture, hearing each other, and then listening to the Scripture, listening to each other, and hearing the Scripture again. It is a process that is neither embarrassed by nor impatient with disagreement, diversity, or pluralism, but rather expects such and puts it to work for the mutual benefit of the body of Christ.<sup>30</sup>

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>See particularly C. Norman Kraus, *Dispensationalism in America: Its Rise and Development* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1958); and E. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

<sup>2</sup>Sandeen's thesis, which essentially identifies Fundamentalism with millenarianism, has been modified by George Marsden and others. Nevertheless, dispensationalism played a large role in the Fundamentalist movement. See G. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford, 1980).

<sup>3</sup>For a history of the problem of defining dispensationalism and a rationale for the descriptive definition given here, see C. Blaising and D. Bock, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 13-34, 377-79.

<sup>4</sup>See C. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism: Its Historical Genesis and Ecclesiastical Implications* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960). On the life of Darby, see M. Weremchuk, *John Nelson Darby* (Neptune, N. J.: Loizeaux Brothers, 1992). For a comparison of Darby and Scofield, see L. Crutchfield, *The Origins of Dispensationalism: The Darby Factor* (Lanham, MD.: University Press of America, 1992). On the theology of Lewis Chafer, see L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947-48); also see C. Blaising, "Lewis Sperry Chafer," in *The Handbook of Evangelical Theologians*, W. Etwell, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 83-96.

<sup>5</sup>F. S. Elmore, "A Critical Examination of the Doctrine of the Two Peoples of God in John Nelson Darby" (Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1990), 201-311. The theory runs through the writings of Chafer. For various references to this theme in Chafer's writings, see C. Blaising, "Lewis Sperry Chafer," in *The Handbook of Evangelical Theologians*. An overview of the *two purposes/two peoples* theory is given by the early American dispensationalist, T. H. Cleland, "The Celestial and the Terrestrial, or the Dispensational Difference Between the Church and the Kingdom of Heaven," *Truth, or Testimony to Christ*, (1881): 416-20, 461-67, 514-17; idem., *Truth, or Testimony to Christ* 8 (1882): 34-39, 85-91, 125-28, 173-81.

<sup>6</sup>See Carl E. Sanders II, "The Premillennial Faith of James Hall Brookes" (Ph.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1994), esp. 76-134.

<sup>7</sup>Twentieth-century dispensationalism's primary emphasis on millennialism (and eschatology generally) in contrast to nineteenth and early twentieth century dispensationalism's primary emphasis on ecclesiology can be seen by comparing the works of Lewis Sperry Chafer and John F. Walvoord. See J. Hannah, "John F. Walvoord," in *The Handbook of Evangelical Theologians*, 241.

<sup>8</sup>L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:14-15.

<sup>9</sup>For a more extended discussion, see C. Blaising, "Lewis Sperry Chafer," *The Handbook of Evangelical Theologians*, 88-90.

<sup>10</sup>J. Weiss, *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes* (Gottigen, 1892).

<sup>11</sup>*The Scofield Reference Bible* (1917), n. 1 on Matthew 3:2, n. 1 on Matthew 6:33, and n. 3 on 1 Corinthians 15:24. For an extended presentation of the Scofieldian doctrine of the two kingdoms, see L. S. Chafer, *The Kingdom in History and Prophecy* (Chicago: Bible Institute Colportage Ass'n, 1936).

<sup>12</sup>*The Scofield Reference Bible* (1917), n. 2 on Matthew 5:2.

<sup>13</sup>For a summary of this controversy, see C. Blaising, "Lewis Sperry Chafer," *The Handbook of Evangelical Theologians*, 92-95.

<sup>14</sup>C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), 146-148; J. D. Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 561-62.

<sup>15</sup>Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 110-31.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>17</sup>G. E. Ladd, *Cru(cial Questions About the Kingdom of God)* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952).

<sup>18</sup>A. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Winona Lake, IN: BMit Books, 1959)

<sup>19</sup>For an overview of revised dispensationalist theories on the kingdom, see C. Blaising and D. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1993), 39-46.

<sup>20</sup>Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 7:98-99.

<sup>21</sup>J. F. Walvoord, *Major Bible Prophecies* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 188-91.

<sup>22</sup>Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970); *idem.*, *There's a New World Coming: A "Prophetic Odyssey"* (Santa Am, CA: Vision House, 1973); *idem.*, *The Terminal Generation* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1976); *idem.*, *The 1980's: Countdown to Armageddon* (New York: Bantom Books, 1980). For an overview of popular apocalypticism, especially since 1945, see P. Bouyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1992).

<sup>23</sup>R. Clutter, "Dispensational Study Group: An Introduction," *Grace Theological Journal* 10(1989): 123-24.

<sup>24</sup>C. Blaising, "Developing Dispensationalism. Part 1: Doctrinal Development in Orthodoxy," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (1988): 133-40; *idem.*, "Developing Dispensationalism. Part 2: Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalists," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (1988): 254-80.

<sup>25</sup>See note 3.

<sup>26</sup>R. Saucy, *The Case For Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993); C. Blaising and D. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1993).

For a summary of progressive dispensationalism, see the latter work, pp.46-56. Also see Blaising and Bock, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 380-85.

<sup>27</sup>Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 48-49.

<sup>28</sup>The widespread acceptance of this view, at least in its overall features, has been noted by Craig Blomberg, "A Response to G. R. Beasley-Murray on the Kingdom," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35 (1992): 31-32.

<sup>29</sup>For preliminary thoughts in this direction, see Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 284-301.

<sup>30</sup>Idem., *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 384-85.