

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Does Progressive Dispensationalism Teach a Posttribulational Rapture? Part II

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Introduction & Review

In the last article we say that Progressive dispensationalists define the Church significantly different than traditional dispensationalists have done. This is done in at least seven ways: 1) The concept of the church is seen as a remnant instead of a body; 2) The body of Christ concept is not the defining entity of the church; 3) The baptism of the Holy Spirit is viewed differently and is not the defining work of the Church; 4) The view of one people of God instead of two; 5) The mystery nature of the Church is minimized and redefined; 6) The Church is the kingdom in this dispensation (Matt. 13:7) The Church fulfills Israel's new covenant as well as the Davidic and Abrahamic covenants in an inaugurated way.

In this article, we will begin with an examination of the similarities of Robert Gundry's views to those of the Progressives.

Progressives' View of the Church is Similar to Robert Gundry's Posttribulational Teaching

Gundry in his 1973 book entitled *The Church and the Tribulation* writes:

In the chronological question concerning the rapture, the dispensational issue centers in the field of ecclesiology. An absolute silence in the Old Testament about the present age, a total disconnection of the Church from the divine program for Israel, and a clean break between dispensations would favor pretribulationism: the Church would not likely be related to the seventieth week of Daniel, or the tribulation, a period of time clearly having to do with Israel. But a partial revelation of the present age in the Old Testament, a connection (not necessarily identification) between Israel and the Church, and a dispensational change involving a transitional period, open the door to the presence of the Church during the tribulation.¹

¹ Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973), p. 12.

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Gundry argues, as progressives argue, against the traditional view that the Church is a mystery entity not revealed in the Old Testament. Gundry states:

Besides dispensational breadth in the usage of the term “mystery,” there are Old Testament prophecies which specifically mention and imply the present age. These prophecies provide support for a connection between Israel and the Church, between Old Testament prophecy and the present age.

The current session of Christ at the Lord’s right hand fulfills the Messianic prediction in Psalm 110:1 (see especially Acts 2:34, 35).²

Gundry apparently believed that Christ was sitting on the Davidic throne and that the Davidic covenant was inaugurated as well, exactly like the progressives teach. He states:

Not only did the Old Testament predict the present age, but the New Testament applies Old Testament prophecy to the Church. The applications are more than analogical; i.e., they do more than draw comparisons. They affirm at least partial fulfillments of the Old Testament in the Church and the present age.

Peter says, “This is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel ...” (Acts 2:16–21).³

This is exactly what the progressives teach.

... the Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit fulfilled Joel’s prophecy ... The baptism in the Spirit constituted the crux among those events. If then the main event on the very birthday of the Church was prophesied in an Old Testament passage within an Israelitish context, it should not seem strange that the Church bears a relationship also to end-time events similarly prophesied in the Old Testament, even though they are Israelitish in cast. In fact, since the beginning of the Church age bears a marked relationship to Old Testament predictions concerning Israel, we are not hindered dispensationally from presuming that the same will be so at the end of the Church age.⁴

Gundry also argues for the *fulfillment* of the new covenant.

Jeremiah prophesied the new covenant under which the Church now stands (Jer. 31:31–34). Some dispensationalists separate the new covenant for Israel of which

² Ibid., p. 14.

³ Ibid., p. 15.

⁴ Ibid.

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Jeremiah spoke from an unpredicted covenant for the Church. However, that view seems defective.

Scripture makes no explicit distinction between two different new covenants. The identity of terminology therefore creates a presumption in favor of only one.⁵

Gundry states that the Church is not entirely unrelated to the Old Testament prophecy which pertains to Israel:

Such an acknowledgment opens a dispensational door to posttribulationism by allowing, in principle, the possibility of the Church's presence on earth during a period of time predicted in the OT, such as is the tribulation.

In an attempt to disconnect the Church from God's workings with Israel and the nations, emphasis frequently falls on the uniqueness of the Church. To be sure, many features about the Church and this age are unique. However, the Scriptures also teach the essential unity of all saints. Dispensational distinctions between God's people are economical and transitory. At a deeper level, all saints enjoy unity in Christ. That unity allows the possibility of, indeed provides the basis for, an overlapping of dispensations.

Evidence abounds that the Church merges with God's people of all ages. Paul calls Abraham, himself an OT saint and the progenitor of the Israelite nation, "the father of *all* who believe" (Rom. 4:11; cf. vv. 12, 16)....

The distinctiveness of the Church tends toward pretribulationism. The oneness of the Church with saints of other dispensations tends toward posttribulationism.

The tribulation knows only one group of redeemed people, the Church. The regenerate Jewish remnant will belong to the Church then as now (Rom. 11:15) and will be raptured at the posttribulational advent of Christ.⁶

We see here that the remnant concept mentioned by progressives, especially the Jewish remnant, will inherit the kingdom promises at the second advent of Christ. The understanding of the Church in this sense is identical with progressive dispensationalism. Gundry states:

We ought rather to recognize the connection of the Church with other dispensations and saints. This connection becomes possible and actual in the

⁵ Gundry, p. 16.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 18, 21–24.

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broad use of the term “mystery,” in specific OT indications of this age, in NT applications of OT prophecies to the Church, in the prolonged period of transition during which the old economy faded away and the new began, in the oneness of all the redeemed in Christ, and in the united, heavenly goal of both Israel and the Church. Posttribulationism accords well with a scripturally measured dispensationalism.⁷

The progressive dispensational view also sees the connection of the Church with saints of other dispensations. These dispensations and peoples are connected and the Church is not viewed as a distinct entity in the sense of being unrelated to the promises to the nation Israel. Gundry uses these views of the Church to argue for a posttribulationist rapture. These are exactly the same as the views adopted by the progressive dispensationalists.

Thus, it would seem only logical that with the key doctrinal elements that distinguish the Church from Israel dissolved or at least severely blurred, that progressives would eventually adopt a posttribulationist view of the rapture. It has already been demonstrated that their view is exactly the same as Gundry's view, a posttribulationist.

Interestingly enough, Gundry, in his 1997 revision of *The Church and the Tribulation* entitled *First the Antichrist*, speaking of the fundamental unity between Israel and the Church, states:

Right within the dispensational school of thought associated with pretribulationism, so-called “progressive dispensationalists” are recognizing this unity. So the biggest distinction of all—the one between Israel and the church—fails to support pretribulationism.⁸

As Gundry and, for that matter, many traditional dispensationalists have recognized, it is probably just a matter of time before many progressives will embrace a posttribulationist view.

Deliverance in the Day of the Lord

By using the phrase deliverance “in” the Day of the Lord and by applying this to the Church's deliverance, progressives seem to indicate their leaning toward the belief that the Church will be in Daniel's seventieth week. Blaising and Bock state:

⁷ Gundry, pp. 26, 27.

⁸ Robert Gundry, *First the Antichrist* (Grand Rapids, Baker Book, 1997), pp. 139–40.

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Deliverance *in* the Day of the Lord is a special theme of I Thessalonians. At His return, Jesus “delivers us from the wrath to come” (1:10).⁹ (*italics mine*)

It is interesting that Bock and Blaising chose the preposition “in” to describe the Church’s deliverance in reference to the Day of the Lord. If they wished to convey the pretribulational rapture perspective, they should have used the preposition “before” or “from” to prove that the church will be delivered before the Day of the Lord. Instead they chose “in” the Day of the Lord. At the very least this implies a mid-trib position if not a posttribulational deliverance. If the latter, this would be the same type of deliverance that Israel will experience in the tribulation (Rom. 11:26) when the deliverer will come out of Zion. The nation Israel will be “in” the Day of the Lord and they will be delivered in that time; however, the Church’s deliverance is promised “before” the Day of the Lord (1 Thess. 5:1–9, Rev. 3:10).

We also see that Bock and Blaising speak of Christ’s coming *in* the Day of the Lord.

The *coming* of the Lord to rule as King is described as a Day of the Lord ... In Zechariah 14:9, God comes in the Day of the Lord to take up His rulership as King.¹⁰

The coming here in the Day of the Lord is clearly a reference to the second coming. Although in context they are speaking of Israel, they clearly use the deliverance in the Day of the Lord to refer to a second coming. When speaking of the Church they write:

Scripture speaks of these features as a deposit (Eph. 1:13–14), [He is speaking of New Testament blessings that have been inaugurated.] an initial structure which awaits completion at His glorious coming in the Day of the Lord. His teaching on the future coming of the kingdom look forward to the full institutional establishment of the kingdom [clarification mine].¹¹

In this quote they state the full future benefit of the Church’s new covenant blessing as occurring at the time of the millennial kingdom. This indicates a post-tribulational rapture. They also state:

Like most premillennialists, dispensationalists interpret biblical prophecy to teach that Christ will return during a time of trouble traditionally called “the Tribulation.” However, unlike most premillennialists, most dispensationalists

⁹ Craig A. Blaising and Darrel L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, IL: Bridge Point, 1993), p. 263.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 226.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 251.

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have advocated the doctrine of the pretribulational Rapture—the doctrine that Christ will come *for the church* prior to the Tribulation, resurrecting the dead in Christ, translating living believers into immortal life, and then taking the church with Him to heaven prior to His millennial return in which He will visibly rule the nations on earth.¹²

This is a further demonstration that Bock and Blaising, when they speak of the term “deliverance in the Day of the Lord”, mean a posttribulational deliverance.

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Under a section entitled, “The Imminent Return of Christ,” Bock and Blaising say that:

Premillennialists believed that Christ would return before the millennium, they believed that He would return in a time of trouble, and that the present time evidenced sufficient trouble for Him to return at any time.¹³

What progressives mean by “deliverance in the Day of the Lord”, is a premillennial, posttribulational deliverance, not a premillennial, pretribulational one.

The Next Change In Dispensations Is Tied With The Church's Resurrection

Bock and Blaising state several times in their book that the next change from the dispensation of the Church to the dispensation of the millennium occurs at the time of the Church's resurrection which is at the second coming of Christ to the earth.

The change of dispensation will occur at the descent of Jesus from heaven. New covenant blessing (and thus Abrahamic blessing) will be extended to the national and political dimensions of human existence as He realizes His Davidic prerogative to personally rule the nations. The blessings of the indwelling Spirit and new heart will be completed with resurrection from death and perfection in holiness.

The change from the first to the second appearance of the eschatological kingdom was marked by the resurrection and glorification of the king. The change from the second to the third phases of the kingdom is marked by the resurrection and glorification of the church.

¹² Blaising and Bock, 19.

¹³ Ibid., 20.

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The millennial empire of the Messiah is the next phase of the eschatological kingdom after that phase which is now present—the community of the king, the church.

The church waits for Him to return. Consequently the church is a constituency of the future kingdom, present on earth before that kingdom comes in all its fullness at the return of Messiah.¹⁴

Obviously, this is a posttribulational view.

“The Day Of The Lord” And “The Day Of Christ” Confusion

This confusion of the Day of the Lord with the Day of Christ and the judgment seat of Christ is brought out in *Progressive Dispensationalism*.

What the church expects to happen at the coming of Jesus correlates generally with Old Testament predictions regarding the coming of the kingdom. It will be a Day of the Lord, a time of wrath and judgment against sin and evil (1 Thess. 5:1–9; 2 Peter 2:9; 3:7–12; Rev. 6:17; 16:14). It is “the Day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:8) which takes place at His “revelation” from heaven (1 Cor. 1:7). The Old Testament literary descriptions of God coming in wrath in the Day of the Lord are combined with the new understanding of Messiah as taught by Jesus.... the coming of God in the Day of the Lord is presented as the coming of Jesus.

The Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed (2 Thess. 1:7–10).¹⁵

This quote shows that progressives believe that the church should expect Christ’s coming in the Day of the Lord at which time He will establish His kingdom. They go on to state that the judgment seat of Christ is the Day of the Lord.

The judgment that Jesus brings begins first with “the household of God” (1 Peter 4:17; cf. 1 Cor. 4:5; James 5:7–9; 1 John 2:28) in order to reveal what is true and lasting. Accordingly, Paul says that the Day of the Lord will reveal each one’s work. Some will suffer loss even though they are saved (1 Cor. 3:13–15). The

¹⁴ Blaising and Bock, 281, 286.

¹⁵ Ibid., 262.

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judgment then proceeds to unbelievers. However, the passages that relate believers to the Day of the Lord mostly speak of deliverance, a theme which is also consistent with the Old Testament.¹⁶

Bock and Blaising confuse the Day of the Lord with the Day of Christ and also the judgment seat of Christ. They call the judgment seat of Christ, the Day of the Lord whereas in the text it is only called the Day. They are interpreting this as the Day of the Lord. Gundry, who holds to a dispensational posttribulational position also confuses the different days.

There is no solid basis, then, for distinguishing between the day of Christ and the day of the Lord.

And if the day of Christ and similar expressions are equivalent to the day of the Lord, the connection between the Church and the day gains further strength.¹⁷

According to Gundry, if there is a connection between the Day of the Lord and the Day of Christ, the Church would be in the tribulation period and not be raptured and resurrected until the end. This would destroy the uniqueness of the judgment seat of Christ for Church age believers only. This is why Gundry states that the judgment of believers occurs at the end of the millennium with the judgment of the ungodly. One wonders as progressive dispensationalism continues to develop where will they place the judgment seat of Christ? Will the judgment seat of Christ lose its uniqueness as it already has in Gundry's view?

By connecting the Day of the Lord with the Day of Christ, progressives can teach that the Church will be in the tribulation period and will await the second coming of Christ.

The Davidic Covenant And A Posttribulational Rapture

How does the progressive view of David sitting on his throne ruling over the covenant community, the Church, tie in with a posttribulational rapture? According to progressive dispensationalists, Christ, the Davidic king, mediates the new covenant. One of the benefits of the new covenant is the reception of our future inheritance which is the resurrection from the dead. This occurs at the future coming of the Davidic king.

¹⁶ Blaising and Bock, 263.

¹⁷ Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation ...*, 96.

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At the present time, this kingdom, this “inheritance,” is said to be “reserved in heaven” (1 Peter 1:4). Such language corresponds to the strong emphasis we have seen on the present enthronement of the Messiah in heaven.¹⁸

Bock and Blaising go on later to write that at the return of the Davidic king the Church will receive its future inheritance, which is the resurrection from the dead. This leads to our inheritance in that future form of the kingdom. We see our future inheritance is directly tied to the Davidic king’s return at the second coming; therefore, progressives teach a posttribulation resurrection for the Church. Blaising and Bock write:

The Davidic covenant was also given to bring the Abrahamic covenant blessing into everlasting fulfillment. Consequently, the Davidic and new covenants must come together in this task....

But it (the new covenant) also included the promise of resurrection life with a new heart. Consequently, the fulfillment of the Davidic covenant will take place in a king who embodies the new covenant promise of a new heart and an immortal life mediated by the indwelling Spirit of God ...

Since the new covenant is the form in which Abrahamic covenant blessing will be fulfilled, then according to the structure of the Davidic covenant, new covenant blessing will be mediated by the Davidic king. This would mean that even the blessings of resurrection, renewal, and sanctification by the indwelling Holy Spirit will in some way be mediated through the king.¹⁹

Progressive dispensationalists teach that when the Davidic king returns to the earth to establish his future kingdom, he will mediate the future form of blessing, that of the resurrection.

Scriptures Progressives Use That Teach A Posttribulation Rapture

Romans 8:11–12, 18–25

When speaking of the Church’s resurrection from the dead in Romans 8, progressives use this verse to teach that our resurrection will be after the tribulation right before the millennium. Blessing and Bock write:

Romans 8:18–25 looks forward to the time when the children of God stand on the renewed and redeemed earth in resurrection bodies. This ministry of the Holy

¹⁸ Blaising and Bock, 264–65.

¹⁹ Ibid., 170.

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Spirit will eventually lead to the resurrection of their bodies, a blessing which is also part of the new covenant promise (recall again Ezek. 36–37).

But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who indwells you (Rom. 8:11, cf. 18–25).

Romans 11:26–27 quotes Isaiah 59:20–21, a new covenant prediction, with a view toward the future salvation of all Israel, a reference to the nation as a whole.²⁰

In doing so, progressive dispensationalists tie our resurrection in as a promise of the new covenant blessing and also they tie it in with the future salvation of all Israel. Again they write:

Corresponding to our resurrection from the dead will be the renewal of the earth, the locus of the future kingdom (Rom. 8:18–23).²¹

We see here that they place the Romans 8 resurrection at the time of the future kingdom, the renewal of the earth. In another place they write:

Paul argues that by the grace of justification and new covenant righteousness, God's salvation will lead to the revelation of an immortal humanity on a renewed earth (8:11, 18–23).

The new covenant promises envisioned both spiritual renewal and bodily resurrection. In Pauline theology, the enlivening is first spiritual (that is, spiritual renewal of the heart) and then physical, at the coming of Christ (Rom. 8:10–11).²²

Their view of the Church's resurrection is posttribulational—right before the beginning of the millennial kingdom.

Romans 8:11 teaches the future resurrection of our body. Just as we anticipate our future renewal, the creation itself will be renewed as well. It does not teach that our resurrection will occur *at the same time* as the renewal of the earth in the millennial kingdom.

²⁰ Blaising and Bock, 121, 205.

²¹ Ibid, 265.

²² Ibid., 269, 317.

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Colossians 3:4

Progressives use Colossians 3:4 to teach that the future of our inheritance, our resurrection of the body, will occur at Christ's return to the earth to establish His kingdom. They write:

Whereas in the dispensation of Colossians 1:13 we have already been transferred into the kingdom, in Colossians 3:4 we expect that "when Christ ... is revealed, then [we] also will be revealed with Him in glory." There is an appearance of the kingdom that is yet future, tied to the return of Christ (1 Cor. 15:23–28; 2 Tim. 4:1). It constitutes the dispensation that is likewise yet to come.²³

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Bock and Blaising teach that the future of our inheritance coincides with the return of Christ (Col. 3:4). They also state that the inheritance of Israel is included as a feature of this salvation history that culminates at the coming of Christ (Rom. 11:26). They reason:

The future reception of our inheritance—coincides with the return of Jesus Christ, the future culminating event of salvation history. He writes in Colossians 3:4, "When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory" (cf. Phil. 3:20–21; 1 Thess. 1:10; 4:13–5:11; 2 Thess. 1:6–2:14; 2 Tim. 4:1). The inheritance of Israel is also included as a feature of this salvation history which culminates at the coming of Christ (Rom. 11:26).²⁴

Progressives teach that the completion of our salvation occurs at the second coming. They state:

The sanctification to which the church is called is the present rule or reign of the Messiah in the church (3:15). It anticipates the future coming of Christ at which time we will be "revealed with Him in glory" (3:4).²⁵

According to Bock and Blaising, our resurrection from the dead is tied in to our future inheritance of the kingdom as revealed in this statement:

The church which is "in Christ" thus has a heavenly identity in this dispensation. But, as we have seen, Christ will return to earth. "When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory" (Col. 3:4). This "revelation" will be the completion of our salvation (1 Peter 1:7–9, 13), our

²³ Blaising and Bock, 126–27.

²⁴ Ibid., 116.

²⁵ Ibid., 258.

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resurrection from the dead (1 Peter 1:3), which leads in turn to our inheritance in that future form of the eschatological kingdom (1 Cor. 15:50–57).²⁶

So progressives use Colossians 3:4 to teach that our future inheritance, the resurrection of our body, the completion of our salvation will occur at Christ's return to the earth to establish His kingdom. Israel will receive it's inheritance at this time as well.

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Ephesians 1:13–14

Ephesians 1:13–14 is probably the most extensive passage used by progressives to teach the relationship of the Church with the future kingdom. They use Ephesians 1:13 to teach that the kingdom blessings in the Church now are a down payment toward the future millennial kingdom blessings. They write:

The themes of present blessing and future inheritance are presented in verses 13–14. And it is clear that the present arrangement (dispensation) is a down payment on blessings that will be fully realized in the future. Though existing blessings will differ from those in the future, the difference is one of degree not of kind.

The present gift of the Spirit, which Paul identifies as new covenant blessing (3:3, 6), is the pledge of future new covenant fullness (5:5; cf. Eph. 1:13–14).

This brings us back to Ephesians 1:13–14. The Spirit is the “pledge,” the down payment on our future inheritance, which is “the kingdom of Christ and God” (Eph. 5:5).

Scripture speaks of these features as a deposit (Eph. 1:13–14), an initial structure which awaits completion at His glorious coming in the Day of the Lord.

Not all that was predicted about renewal by the Holy Spirit (including resurrection from the dead) has yet occurred. The new covenant has been inaugurated, but complete fulfillment awaits the return of Christ.²⁷

Progressives use this verse to teach that:

- 1) The new covenant has been inaugurated and is a down payment of our future new covenant blessings.
- 2) The fullness of the Spirit equals the resurrection of our bodies.

²⁶ Ibid., 265.

²⁷ Blaising and Bock, 115, 206, 209, 251, 260.

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- 3) The fullness of the new covenant blessing equals the next dispensational change.
- 4) The next dispensational change will be at Christ's coming to the earth.
- 5) The Church's resurrection will be at Christ's second coming to the earth to establish His kingdom.

In conclusion, progressive dispensationalism teaches that the Church's resurrection is posttribulational.

Conclusion

In response to the teaching of this paper, progressive dispensationalists or other individuals may point to the one statement in Bock's and Blaising's book which seems to teach that progressives still hold to a pretribulational rapture. Quoting from the footnote section of the book we read:

Dispensationalists have traditionally advocated pretribulationism, the belief that the Rapture will take place before the *Tribulation*. The Tribulation is a label which most often designates the seven year period seen in Daniel 9:27, including the event associated with it—events which receive further elaboration in Daniel's vision. In the Olivet discourse, Jesus synthesizes or conflates Daniel's visions of trouble with the prophetic theme of the Day of the Lord (see above). Both Paul (in 1 Thess. 5:1–12) and John (in Revelation) follow Jesus in this conflation (confirming their dependence by the literary use of Jesus's sayings). With this in mind, the deliverance at the *inception* of the Day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5 (note the surprise beginning, comparison with the onset of labor in 1 Thess. 5:2–3, and the verb "overtake" in 5:4), would appear to be pretribulational.²⁸

The problem is that if one pushes the theology of progressives to its logical extreme, based on the blurring and breaking down of the clear distinctions that distinguish the Church, it is more, much more logical to be posttribulational. That is why this writer and others believe it is just a matter of time until they start departing from their previous pretribulational position.

In fact, in much of their writings, the question on when the rapture occurs is still left open. No where in all the progressive dispensational writings do they deal extensively with Daniel's seventieth week or with the rapture of the church. The question of the timing of

²⁸ Blaising and Bock, 317.

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the rapture at this time seems to be left open. It is interesting that in Saucy's book he states in his preface:

The question of the time of the rapture has not been included in the work. 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.²⁹

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They are leaving the question open right now for further refinement; however, as we have seen in this paper, progressives have already taught, by implication and by direct quotes, that the church's resurrection occurs at the second coming of Christ right before the millennial kingdom.

We already noted that in Bock's and Blaising's book they stated that Gundry is still a dispensationalist though he holds to a posttribulation rapture. And as we have seen, it seems clear that progressive dispensationalists' theology naturally leans toward that conclusion.³⁰

²⁹ Blaising and Bock, 316.

³⁰ Brumett, J. (1998). Does Progressive Dispensationalism Teach a Posttribulation Rapture? —Part II. *Conservative Theological Journal* Volume 2, 2(6), 318–332.