



Liberty University
DigitalCommons@Liberty
University

Article Archives

Pre-Trib Research Center

May 2009

What Is Progressive Dispensationalism?

Thomas D. Ice

Liberty University, tdice@liberty.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/pretrib_arch

Recommended Citation

Ice, Thomas D., "What Is Progressive Dispensationalism?" (2009). *Article Archives*. Paper 119.
http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/pretrib_arch/119

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Pre-Trib Research Center at DigitalCommons@Liberty University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Article Archives by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Liberty University. For more information, please contact scholarlycommunication@liberty.edu.

What Is Progressive Dispensationalism?

by Thomas Ice

Two Dallas Theological Seminary professors have edited a major new book calling into question previous formulations of dispensationalism, while at the same time attempting to develop a new kind of dispensationalism. This new approach has been labeled by its advocates "Progressive Dispensationalism" (PD) in 1991. PD is often critical of older dispensationalism while incorporating elements from theological systems which in the past have been in opposition to traditional dispensational understandings of the Bible.

Dr. Craig Blaising teaches Systematic Theology at Dallas and Dr. Darrell Bock is in the New Testament Greek Department. Their new book is *Dispensationalism, Israel and The Church: The Search For Definition, (DIC)* (Zondervan, 1992), which was released in late September 1992. It will not take those attempting to read this new book long to find that this book is difficult to read because of its erudite and technical style. This is a marked change from a previous generation of dispensationalists, often typified by Dr. Charles Ryrie, who were known for their clear, direct, and concise brand of scholarship. In *DIC* it is sometimes hard to get a grip on what is being said, even after reading a passage several times.

CHANGES IN DISPENSATIONALISM

No one can debate that some are proposing radical changes within the dispensational camp. The questions that arises relates to the nature and virtue of the change. While I do not agree with most of the changes being put forward by the advocates of PD, I do want my disagreement to be irenic, since I know through personal discussion with many who are proposing these changes believe that they are doing the right thing. Also, I do not believe that their writings, nor my personal discussions evidence a personal dislike for dispensationalism as is often evident in many of the attacks by "outsiders." However, at the same time I believe that these men are in the process of destroying dispensationalism. In personal discussions with many of the older dispensationalists their either believe that they have gone as far as one could go and still be said to be a dispensationalist (if they good any further then they will have left dispensationalism, they say), or some believe that they have already gone too far and should not be viewed as a true dispensationalist.

I am not opposed in any way to scholars attempting to discuss and sharpen a system of theology, or even suggesting changes. As Craig Blaising has argued, change has always occurred within dispensationalism. However, I also reserve the right to say that I believe someone has gone too far. I believe that to be the case with PD. There is a need for the changeless truths of the theology of the Bible to be articulated to each new generation, taking into account the particular ethos and questions produced by successive age groups.

My experience within the dispensational movement has paralleled Stan Gundry's statement of self-examination from the book's Foreword.

At its best, within dispensationalism has always been a dynamic that drives it to be constantly correcting itself in the light of Scripture. . . .

Critics of dispensationalism have always found it easier to identify the simplistic approaches of Scofield, to criticize the excesses of Lewis Sperry Chafer, and to poke fun at the charts of Clarence Larkin than to understand

and appreciate the self-critical and self-corrective drive that has characterized dispensationalism at a deeper level.¹

However, just because dispensationalism does have a history of development, does not mean that all proposals for change are necessarily correct or necessarily wrong. I know PD would agree. So in the same spirit in which those within the PD camp felt free to voice their criticism of older dispensationalists, I want to interact with these newer ideas.

My goal in this article will be to give some of the background leading up to the development of the PD movement; to explain PD in contrast with what older dispensationalists have believed; and to interact with specific PD viewpoints. Since I will not have enough space in this article, I hope to continue interaction in future articles in the coming year.

A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

If a father of the PD movement can be identified, it would most likely be Dr. Robert Saucy of the Talbot Graduate School of Theology in Southern California. Dr. Saucy wrote a number of articles throughout the 1980's (beginning in 1984), dealing with dispensational themes. In some of these articles Dr. Saucy began to moderate a few of his dispensational views. At the same time (during the 80's), other dispensationalists wrote articles in books and journals often disagreeing with older dispensational interpretations of Scripture or theology. Yet these writers still considered themselves to be dispensationalists.

Within this environment of flux and redefinition, it is not surprising that an organization arose meeting in conjunction with the annual Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) convention in 1985, held at Talbot Seminary in California. (These yearly conventions usually meet in late October.) The "dispensational study group" (DSG) grew out of this informal meeting at Talbot for the purpose of discussing "current trends and ideas relating to the topic of dispensationalism."² It is the DSG which has been a leading forum for PD.

The first public gathering of the DSG was in conjunction with the ETS gathering in Atlanta in 1986. Format of the meetings have revolved around a major presentation followed by discussion. Craig Blaising made the first presentation of a paper in Atlanta,³ in which he argued that dispensationalism has changed over the years. This is the foundational apologetic used to justify many of the major changes being suggested for dispensationalism.

The DSG meet at Gordon-Conwell Seminary in Massachusetts in 1987. Darrell Bock of Dallas Seminary presented his ground-breaking paper entitled "The Reign of Christ."⁴ Bock's suggestion that Christ is now reigning (spiritually but not yet physically) on David's throne, which constitutes an inaugural fulfillment of the Davidic covenant of 2 Samuel 7 is a tenet of PD which presents the greatest difficulty for older dispensationalists to agree with. Traditionally dispensationalists have distinguished between Christ's ascension to the right hand of the Father's throne and the future time when He will descend from heaven, thus leaving the right hand of the Father's throne, and reign literally from David's throne in Jerusalem during the millennium. However, Bock has admittedly borrowed the "already / not yet" dialectic from the late George E. Ladd (and other European theologians) to support his view of the reign of Christ.

In 1988 the meeting was held in Wheaton, Illinois. Mark Bailey, who teaches Bible Exposition at Dallas Seminary, presented a paper entitled "Dispensational Definitions

of the Kingdom.” Bailey is not a PD, but instead fits into the older dispensational mode. Dr. John Master of Philadelphia College of the Bible (also not a PD) notes⁵ that during the discussion period varying views were presented in attempts to define the essentials of dispensationalism. Dr. Charles Ryrie’s three-part “*sine qua non*” was discussed,⁶ since his definition has dominated discussion since 1965. Master noted that it did not appear that the audience could agree on the importance of these items in defining dispensationalism. In fact, at the conclusion of the meeting, there was no agreed upon definition of dispensationalism.

Dr. Vern Poythress of Westminster Seminary, an millennial covenant theologian, presented material from his book *Understanding Dispensationalists*⁷ at the 1989 meeting in San Diego. This meeting signaled a desire to open a dialogue with nondispensationalists, yet without coming to a consensus within dispensationalism regarding the matter of essentials.

New Orleans was the site of the 1990 meetings. Dialogue with amillennial covenant theologians continued as Dr. Tremper Longman of Westminster, presented a paper, as did Dr. Elliot E. Johnson of Dallas, both dealing with hermeneutics. Both men, from differing theological perspectives, claimed to be using a grammatical, historical, and contextual approach to the Scriptures. This is important in light of the fact that dispensationalists have long boasted of using a *consistently* literal hermeneutic, while accusing others of spiritualizing things like Israel and the church. This has led to a belief by PD that there is not really a hermeneutical distinction between dispensationalists and nondispensationalists as Ryrie had declared in his *sine qua non*. “As evangelicals have worked together exploring these developments,” said Blaising, “the old divisions of spiritual versus literal interpretation have been left behind” (DIC:32).

In 1991 they meet in Kansas City. Dr. Doug Oss presented a paper on dispensationalism from the perspective of one committed to the Pentecostal/charismatic movement. A major focus of the paper dealt with the question of the cessation of gifts in the present dispensation. This meeting did not appear to have produce noticeable development of PD. However, the term “progressive dispensationalism” surfaced as a term which many following the PD agenda began using to describe their new position. I will provide a description/definition later in this paper.

At the time of this writing, the most recent engagement (1992) took place in San Francisco. This meeting involved a presentation by Bock and Blaising of their new book *DIC*. I attended this meeting and the significance seemed to be that this new formulation called PD finally has a written expression. It was also interesting to informally observe that while PD have dominated the agenda surrounding the DSG, there is far from overwhelming support from the rank and file at the meeting. Many questions and concerns remain to be discussed in the days to come. Further development of PD surely seems to be in the works with Robert Saucy coming out with a book on the subject scheduled for a 1993 release date. Bock and Blaising also plan a follow up book for late 1993 or 1994.

Blaising and Bock have been the major forces behind the discussions of the DSG and in formulating PD. Their material has provided the framework for the discussions that have taken place over the last few years. I have spent many hours in personal discussion during these years with them (mainly with Blaising) in an effort to understand what they are saying. I appreciate the time spent discussing these issues and do not want to misrepresent their views. However, it is difficult at times to

understand just what they are really saying. I have made every effort to properly present their views. Now I will attempt to describe PD.

WHAT IS PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM?

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. One current professor at Dallas Seminary who is strongly opposed to this new formulation of dispensationalism has described the issue to me as follows: One has to decide whether or not PD is merely rearranging the furniture in the room (*i.e.*, development of dispensationalism), or whether or not they are removing key pieces of furniture from the room (*i.e.*, abandonment of dispensationalism).

A Description of Progressive

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). Blaising and Bock give the following explanation:

The label *progressive dispensationalism* is being suggested because of the way in which this dispensationalism views the interrelationship of divine dispensations in history, their overall orientation to the eternal kingdom of God (which is the final, eternal dispensation embracing God and humanity), and the reflection of these historical and eschatological relations in the literary features of Scripture. (380)

Features of Progressive Dispensationalism

Hermeneutics: 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."⁸ Blaising says of Ryrie:

He is quite insistent that the difference between a dispensational and a nondispensational hermeneutic is that the former is consistent in the employment of literal or normal interpretation. The presence of spiritual or allegorical interpretation to any extent "in a system of interpretation is indicative of a nondispensational approach." (26)

Blaising and Bock do not believe that dispensationalists practice a unique approach to hermeneutics.

The issue is not a distinct hermeneutic but debate about *how to apply the hermeneutic that we share that we share*. The question most simply put is, How does "new" revelation impact "old" revelation and expression? (392)

Blaising and Bock want to put forth what they call a "complementary hermeneutic." Complementary hermeneutics appears to be a synthesis of the two older approaches which have battled each other for years—the spiritual and literal approaches—in their handling of how the New Testament uses the Old Testament.

Third, does the New Testament *complement* Old Testament revelation? According to this approach, the New Testament does introduce change and advance; it does not merely repeat Old Testament revelation. In making complementary additions, however, it does not jettison old promises. The enhancement is not at the expense of the original promise. (392-3)

This hermeneutical approach is used to support their "already/not yet" interpretation of the Davidic Covenant.

Davidic Covenant: Bock's contribution to PD is the notion that there is an unanticipated inauguration of the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant with Christ currently reigning on David's throne spiritually. Bock uses a dialectical phrase "already/not yet" (46) to support his form of realized eschatology. In the past, dispensationalists have seen the current Church Age as distinct in purpose and administration from the future Kingdom Age or Millennium. Dispensationalists have made a distinction between Christ's current reign at the right hand of the Father (Rev. 3:21) and His future reign on earth in Jerusalem during the Millennium upon David's Throne, thus fulfilling the blessings of the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam. 7). In the past, nondispensationalists have seen the present Church Age as a realized form of the Kingdom. They do not make a distinction between Christ's present session at the Father's right hand and the rule of Christ on David's throne. Thus, creating a conflict between dispensationalists and nondispensationalists over the timing of the Kingdom.

Bock has attempted to merge the two views by creating out of thin air (in my opinion), an artificial view that the Kingdom is both present and future at the same time. Thus, the current Church Age is not distinct from the future Kingdom. Instead Bock views our current age as "the 'already,' the 'sneak preview,' or the 'invisible' kingdom rule of Jesus" (65). Bock explains:

Thus the new community, the church, is the showcase of God's present reign through Messiah Jesus, who inaugurates the fulfillment of God's promises. . . . Jesus reigns from heaven invisibly but powerfully, transforming people

through his Spirit. . . . He invites all into God's kingdom, where promises are beginning to be realized, a kingdom that functions *distinct from* and *in the midst of* the kingdoms of earth. The current phase of the kingdom has continuity with the kingdom to come, because it shares the call to reflect the activity and presence of God's righteousness in the world. (65-6)

Rather than following traditional logic that reasons if the church is currently in the Messianic Kingdom, then it is present and not future. Instead Bock says that there is also a future phase of the Kingdom, yet to be fulfilled. Bock explains:

In the second stage, the promise moves to ultimate consummation. . . . When Jesus returns, he will do all that the prophets of the Old Testament promised. The language chosen specifically ties itself to the concept of Israel's restoration, which is an element that is totally absent in the current activity of Jesus. . . . There is no indication that earthly and Israelitic elements in Old Testament promises have been lost in the activity of the two stages. In the "not yet," visible, consummative kingdom, Jesus will rule on earth. He will rule before and over all. (66)

In a future issue I hope to deal more in depth with Bock's views, but some problems with his view include: 1) His use of an invalid spiritual hermeneutic at key points to support his "already" view of the Kingdom. 2) After reading the presentation of his view I do not see where Bock gets from the Bible the dialectic of "already/not yet." This is simply an arbitrary device to allow him to support a realized kingdom and at the same time hold to a premillennial futurism. I think a dialectical approach is employed by both theologians when they attempt to blend elements of contradictory ideas. Bock and others like him simply need to make up their minds. 3) As John Master pointed out at ETS this year, how can something be both fulfilled and yet not fulfilled? This is an amazing use of a word that has a clear sense of finality to it. 4) If Bock's exegetical approach can be used to support a current spiritual Davidic fulfillment (even though partial) then why can't the same approach be used to apply an "already" fulfillment to Israel's land promises found in the Palestinian Covenant? Put another way, why stop where PD has stopped thus far in breaking down distinctions? Why not apply this wonderful new development of dispensationalism across the board?

Israel and the Church: PD blunts distinctions between Israel and the Church, while the older forms of dispensationalism highlight distinctions. Even though some distinctions are maintained by PD I wonder how long it will be before this new form of "dispensationalism" will become the highway leading one totally away from most, if not all, of the distinctions of dispensationalism? Blaising explains that their search for a new dispensationalism

has led many dispensationalists to abandon the *transcendental distinction* of heavenly verse earthly peoples in favor of a *historical distinction* in the divine purpose. The unity of divine revelation, of the various dispensations, is found in the goal of history, the kingdom of God. (33)

One of the few distinctions which PD has maintained from older dispensationalism is their rejection of replacement theology. If a full replacement of Israel for the church were to start to happen, then no one could successfully argue that this could be a valid

form of dispensationalism. PD current commitment to a futurist eschatology keeps them from totally commingling the church and Israel. But there is no question about their overall tendency to stress unity of the dispensations at the expense of diversity when compared to older dispensationalism.

Some of the problems created by PD's de emphasis on distinctions between God's plan for Israel and His plan for the church include: 1) The church loses its distinctiveness as a special work of God apart from Israel. Thus, the church is reduced to a second rate expression of the Kingdom lacking the fullness of God's power that will accompany the future "phase" of the Kingdom. 2) Since much of the theological support for the pretribulational rapture is based upon the exegetical conclusion that God's plan for the church is totally distinct from His plan for Israel, then this change will only undermine support for the pretrib position.

BLAISING'S HISTORICAL JUSTIFICATION

DIC begins with a historical polemic in the Introduction by Craig Blaising in an apparent attempt to justify the need for their new brand of dispensationalism and most likely to lay a groundwork for those who might suggest that PD has gone too far and is no longer a valid form of dispensationalism. In the final chapter of the book Blaising and Bock deny that an *essential* of dispensationalism is the distinction between Israel and the church (they still hold to distinctions, they just do not believe that they are *essential*) and conclude that if this were the case "then any change or modification of that view is departure" (377). They then show why they interpret the history of dispensationalism as a futile attempt to locate essentials when they declare:

The problem with this is that it ignores the fact that *essentialist* dispensationalism that which found its dispensational identity in the *sine qua non*) was only one form of a tradition in which other forms preceded it. This in itself raised the possibility that other forms may also follow. . . . It leads us to search for a new definition of dispensationalism, one that embraces the various historical manifestations of the tradition and that places the emergence of this postessentialist form of dispensationalism in perspective. (377-8)

Their search did not lead them to find a new *sine qua non* for dispensationalism, instead they only observed "patterns" of what dispensationalists in the past have believed. This agnostic conclusion serves their purpose. If essentials cannot be clarified then their new PD cannot be viewed as a departure from dispensationalism. So the matter of dispensationalism's history is of central importance in evaluating their case for PD.

At least two items are important to Blaising's interpretation of American dispensationalism. First, is his classification and interpretation of the stages of American dispensationalism. Second, his conclusion that Ryrie has been wrong to see historic essentials that have given definition to dispensationalism. Instead he believes that dispensationalism has always been in flux and void of true universal characteristics. These two items, if true, would lend support to Blaising's claim that PD is simply another turn of the wheel in the development of dispensationalism, instead of a departure from dispensationalism as some have charged. It should also be pointed out that Blaising's historical interpretation is an attack upon Ryrie's brand of dispensationalism and his view of the history of dispensationalism. If Ryrie's dispensationalism or view of dispensationalism's history is correct, then PD would

have to be judged from that framework to be a departure from dispensationalism. Thus, Blaising's historical arguments are crucial to making the case for PD as a new development in dispensationalism and not a departure.

Overview of American Dispensationalism

Blaising begins his historical argument by dividing the development of American dispensationalism into four stages of development: 1) Niagara premillennialism, 2) Scofieldism, 3) essentialist dispensationalism of Charles Ryrie, and 4) progressive dispensationalism or postessentialist dispensationalism. I do not have any particular problem with these categories, other than with the title essentialist dispensationalism. The essentialist label implies that Ryrie invented the *sine qua non* late in the game, instead of observing and distilling the essence of historic dispensationalism. Since Blaising's interpretation of the history of dispensationalism is used by him to put a spin upon the development of dispensationalism that allows advocates of PD to justify their radical changes, I will interact with key elements of each era of American dispensationalism.

Niagara

The annual gathering of the Niagara Bible Conference (1883-1897) was spearheaded by the father of American dispensationalism—James H. Brookes—with the aid of A.J. Gordon. Niagara grew out of earlier Bible Study conferences that were being held as early as 1878 in Clifton Springs, New York.⁹ Blaising correctly notes that these conferences were “the forum for introducing and developing American dispensationalism.” “Two features of the conference,” continues Blaising, “especially lent themselves to the development of dispensationalism” (16). The first feature “a view of the church that went beyond local churches and denominations” (16). “The second feature of the Niagara Conference that lent itself to the development of dispensationalism was its emphasis on the Bible” (17).

The first point Blaising makes regards the ecumenical nature of the Niagara Bible Studies. “Niagara sought a visible experience of unity among those who belonged to and continued in different churches and denominations,” notes Blaising. *DIC* gives the impression that PD is restoring dispensationalism to the ecumenical unity of Niagara that was fractured by the narrow dogmatism of essentialist dispensationalism. While it is true that Niagara dispensationalism featured a certain kind of ecumenical unity, I think that there are significant differences between the “community of scholars” (385) assembled around PD in our day and the dynamics responsible for earlier dispensationalism.

The differences between the unity of Niagara and that of the modern movement is more like two high-speed trains, on separate tracks, passing each other, going in opposite directions. Further explanation of this first point moves us into discussion of Blaising's second feature, the emphasis on the Bible. Niagara was a Bible Study conference that met together to inductively study the Bible with an eye on answering attacks on the Bible coming from a growing modernist movement. Ryrie's disagreement with Kraus' understanding of the purpose behind Niagara supports this point:

His [Kraus] attempt to link the prophetic conferences with dispensationalism is in reverse gear. He tries to show that since there was some dispensational teaching in the conferences this was the cause of their being convened. The

truth is that the calling of prophetic conferences as a protest to modernism was the cause, and a gradual understanding of dispensationalism was the effect. The conferences led to dispensationalism, not vice versa. To be sure there was an inevitable and eventual link between the conferences and dispensationalism, but dispensationalism grew out of the *independent* study which resulted from the interest in prophecy.¹⁰

Niagara's unity was the product of those from within liberal denominations who meet together for Bible Study to counter the lack of biblical input they were not receiving from their mainline churches. The result was that they saw in dispensationalism an answer to modernism's approach to tearing down the biblical faith. PD is not made up of those who are dissatisfied with liberal denominations, instead they are Evangelicals who are dissatisfied with the dispensationalism of their forefathers and have met together to change it. Our Niagara fathers were premillennialists and they did not include amillennialists and postmillennialists (for the main part) in their formulations. Today, however, PD's are including nonpremillennialists in their "community" which helps explain why they are arriving at a synthesis between premillennialism and "an inaugurated eschatology"¹¹ (i.e., an amillennial or postmillennial view that the current age is the Davidic kingdom or millennium) as stated in their "already / not yet" dialectic. The Niagara fathers meet for inductive Bible Study and the result was the formulation of dispensationalism. However, today, PD has been the product, in my opinion, of ideas that need to be supported by study of the Bible. Niagara stressed distinctions found in Bible Study, while PD stresses continuity and unity in the Bible. Niagara used as its standard for resolving differences an appeal to the Bible, while PD seems to place great weight up theological dialogue between opposing theological systems.

Blaising says "Niagara dispensationalism was inclusive; it had no distinct identity as 'dispensationalism.' But dispensations and dispensational ideas were present in the study of premillennialism" (20, f.n.). This is an interesting statement. How could "Niagara dispensationalism" be classified as dispensationalism and yet not be considered dispensationalism? I believe a better understanding of Niagara dispensationalism would see their view of dispensations (the early term for dispensationalism) as more dispensational than Blaising would admit. Like the perspective of many modern television shows and movies, Blaising wants to project the modern ethos upon a previous generation that viewed their concerns from a different perspective. About half of Kraus' book *Dispensationalism In America* covers the Niagara period in which he believes that their views of dispensations clearly constituted dispensationalism. There was just as much talk during the Niagara period about learning to distinguish the dispensations as there has been since Ryrie's day where similar interests have been expressed in term of distinguishing between Israel and the Church.

Blaising's desire to have his readers view Niagara as a time of strong ecumenical sentiment, I believe, is to overrate and misinterpret the true place of unity at the conference. It was a feature of Niagara, but to emphasize it as one of the two or three key elements at Niagara goes to far. Instead, it appears that Blaising is stressing this feature because he wants it to be an aspect of the current dialogue on dispensationalism. This would cast PD in a better light if he can compare today's noble efforts with those of our natal past. An ecumenical impulse such as this could be one of the hidden motives explaining the rise of PD.

The leadership of Niagara developed a detailed doctrinal statement of essentials (clearly an essentialist mentality which Blaising opposes) that served to narrow and eliminate those who did not want to unite under such a restrictive banner. The attitude at Niagara, while opposing harsh and inflammatory rhetoric, was that they would stand for what they believed the Bible taught regardless of the impact upon the “community of scholars.” On the other hand, PD’s unity is based upon an inclusive, “don’t-let-doctrinal-differences-stand-in-our-way” kind of unity. Blaising and Bock have concluded that, “this is the nature of theological dialogue in the context of community” (394). The following statement clearly indicates that they place unity, at least on this matter, above Biblical conviction.

This work indicates where many dispensationalists are today, while recognizing that it is part of a larger theological community that is the body of Christ. Our discussion should continue, but not at the expense of our unity. (394)

Niagara’s “promotion of a nonpartisan method of Bible study” (18) often known today as the inductive approach, consisted of three features, according to Blaising. They are 1) Christocentricity, 2) piety, and 3) an inductive or scientific approach to Bible Study (18).

Christocentricity is said by Blaising to mean that “[a]ll Scripture points to Christ and is interpreted correctly only with respect to Christ” (18). Contrary to Blaising this is a feature that has been an emphasis universally recognized by all dispensationalists (Luke 24:27, 44). Yet Blaising and Bock want to give the impression that PD has returned to the Christocentricity of Niagara and that the Scofield and Ryrie (essentialist) eras had abandoned this principle with their alleged “anthropologically centered” (383) and “doxological unity” (27).

What is needed today is a new approach to defining dispensationalism. . . . one that may rehabilitate and revise features that were central to an earlier dispensationalism but may have been eclipsed by the concerns of an intervening generation [such as Scofield and Ryrie—TDI] (such as the factors of exclusivity and Christocentricity, which present-day dispensationalists share more closely with the Niagara dispensationalists than they do with their immediate predecessors). (30)

Scofield and Ryrie demonstrate that they are just as Christocentric as Niagara:

The Central Theme of the Bible is Christ. It is this manifestation of Jesus Christ, his Person as “God manifest in the flesh” (1 Tim. 3:16), his sacrificial death, and his resurrection, which constitute the Gospel. Unto this all preceding Scripture leads, from this all following Scripture proceeds. . . . etc. (*The Scofield Reference Bible*, 1917 edition: vi; 1967 edition: xi)

The outstanding theme that ties those sixty-six books together is God’s provision of a Savior in Jesus Christ. The Old Testament predicts His coming, and the New Testament announces the good news of His coming. Not every verse, of course, directly mentions Him, but He is the theme that ties the Bible together. (*Ryrie’s Concise Guide to the Bible* Here’s Life Publishers, 1983:13)

Blaising and Bock use this point about Christocentricity as their integrating principle between Old and New Testament theology. (382)

The dispensationalism of this book distinguishes itself from the immediately preceding dispensationalism [i.e., Ryrie—TDI] and Scofieldism by the fact that instead of being anthropologically centered on two peoples, it is Christologically centered. (383)

It appears to me that Blaising and Bock are using Christocentricity in a different way than Niagara and other dispensationalists. They seem to be using it as a mechanism to break down dispensational distinctives (hardly the same direction that those of the Niagara era were moving). They seem to be using Christocentricity in the same way that a Covenant Theologian uses the covenant to argue against distinctions seen by dispensationalists. Christocentricity is one of the devices they use to argue for a present form of a Davidic rule for Christ.

The movement from the past to the present and then to the future dispensations is not due to a plan for two different kinds of people but rather is due to the history of Christ's fulfilling the plan of holistic redemption in phases (dispensations). (383)

For Blaising to describe PD as Christocentric, as set against the characterization that Scofield's dispensationalism is anthropologically centered or Ryrie's is defectively theocentric is an arbitrary judgment. I could just as likely say (I am not saying this, just illustrating) that Blaising and Bock's dispensationalism is influenced by Karl Barth, since Barth often is described as having a Christocentric theology. It would be better to see each brand of dispensationalism as having a certain view of each aspect of theology. Each view has an anthropological dimension. Each view has a Christological position, etc. So it does not make one form of dispensationalism any better or more heroic (better able to explain the Bible) to say that PD is Christocentric, as set against other forms of dispensationalism.

In the next issue I want to deal with Blaising's attempt to cast a bad light upon inductive Bible study and literal hermeneutics. I am not saying that Blaising rejects inductive Bible study and a form of literal hermeneutics, but that he wants to taint older systems of dispensationalism as having been influenced for the bad by secular thought from the culture. With all the current discussion of preunderstanding and the need to be aware of cultural influences upon how we view the Bible, I did not see a self-examination in this area by Blaising. Has the existential idealism of modern America influenced their hermeneutics and theology causing them to devalue *consistent* literal interpretation for an element of spiritualization? These matters will have to wait until next issue, since as finite creatures we are limited by boundaries such as space and time.

NOTE: This was the first in a series of articles on PD, but no other articles were ever produced.

ENDNOTES

¹ Stanley N. Gundry, Foreword to Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, Editors *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1992):11-12.

² Ronald T. Clutter, "Dispensational Study Group: An Introduction," *Grace Theological Journal*, 10:2 (1989):123.

³ Blaising paper, while later published in Dallas Seminary's *Bibliotheca Sacra* (145, 1988), his introductory chapter in *DIC* is a later edition of his paper.

⁴ The essence of this paper can be found in *DIC*, chapter 1 "The Reign of the Lord Christ."

⁵ John Master in a private discussion with Thomas Ice, December 1992.

⁶ Ryrie's much quoted statement is as follows: "The essence of dispensationalism, then, is [1] the distinction between Israel and the Church. This grows out of the dispensationalist's consistent employment of [2] normal or plain interpretation, and it reflects an understanding of [3] the basic purpose of God in all His dealings with mankind as that of glorifying Himself through salvation and other purposes as well." *Dispensationalism Today* (Moody Press, 1965):47.

⁷ Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1987).

⁸ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* :20.

⁹ For one of the most extensive, though not always reliable, accounts of Niagara and the development of the Bible Study movement see C. Norman Kraus, *Dispensationalism in America: Its Rise and Development* (John Knox Press, 1958):71-110.

¹⁰ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* :81, f.n. 28.

¹¹ Kenneth L. Barker's statement in *DIC*:295.