

Dichotomy or Continuity Between the Present and Past Dispensations Opening Argument

Tim Warner 08-07-2002

Copyright Conservative Theological Society - Reproduced by Permission

I would like to take this opportunity to publicly thank Dr. Couch and CTS Online for extending the gracious offer to debate, and for permission to publish this debate in full on **The Last Trumpet - Post-Trib Research Center** website.

Having been given the privilege of going first, I have prayerfully considered my opening remarks. I take very seriously the responsibility of accurately portraying the issues involved in progressive dispensationalism, but at the same time staying true to my own beliefs where I have some small differences with certain other progressive dispensationalist writers (particularly in the area of eschatology). The arguments I will present in this debate are my own, many of which will parallel other writers. Some will be entirely new. I look forward to breaking new ground here, particularly in areas where others have not ventured before.

I should state up front that my eschatology is solidly pre-millennial and post-tribulational, similar to Robert Gundry's. To my knowledge, none of the other progressive dispensationalist writers claim to be post-trib. They may have a different opinion about the logical implications of progressive dispensationalism concerning the rapture. So my brief comments on the rapture implications should be seen as my opinion only. Other progressive dispensationalists may be perfectly content with a pre-trib form of progressive dispensationalism. But, I do agree with John Brumett that the logical implication of consistent progressive dispensationalism is a post-trib/pre-mill rapture.

Please do not assume that all of my arguments are representative of all progressive dispensationalists. There is a spectrum of views within the progressive dispensationalism camp, just as in normative dispensationalism. The fact that I am not trying to reconcile the pre-trib rapture view with progressive dispensationalism allows me some freedom of argumentation that others might not choose to pursue.

One point of disagreement among progressive dispensational writers concerns the Davidic covenant. Drs. Blaising and Bock hold to a partial fulfillment of the Davidic covenant in this dispensation. Dr. Saucy sides with normative dispensationalism in believing the Davidic covenant has been postponed until the second coming of Christ. I agree with Dr. Saucy. For the sake of this exchange, the Davidic covenant will not be an issue since Dr. Couch and I are in agreement on that topic, and I am not here to defend Drs. Blaising and Bock. It is my personal opinion that this should not be the defining issue within progressive dispensationalism any more than the "two new covenants" view

of some prominent normative dispensationalists should define normative dispensationalism in general.

Introduction to my First Argument:

Dispensationalism originally grew out of a return to futurist pre-millennialism. In doing so, it threw off many of the concepts held by the Reformers, and their theories regarding Israel's relationship to the Church. In abandoning amillennialism and historicism, early dispensationalists had to grapple with reconciling the Old Testament with the New. The replacement theology of Catholicism and the Reformers simply could not be sustained from a literal reading of the Old Testament. The solution devised by the early dispensationalists was a kind of dichotomy between the Old Testament program, which was seen as Jewish and earthly, and a New Testament program for the Church, which was seen as heavenly.

Taking the "dichotomy" approach to solving the seeming conflict between Old and New Testament programs is really nothing new. In the second century there was a similar battle raging between two completely different approaches to this question. Faced with a God in the Old Testament who seemed to have one program, and a God in the New Testament who seemed to have a completely different program, certain Gnostic sects imagined that the God of Israel was not the same Father God whom Jesus proclaimed, but a lesser god.^[1] They envisioned a total "dichotomy" between the God of Israel with His "carnal" (physical) program, and the Father Jesus proclaimed, who had a much more heavenly minded (spiritual) program for those who had knowledge (gnosis) of the mystery.^[2] The followers of Marcion (one of the Gnostic sects) went so far as to claim that Paul alone received the revelation of the "mystery," not foreseen in the Old Testament, or revealed to the other Apostles.^[3]

Irenaeus, the second century orthodox pastor and martyr, was a disciple of Polycarp, the disciple of John. He made it his life's goal to refute the Gnostic heretical sects point by point in his massive five volume work, "A Refutation and Subversion of Gnosis falsely so called" or "Against Heresies" for short. One of Irenaeus' tactics in refuting the Gnostics was to illustrate the continuity between the Old and New Testament programs. He did this by citing Old Testament prophecy fulfilled in the Church (that is, specific prophecy about this present dispensation), and citing New Testament passages that linked the present dispensation with the past one.^[4] He also appealed to the agreement between Old Testament prophecy and New Testament prophecy regarding eschatology.^[5] He proved with many quotations of Scripture that the Apostolic writings concerning the Church were in perfect alignment, and even depended upon, the goal of Old Testament prophecy regarding Israel. The goal of both Testaments was the same, and the destiny of the redeemed from both Testaments was a horizontal hope, the Millennial Kingdom of Christ on earth, not a vertical hope, being carried off to heaven.^[6] The 'mystery' was not seen as a parenthetical Church age, but the whole hidden plan of God to redeem mankind through the atoning sacrifice of Christ and the Gospel being proclaimed to the nations. It was hidden within the Old Testament Scriptures, and revealed by Jesus and the Apostles.^[7] Therefore in Irenaeus' mind, one God was interacting with man through a single program, and the Church consisted of all of the redeemed. God's unfolding plan

for mankind's salvation was manifest through a series of progressive dispensations, according to Irenaeus.^[8] This was the orthodox Faith of all the local churches in the second century, from Germany to Lybia, from Gaul to Egypt. And it was the tradition passed down by the succession of "faithful men," the elders of the churches founded by the Apostles.^[9]

Welcome to the 'chiliasm' (millennialism) of the early orthodox Christian Church. It knew nothing of a "heavenly destiny" for the Church distinct from God's program for Israel. The early Christians' hope was identical to that of the Patriarchs, the Prophets, and all the saints of Hebrews eleven, an inheritance in the coming physical Kingdom of God on earth. The 'Church' was seen as all of the redeemed from every dispensation.

While most may not be aware of this, progressive dispensationalism is largely a return to the basic pre-millennialism of the early orthodox Church. Darby threw off some of the Augustinian thinking predominant in Protestantism, particularly where it concerns the nation of Israel. But, it is my personal belief that he did not go far enough, and continued to entertain "mystical" thinking regarding the Church, begun by the Gnostics, toned down by Origen, and made mainstream by Augustine. Darby should have gone all the way back to Apostolic theology found in those who had personal linkage to Apostolic oral tradition, like Justin, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus. He should have abandoned the "heavenly destiny" idea of the Gnostics, Origen, and Augustine, and embraced the "chiliasm" handed down to the second generation Christians by the Apostles.

I am not identifying normative dispensationalism with Gnosticism. The differences outweigh the similarities. But I am drawing a parallel between the solution devised by the Gnostics and the one employed by Darby. It is my contention that both the Gnostics and modern day dispensationalists have missed the key to solving the dilemma, and have taken a wrong turn. Rather than "dichotomy," the solution is found in "continuity," and a biblical understanding of the "mystery" hidden in the "Scriptures of the prophets" (Rom. 16:25-26). This approach is perfectly compatible with the grammatical-historical hermeneutic.

I. First Argument:

In my initial defense of progressive dispensationalism I intend to follow in Irenaeus' footsteps, and employ the same approach to a similar scheme. I would like to initially offer several passages of Scripture that, in my opinion, show a continuity between God's program for Israel and the Church. This implies a progression of dispensations within a single program, and that the present dispensation was foreseen in previous prophecy regarding Israel. That would make the Church the fulfillment of promises made to Israel. For the sake of clarity, let me define "Israel" and the "Church" as I understand the Biblical usage of each term.

"Israel" is the physical seed of Jacob through the twelve tribes. It is a nation, like any other nation, consisting of believers and unbelievers. The believers among the nation of Israel (from all dispensations) make up the "remnant" of Israel, who are the heirs according to the promises.

The "Church" consists of the believing remnant of Israel, along with the believing remnants of all the Gentile nations, united in one body. Israel and the Church are not identical. However, they overlap where the Jewish remnant is concerned. The term "Israel" is not used of the Church in general in Scripture, nor is the term "Church" used of the whole nation of Israel. The terminology must always be distinguished. Now, on to my arguments.

A. On the Day of Pentecost, Peter plainly stated that the coming of the Spirit to empower the Church was the direct fulfillment of Joel's prophecy. "This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel" leaves no room for the alleged dichotomy between programs. Similarly, in his second sermon in Acts 4, Peter reminded his Jewish audience of Moses' prophecy of another "Prophet" who would divide Israel into two camps. The unbelievers would be "utterly destroyed from among the people" (Acts 3:23). Peter proclaimed that "all the prophets, from Samuel and those who follow, as many as have spoken, have also foretold these days" (vs. 24). In his closing statement, Peter reminded them of the Abrahamic Covenant which promised a blessing on the Gentile nations. "You are sons of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.' To you first, God, having raised up His Servant Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from your iniquities" (vss. 25-26).

Not only has Peter equated the present dispensation with the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, but he also told his hearers that they had the first opportunity to partake of this "blessing" of Abraham, implying that the Gentiles would share in the Abrahamic covenant afterward.

B. In Hebrews 8, the writer plainly stated that the "new covenant" prophesied by Jeremiah has been inaugurated by Jesus Christ. The "better covenant" which "was" (past tense) established on better promises is the covenant prophesied by Jeremiah. Yet, Jeremiah explicitly wrote the new covenant would be made with Israel, and would supersede the old covenant (also given to Israel). In fact, its arrival is the mechanism for making the old covenant obsolete, and the ending of sacrifices in this dispensation.

C. In Hebrews 9:15, the writer argued that eternal salvation was made available retroactively for the Old Testament saints, through the new covenant. That "eternal inheritance" is provided for them only through the new covenant implies a unified redemption program for all believers of all time. In Heb. 11:39-40, the same writer indicated that the Old Testament saints would not be made complete "apart from us." That our salvation is through the same new covenant is plain from Jesus' statements at the Last Supper. "For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins." (Matt. 26:28).

D. The Church's inclusion within the new covenant is made plain by Paul in Gal. 4:21-31. In this allegory, he equated the old covenant with Hagar and the earthly city of Jerusalem (representing unbelieving Jews), and the new covenant with Sarah and the New Jerusalem (representing believing Christians). Paul also characterized himself (and the other Apostles') as being "sufficient as ministers of the new covenant" (2 Cor. 3:5).

These things prove that the new covenant prophesied by Jeremiah finds its fulfillment (at least in part) in the present dispensation.

E. In Romans 15, Paul encouraged the Gentile believers to donate toward a special collection for the impoverished Jewish believers in Jerusalem. "For it pleased those from Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor among the saints who are in Jerusalem. It pleased them indeed, and they are their debtors. For if the Gentiles have been partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister to them in material things" (vss. 26-27). To Paul, the Gentiles were indebted to the Jews, because Gentiles had been allowed to partake in the "spiritual things" belonging to the Jews. This implies that believing Jews in Jerusalem were presently enjoying these Jewish "spiritual blessings," which also overflowed to the Gentile believers.

F. In Paul's defense before Agrippa in Acts 26, he stated that his arrest was due to his propagation of the "hope of the promise made by God to our fathers" (v. 6). This "hope" is what Israel sought to attain. "To this promise our twelve tribes, earnestly serving God night and day, hope to attain. For this hope's sake, King Agrippa, I am accused by the Jews" (v. 7). (See also: Acts 28:20). Paul then recounted his conversion, and Jesus' sending him on a mission to the Gentiles. "I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me" (vss. 17,18). Paul's mission to the Gentiles was both the fulfillment of the hope Israel sought to attain, and a rescue mission to bring the Gentiles into the inheritance promised to Israel. Paul summarized his being "obedient to the heavenly vision" (ie, his mission to the Gentiles), with the following statement: "Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come-- that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles" (vss. 22- 23). Note the words "to this day" are meant to include all of Paul's past missionary activity among the Gentiles. From Paul's own lips, being under oath, we have his personal testimony that everything he taught as a part of his mission to the Gentiles, was solidly anchored in Old Testament prophecy, and was "the hope of Israel."

G. The Olive Tree parable in Romans 11:16-29 illustrates a continuity between the natural branches both before and after some were broken off. That only some natural branches were broken off implies that some natural branches remained. The wild branches were then grafted in among the remaining branches. This illustrates a continuity between the Jewish believers both before and after Christ, and the adding of the Gentiles to the remnant of Jewish believers.

H. Paul explained the same concept in Eph. 2:11-22. According to Paul, the Gentiles formerly were "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise" (vs. 12). But, in Christ, having been "once ... far off" we "have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (vs. 13). This begs the question, brought near to what? The only possible answer is that we are "brought near" to the "commonwealth

of Israel" and the "covenants of promise." This is not to say we become Jews or "spiritual Israel." Being "brought near" to the Jewish covenants and promises does not make us Jews, only that we share in the blessings promised to the Jews.

I believe these passages and others prove that the propagation of the Gospel to the Gentiles through Paul's ministry was the direct fulfillment and goal of part of the "hope" promised to Israel in the Old Testament. As to how explicit this "hope" is in the Old Testament, and precisely where it is located, I will reserve that for another cycle in this debate.

Conclusion:

It is my contention that normative dispensationalism wrongly isolates the Church from God's progressive program with Israel because of a faulty presupposition that the Church's destiny is "heavenly." If we remove this assumption, yet maintain the literal interpretation of Old Testament prophecy, as well as the Scriptures I have presented above, the natural conclusion is progressive dispensationalism. I further contend that this is what was handed down by the Apostles to successive generations, as evidenced by the writings of the orthodox early Church Fathers.

Notes:

[1] Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Bk. I, ch. XXIV, 2,4,

[2] Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Bk. I, ch. VI, 1-2

[3] Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Bk. III, ch. XIII, 1

[4] Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Bk. I, ch. X, 3, Bk III, ch. XII, Bk. IV, ch. VIII, IX-XII, XXI-XXV

[5] Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Bk. V, ch. XXV-XXVI

[6] Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Bk. V, ch. XXXII - XXXV

[7] Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Bk. III, ch. XII, 9, Bk. IV, ch. IX, 3, Frag. XXXVI

[8] Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Bk. IV, ch. IX, 3, ch. XXVI

[9] Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Bk. I, X