

THE HERMENEUTICS OF PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM¹

Robert L. Thomas
Professor of New Testament

Progressive Dispensationalism differs from Dispensationalism in a number of ways, one of them being in not viewing the time of the rapture to be as crucial. Progressive dispensationalists view themselves as a continuation of the dispensational tradition, but realize they are moving toward nondispensational systems. The movement's desire for rapprochement with other theological systems has involved a hermeneutical shift in its understanding of Scripture. It has replaced grammatical-historical interpretation with a system of hermeneutics called historical-grammatical-literary-theological. Several comparisons that illustrate the differences between the two hermeneutical systems relate to the function of the interpreter, the historical dimension, the "single-meaning" principle, the issue of sensus plenior, and the importance of thoroughness. The bottom line is that a choice between Dispensationalism and Progressive Dispensationalism amounts to a choice of which system of hermeneutics an interpreter chooses to follow.

* * * * *

A recent development related to the pretribulational rapture has come from a relatively new movement calling itself Progressive Dispensationalism (hereafter usually designated by "PD"). For the most part, progressive dispensationalists believe in a rapture prior to the future seven-year tribulation, but they do so in a rather tentative

¹This essay will also appear in the volume *When the Trumpet Sounds*, scheduled for release by Harvest House in July 1995.

fashion.² Their system could dispense with this doctrine without altering their position significantly.

A closer look at PD will clarify why its adherents do not hold the

²E.g., Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational & Non-Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) 8-9; Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: Victor, 1993) 317 n. 15; cf. Walter A. Elwell, "Dispensationalists of the Third Kind," *Christianity Today* 38/10 (September 12, 1994):28.

pretrib view to be crucial. The name "Progressive Dispensationalism" derives from the proclivity of its adherents to see the movement in the lineage of dispensational theology and from the understanding of dispensations as not being different arrangements between God and the human race but as successive arrangements in the progressive revelation and accomplishment of redemption.³ An attempt at defining PD must remain vague because progressive dispensationalists themselves are still in the process of trying to define it. The title of a recent book, *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition* (1993), reflects the uncertainty of those within the movement about definition.

LINEAGE AND MEDIATING STANCE OF PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM

The leaders in the movement⁴ view themselves and their supporters as taking a further step in the continuing development of dispensational theology.⁵ For example, Bock sees himself as combining two elements, one from what he calls Scofieldian dispensationalism and the other from so-called essentialist dispensationalism, into his system.⁶ Advocates of PD, in other words, see themselves in the lineage of dispensational theology.

Yet they do so with a realization that they are moving toward theological systems that are nondispensational. Saucy's quest is for a mediating position between traditional dispensationalism and nondispensationalism.⁷ In this quest, however, some of his PD associates

³Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 48.

⁴For purposes of this article, Craig A. Blaising, Darrell L. Bock, and Robert L. Saucy—sometimes called "the father of Progressive Dispensationalism"—will receive major attention because of their key leadership roles among progressive dispensationalists.

⁵E.g., Craig A. Blaising, "Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition," *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church: The Search for Definition*, ed. by Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 16-34; Saucy, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 9.

⁶Darrell L. Bock, "The Son of David and the Saints' Task: The Hermeneutics of Initial Fulfillment," *BSac* 150/600 (October-December 1993):442.

⁷Robert L. Saucy, "The Church as the Mystery of God," *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church: The Search for Definition*, ed. by Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 150; idem, *Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* 9, 29.

have gone far enough to suggest to outside observers a nondispensational orientation in their systems.⁸ Bock admits the closeness of his views regarding a present kingdom to those of George Ladd's historic premillennialism—a system adverse to dispensationalism—though claiming a distinction regarding the future kingdom.⁹ In fact, the desire for rapprochement with theologians of other systems appears to be a primary motivation behind the emergence of PD.

HERMENEUTICAL SELF-ASSESSMENT OF PD

With PD's desire for rapprochement, however, has come a hermeneutical shift away from literal interpretation—also call the grammatical-historical method—that has been one of the ongoing hallmarks of dispensationalism.¹⁰ In late twentieth-century writings, advocates of this developing theological perspective have shifted in the direction of nondispensational systems by adopting some of the same hermeneutical practices as found in these other systems. For whatever reason, proponents of PD sometimes call their hermeneutics by the name "grammatical-historical," but they mean something quite different by the phrase. Blaising and Bock confirm this difference:

... Evangelical grammatical-historical interpretation was ... broadening in the mid-twentieth century to include the field of biblical theology. Grammatical analysis expanded to include developments in literary study, particularly in the study of genre, or literary form, and rhetorical structure. Historical interpretation came to include a reference to the historical and cultural context of individual literary pieces for their overall interpretation. And by the late 1980s, evangelicals became more aware of the problem of the interpreter's historical context and traditional preunderstanding of the text being interpreted. These

⁸E.g., Elwell, "Dispensationalists of the Third Kind" 28.

⁹Darrell L. Bock, "Current Messianic Activity and OT Davidic Promise: Dispensationalism, Hermeneutics, and NT Fulfillment," *Trinity Journal* 15NS (1994):70 n. 29; cf. Elwell, "Dispensationalists of the Third Kind" 28.

¹⁰See Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965) 20, 45-46, 86-90; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Findlay, OH: Dunham, 1958) 11-12, 33, 60-61; Thomas D. Ice, "Dispensational Hermeneutics," *Issues in Dispensationalism*, Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master, gen. eds. (Chicago: Moody, 1994) 32. Ice points out the error of Poythress and Blaising in attributing a spiritualized hermeneutics to early dispensationalists such as Darby and Scofield. Dispensationalism has always practiced a literal method of interpretation (Ice, "Dispensational Hermeneutics" 37-38).

developments . . . have opened up new vistas for discussion which were not considered by earlier interpreters, including classical and many revised dispensationalists. These are developments which have led to what is now called "progressive dispensationalism."¹¹

So the hermeneutics of PD represent a significant discontinuity in their alleged lineage of dispensationalism. The recent and more sophisticated "grammatical-historical" interpretation does not lead to dispensationalism in its traditional sense, but to PD.¹²

Blaising and Bock see the continued use of "grammatical-historical" in its traditional sense as running the risk of anachronism,¹³ presumably because their analysis of consensus is that *all* agree on the new principles of interpretation.¹⁴ This appraisal of current views on hermeneutics is open to serious question. No such unanimity in favor of new interpretive approaches exists. Even if it did, who is guilty of anachronism? Is it not those who have taken traditional terminology and read into it new connotations?

Recent additions that differentiate the hermeneutics of PD from traditional dispensational hermeneutics include rhetorical and literary matters, the history of interpretation, the matter of tradition, and the historical context of the interpreter.¹⁵ The method advocates consideration of the problem of historical distance between the text and the interpreter, the role of the interpreter's preunderstanding, and methodological applications of the hermeneutical spiral.¹⁶ In fact, Blaising and Bock in at least one place call the approach by the name "historical-grammatical-literary-theological,"¹⁷ which, of course, is more sophisticated and therefore quite different from simple grammatical-historical hermeneutics. It emphasizes the subjective element in its reasoning and hence is more provisional in its conclusions.¹⁸

This is not the appropriate forum for evaluating recent developments in hermeneutics as a whole—the trends to which these authors

¹¹Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 35-36.

¹²*Ibid.*, 36.

¹³*Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 58, 77.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁶Blaising, "Dispensationalism: The Search" 30.

¹⁷Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 77.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 83.

refer¹⁹—but it is appropriate to compare perspectives regarding several of the new hermeneutical principles with traditional grammatical-historical hermeneutics. For purposes of comparison, Milton S. Terry and Bernard Ramm will furnish principles pertaining to traditional grammatical-historical interpretation in the following discussion.²⁰

¹⁹The *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* plans to publish my partial evaluation of recent developments in evangelical hermeneutics in one of its forthcoming issues (in 1995 or 1996). The title of the article is "Current Hermeneutical Trends: Toward Explanation or Obfuscation?"

²⁰Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.); Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation, A Textbook of Hermeneutics*, 3rd. rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970).

COMPARISON OF OLD AND NEW
HERMENEUTICAL MAXIMS

The following rules of interpretation will illustrate the acknowledged difference in approach to Scripture between PD and dispensationalism. They compare grammatical-historical-literary-theological interpretation with grammatical-historical interpretation.

The Function of the Interpreter

One principle that conspicuously distinguishes the two systems of interpretation relates to the role of the interpreter. Traditionally, the interpreter has sought to suppress any of his own viewpoints regarding what he thinks the passage should mean so as to allow the exegetical evidence from the passage under investigation to speak for itself. Terry writes,

In the systematic presentation, therefore, of any scriptural doctrine, we are always to make a discriminating use of sound hermeneutical principles. We must not study them in the light of modern systems of divinity, but should aim rather to place ourselves in the position of the sacred writers, and study to obtain the impression their words would naturally have made upon the minds of the first readers. . . . Still less should we allow ourselves to be influenced by any presumptions of what the Scriptures *ought* to teach. . . . All such presumptions are uncalled for and prejudicial.²¹

He adds,

He [the interpreter] must have an intuition of nature and of human life by which to put himself in the place of the biblical writers and see and feel as they did. . . . He must not allow himself to be influenced by hidden meanings, and spiritualizing processes, and plausible conjectures. . . . Such a discriminating judgment may be trained and strengthened, and no pains should be spared to render it a safe and reliable habit of the mind.²²

Ramm puts the principle this way:

It is very difficult for any person to approach the Holy Scriptures free

²¹Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 595 [emphasis in original].

²²Ibid., 152-53.

from prejudices and assumptions which distort the text. The danger of having a set theological system is that in the interpretation of Scripture the system tends to govern the interpretation rather than the interpretation correcting the system. . . . Calvin said that the Holy Scripture is not a tennis ball that we may bounce around at will. Rather it is the Word of God whose teachings must be learned by the most impartial and objective study of the text.²³

The hermeneutics of PD are a bold contrast to this principle of seeking objectivity through repression of one's biases. Its relevant principle advocates the inclusion of one's preunderstanding in the interpretive process as a starting point. Leaders in the movement pointedly advocate allowing one's biblical theology and other elements of preunderstanding to influence interpretive conclusions. Blaising and Bock note this in a number of places and affirm it as a proper evangelical procedure of interpretation.²⁴ For example, Bock's preunderstanding in coming to Scripture includes the assumption that a NT appearance of several elements of an OT promise constitutes an initial or partial fulfillment of that promise as a whole.²⁵ This foregone conclusion with which he initiates his research is what ultimately leads him to conclude that Christ is presently ruling from the Davidic throne in heaven.

In the words of Blaising and Bock, "Each of us has our own way of seeing, a grid for understanding, that impacts what we expect to see in the text, the questions we ask of it, and thus the answers we get."²⁶ They apparently agree with McCartney and Clayton that preunderstanding, not interpretive methodology, determines the end result of interpretation.²⁷ This, of course, differs radically from the

²³Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* 115-16. Ramm also quotes Luther to emphasize this point: "The best teacher is the one who does not bring his meaning into the Scripture but gets his meaning from Scripture" (Ibid., 115, citing Farrar, *History of Interpretation* 475).

²⁴E.g., Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, "Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: Assessment and Dialogue," *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church: The Search for Definition*, ed. by Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 380; Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 58-61.

²⁵Bock, "Current Messianic Activity" 72.

²⁶Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 59.

²⁷Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand, A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1994) 65; cf. Millard J. Erickson, *Evangelical Interpretation, Perspectives on Hermeneutical Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 88.

quest of traditional hermeneutics for objectivity in hermeneutical investigations.

Though not as specific as Blaising and Bock, Saucy apparently shares this view of the hermeneutical role of preunderstanding. He writes, "The fact that earthly human ministry still has significance after the finality of Christ's coming leads to a second truth with hermeneutical implications. The application of Christ's fulfillment of the eschatological promises is progressive."²⁸ In coming to the NT, he assumes that it contains a progressive unfolding of the dispensations rather than seeing the church as a parenthesis. This, of course, colors his interpretation of many aspects of revelation regarding the church.

Quite clearly, the issue of preunderstanding distinguishes the hermeneutics of PD from principles of traditional grammatical-historical interpretation.

The Historical Dimension

Another contrast between the two approaches to hermeneutics lies in an understanding of the meaning of "historical" in the expression "grammatical-historical." Traditionally, the historical dimension in interpretation has referred to the historical setting of the text's origin, as Terry describes:

The interpreter should, therefore, endeavour to take himself from the present, and to transport himself into the historical position of his author, look through his eyes, note his surroundings, feel with his heart, and catch his emotion. Herein we note the import of the term *grammatico-historical* interpretation.²⁹

He states further, "Subject and predicate and subordinate clauses must be closely analyzed, and the whole document, book, or epistle, should be viewed, as far as possible from the author's historical standpoint."³⁰

In support of history's importance, Ramm writes, "Some interaction with the culture and history of a book of Holy Scripture is mandatory,"³¹ and "The interpreter must know *Biblical history*. . . . Every event has its historical referent in that all Biblical events occur in

²⁸Saucy, *Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* 32.

²⁹Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 231 [emphasis in original].

³⁰*Ibid.*, 205.

³¹Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* 150.

a stream of history."³²

Bock, on the other hand, advocates a multilayered reading of the text which results in a "complementary" reading (or meaning) that adds to the original meaning determined by the text's original setting. The "complementary" perspective views the text from the standpoint of later events, not the events connected with the text's origin.³³ He proposes a third layer of reading also, that of the entire biblical canon.³⁴ In essence, he sees three possible interpretations of a single text, only one of which pertains to the text's original historical setting. He refers to his method as a historical-grammatical-literary reading of the text.³⁵ He notes that "such a hermeneutic produces layers of sense and specificity for a text, as the interpreter moves from considering the near context to more distant ones."³⁶

By thus ignoring the way the original historical setting "freezes" the meaning of a text, Bock concludes that the meaning of any given passage is not static, but dynamic. It is ever changing through the addition of new meanings.³⁷ In principle, Saucy indicates the same perspective. Though acknowledging that Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in its original utterance had pre-Christian Judaism as its target,³⁸ he views the sermon as directly applicable to the church.³⁹ This can be true only if that portion of Scripture at some point received additional connotations that were not part of its original historical utterance. Adapting Saucy's words from another setting, this amounts to "a bending [of the text] that would have been quite foreign to the original readers [i.e., listeners]."⁴⁰

For PD hermeneutics, "historical" has apparently come to incorporate not just the situation of the original text, but also the ongoing conditions throughout the history of the interpretation of that

³²Ibid., 154 [emphasis in original].

³³Bock, "The Son of David" 445.

³⁴Ibid., 445 n. 9. Blaising and Bock elsewhere call the three levels of reading the historical-exegetical, the biblical-theological, and the canonical-systematic (Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 100-1).

³⁵Bock, "The Son of David" 447.

³⁶Ibid., 447.

³⁷Bock, "Current Messianic Activity" 71; cf. Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 64.

³⁸Saucy, *Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* 87 (see also n. 24).

³⁹Ibid., 18.

⁴⁰Ibid., 235.

text.⁴¹ According to traditional hermeneutical principles, such a "bending" is impossible because the historical dimension fixes the meaning of a given passage and does not allow it to keep gaining new senses as it comes into new settings.

The "Single-Meaning" Principle

Closely related to the dimension that, according to the traditional method, fixes the meaning of a text in relation to its original historical surroundings is the guiding principle that a given text has one meaning and one meaning only. Terry states the principle thus: "A fundamental principle in grammatico-historical exposition is that the words and sentences can have but one significance in one and the same connection. The moment we neglect this principle we drift out upon a sea of uncertainty and conjecture."⁴²

Ramm states the same another way: "But here we must remember the old adage: 'Interpretation is one, application is many.' This means that there is only one meaning to a passage of Scripture which is determined by careful study."⁴³

The position of PD, however, is to refrain from limiting a passage to a single meaning, and to allow for later complementary additions in meaning, which of necessity alter the original sense conveyed by the passage.⁴⁴ These later alterations are in view when Blaising and Bock write, ". . . There also is such a thing as complementary aspects of meaning, where an additional angle on the text reveals an additional element of its message or a fresh way of relating the parts of a text's message."⁴⁵

In part, Bock admits this characteristic of his hermeneutics:

Does the expansion of meaning entail a change of meaning? . . . This is an important question for those concerned about consistency within interpretation. The answer is both yes and no. On the one hand, to add to the revelation of a promise is to introduce "change" to it through addition.⁴⁶

⁴¹Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 29-30.

⁴²Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 205.

⁴³Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* 113.

⁴⁴Blaising and Bock, "Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church" 392-93.

⁴⁵Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 68.

⁴⁶Bock, "Current Messianic Activity" 71.

He tries to justify this change by calling it revelatory progress, but whatever the attempted justification, the fact remains that change is present.⁴⁷ This contrasts with traditional grammatical-historical hermeneutics' denial of the possibility of a passage's having multiple meanings.

Saucy practices the hermeneutics of multiple meanings also. Acknowledging the reference of "seed" in Gen 12:7 to the physical posterity of Abraham, he assigns the term an additional meaning by including Jews and Gentiles who follow Abraham's pattern of faith.⁴⁸ He finds that an original meaning of Psalm 110 received added meaning through Peter's sermon at Pentecost.⁴⁹ This leads him to assign two meanings to the OT throne of David: one a throne in heaven and the other a throne on earth.⁵⁰

In other instances, however, he strongly opposes a reinterpretation of the OT, when it comes to equating the church with the new Israel.⁵¹ Yet this is precisely what he has done in instances when necessary to fit his system of PD. One can but wonder why he does not treat these passages as he does Hos 1:9-10; 2:23 and make them an application of OT passages rather than an added interpretation of them.⁵²

To theorize that the apostles assigned additional meanings to OT texts, as Saucy does,⁵³ cannot qualify as grammatical-historical interpretation, because in numbers of cases the meanings they added to the OT were beyond the reach of human recipients of those OT Scriptures. Yes, God knew all along that the passages would ultimately attain these added nuances, but the additions were unavailable to human interpreters until the time of the NT spokesmen and writers.⁵⁴

⁴⁷Ibid. Progress in divine revelation is quite apparent in tracing through the books of the Old and New Testaments chronologically, but "progress" in the sense only of adding to what has already been revealed, not in any sense of a change of previous revelation. To change the substance of something already written is not "progress"; it is an "alteration" or "change" that raises questions about the credibility of the text's original meaning.

⁴⁸Saucy, *Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* 42-43.

⁴⁹Ibid., 71.

⁵⁰Ibid., 72.

⁵¹E.g., *ibid.*, 134, 211.

⁵²Cf. *ibid.*, 205-6.

⁵³Ibid., 33

⁵⁴Saucy himself illustrates the difference between divine and human perspectives in his defense of the validity of an offer of the kingdom to Israel prior to the prophesied cross of

It is an example of anachronistic hermeneutics to read NT revelation back into the context of the OT under the banner of grammatical-historical methodology. This method limits a passage to one meaning and one meaning only.

The Issue of Sensus Plenior (i.e., "Fuller Meaning")

The issue of whether to assign a fuller sense to a passage than grammatical-historical examination warrants is not too remote from the issue of the principle of single meaning. The practice of doing so has characterized Roman Catholicism for centuries,⁵⁵ and amounts to an allegorical rather than a literal method of interpretation. Terry strongly repudiates this practice: "He [the systematic expounder of Scripture] must not import into the text of Scripture the ideas of later times, or build upon any words or passages a dogma which they do not legitimately teach."⁵⁶ Recently Protestant evangelicals have begun advocating the incorporation of this "fuller meaning" too.⁵⁷ Remarks in the earlier discussion of "historical dimension" and "single-meaning" reflect the disharmony of *sensus plenior* with traditional grammatical-historical interpretation.

Christ: "We suggest that the solution lies in the same realm as other problems related to the sovereign decree of God for history and the responsible actions of mankind. The idea that God could offer humankind a real choice and opportunity, knowing all the while that humankind would fail (and, in fact, having decreed a plan on the basis of that failure), is expressed in other passages of Scripture. In Eden, humankind was given a genuine opportunity to choose holiness, yet Scripture indicates that God's plan already included the sacrifice of Christ 'from the creation of the world' (Rev 13:8; cf. Ac 2:23; 4:28). Thus in this instance, a similar unanswerable question as that related to the offer of the kingdom might be posed: What would have happened to the death of Christ if Adam and Even had not sinned?" (ibid., 92). The analogy holds here too: the humanly discernible meaning of these OT passages was limited to the single connotation determined by grammatical and historical factors, the additional divine nuance being reserved for later NT revelation to humans. The answer to the question, "What would have happened to the added meanings if the NT writers had never penned new meanings to OT passages?" is also unanswerable. Would the meanings have remained unknown to men?

⁵⁵Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* 40-42.

⁵⁶Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 583.

⁵⁷E.g., McCartney and Clayton, *Let the Reader* 162, 164; cf. William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993) 139, 145-50; Moisés Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics, The Search for Meaning*, co-authored with Walter C. Kaiser (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 267.

Facing the issue of "fuller meaning," PD comes down clearly on the side of incorporating it into hermeneutical methodology. Its delineation of "complementary hermeneutics," as described above, is clearly of this nature. Blaising and Bock explicitly refuse to limit textual meaning to a reproduction of what the author meant.⁵⁸ Regarding this issue they state, "These texts have a message that extends beyond the original settings in which they were given. Something about what they say lives on."⁵⁹ They deny the well-known maxim of "one interpretation, many applications," referring to later applications as added meanings that accrue to various biblical texts.⁶⁰ This opinion is in essence none other than an advocacy of *sensus plenior*, when they refer to a meaning beyond that determined by the historical circumstances of the text's origin.⁶¹ When in referring to the possibility of later revelation's expanding of previous revelation, one means an addition to the original text,⁶² it is tantamount to the principle of assigning a meaning beyond that yielded through grammatical-historical study.

In his expansion of the meaning of "seed" in Gen 12:7,⁶³ Saucy follows the same pattern of assigning a fuller meaning than called for by traditional hermeneutics. He also points out that Peter's preaching in Acts 2 added something to the meaning of Psalm 110 that was unrecognized in earlier interpretations.⁶⁴ All such interpretations of PD—of which there are many—fall into the category of historical-grammatical-literary-theological hermeneutics and are a distinguishing mark of this new system.

Saucy, on the other hand, sometimes takes NT uses of the OT not as fulfillments, but as new applications of the OT. He summarizes an extended discussion of how Hebrews uses the OT in these words: "In this connection it is important to recognize that the purpose of the

⁵⁸Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 64.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 64.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*; cf. also *ibid.*, 65-68.

⁶¹Bock elsewhere denies that this hermeneutical principle amounts to *sensus plenior* or spiritualizing interpretation, choosing to refer to it as "pattern" fulfillment or typological-prophetic fulfillment ("Current Messianic Activity" 69; cf. Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 102-4). Whatever name one applies to the practice, it still violates the strict standards of a consistent grammatical-historical interpretation.

⁶²Bock, "The Son of David" 446.

⁶³Saucy, *Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* 49.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 71.

writer to the Hebrews is not to give us an interpretation of Old Testament prophecy. The book is rather 'a word of exhortation' (13:22). . . ."65 He also notes,

. . . The Scriptures frequently reveal different applications of similar language without implying a change in identity. The fact that the same phrase about God's son being called out of Egypt applies to both Israel and Christ does not make these objects identical (cf. Hos 11:1 and Mt 2:15).66

This principle of seeing the NT use of the OT as applications rather than as interpretations is more in accord with grammatical-historical practices. The fact that the added meanings supplied in the NT did not become discernible until provided by inspired NT writings means that the authority for such interpretations derives from the NT citation, not from the OT passages themselves. This being the case, the support for PD vanishes when evaluated by grammatical and historical criteria. Of course, God knew from eternity past that fuller meanings would eventually emerge, but so far as human beings were concerned, such meanings were nonexistent until the time that NT apostles and prophets disclosed them.

The Importance of Thoroughness

The expression "hermeneutical hopscotch" describes a final characteristic of PD hermeneutics. Hopscotch is a game in which players choose which squares they want to hop into and avoid stepping in the squares that would lose the game for them. Hermeneutical procedures of PD resemble this game through a selective use of passages seemingly in support of their system—while avoiding others that do not—and through selective comments regarding the passages they cite. The following instances illustrate this fact.

Traditional grammatical-historical exegesis refrains from such passage selectivity. Ramm warns against the danger of *apparent* cross references—i.e., places where a word or words may be the same in two passages, but when equating the two misrepresents the meaning of one or both passages.⁶⁷ The practice to which this warning applies is

⁶⁵Ibid., 56.

⁶⁶Ibid., 206.

⁶⁷Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* 140-41. Terry also warns, ". . . We must avoid the danger of overstepping in this matter [i.e., the matter of using cross-references too

remarkably close to Bock's treatment of the words "light" and "sit" in some of Luke's writings.⁶⁸ He builds major doctrinal conclusions on the repetitions of these words in contexts that differ considerably from one another. Another instance of selectivity—this time of a thematic type—is Bock's survey of Luke's gospel and Acts to prove that Christ's promised kingdom rule presently exists. He selects scattered passages in the two books that allegedly prove his point, but omits those that are destructive to his theory, such as Luke 8:10 where Christ through His use of "mysteries" indicates He is talking about a kingdom unforeseen in the OT.⁶⁹

Traditional grammatical-historical exegesis also refrains from making only selective comments regarding texts that are crucial to the point to be proven. Careful study of a passage is the way to obtain the one and only meaning of that passage.⁷⁰ Progressive dispensationalists do not exhibit "careful study" in their handling of critical texts. Regarding Rom 16:25-27, the three principal spokesmen fail to acknowledge another interpretation of the passage that refutes their use of it.⁷¹ They consistently interpret "the Scriptures of the prophets" (lit., "the prophetic scriptures") (16:26) as referring to the OT. They conclude on the basis of this assumption that "the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past" (16:25) was made known in the OT. They nowhere in their major writings on the subject show an awareness that another very viable interpretation of "the Scriptures of the prophets" exists, i.e., that it refers to the utterances and/or writings of NT prophets.⁷² This latter meaning would negate the conclusion they draw from the passage. Thorough-going grammatical-historical interpretation does not condone this kind of superficial treatment of texts, particularly when they are critical to support a doctrine being propounded.

carelessly]" (Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 222), and "There may be a likeness of sentiment without any real parallelism [i.e., in regard to verbal parallels between separate passages]" (ibid., 223).

⁶⁸Bock, "The Son of David" 447-48, 451-52.

⁶⁹Cf. ibid., 449-54.

⁷⁰Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* 113.

⁷¹Cf. Blaising and Bock, "Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church" 393 n. 8; Bock, "The Son of David" 456 n. 26; idem, "Current Messianic Activity" 84; Saucy, "The Church as the Mystery" 144.

⁷²Cf. Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on Romans* (1977 reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1883) 504-5; James M. Stifler, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Chicago: Moody, 1960) 254-55.

In the matter of hermeneutical hopscotch, then, lies another distinction between grammatical-historical interpretation and the methodology of PD. The five principles, of which this is the last, are not all that distinguish the two approaches, but they are sufficient to illustrate that significant differences exist.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The difference in hermeneutical methodology summarized above explains why PD is less clear-cut in its support of a pretribulational rapture of the church as well as of a number of other long-standing distinctives of dispensationalism. It is not the purpose of this essay to raise the question of how proper it is to apply the name "dispensational" to the new theological system. The discussion above has only sought to clarify wherein lies the basic difference between dispensationalism and PD.

By now it has become quite evident both from the self-assessment of progressive dispensationalists and from the comparison of illustrative hermeneutical principles that a choice between the two systems amounts to a choice between two systems of interpretation. If one endorses recent trends in evangelical hermeneutics, that person may very easily fit into the camp of PD or perhaps even into a theological system that is decidedly nondispensational. On the other hand, a choice of grammatical-historical interpretation must lead to dispensational conclusions.

In the latter case, a consideration of the hermeneutics of PD is beneficial in sharpening an appreciation for some of the finer points of the traditional method. Positive lessons from above comparisons include the importance of interpretive objectivity, of a passage's historical and cultural background, of limiting each passage to a single meaning, of avoiding the temptation to assign a "fuller meaning," and of thoroughness in letting each passage have its complete contribution to the totality of biblical revelation. Practicing these lessons will have a stabilizing and building effect in the growth of Christ's body.

