"Dispensational Development and Departure: Differences Between Classical, Essentialist, and Progressive Dispensationalism"[[1]](#footnote-1)

While pursuing a Masters at Dallas Theological Seminary, I struggled to understand what the big difference was between progressive dispensationalism and traditional dispensationalism. It was not until my Ph.D. studies at Baptist Bible Seminary that I began to finally understand the issues. What I thought was a natural development in the history of dispensationalism from classical, to what Bock and Blaising called “revised dispensationalism” to progressive dispensationalism was actually a development into a progressive dispensationalism model that was inconsistent with its predecessors. The purpose of this paper is to portray each position fairly in a way that does not require Ph.D. studies to understand the issues. Before we get to that, I would like to define the positions.

**Categories of Dispensationalism**

***Classical dispensationalists*** include the initial teachers and scholars that defined and systematized the dispensationalist system. They include men like Darby, Scofield, Gaebelein, and Chafer. Classical dispensationalists had tremendous success in getting dispensationalism into the local church through the *Scofield Reference Bible* and Chafer’s *Systematic Theology*. They contributed to dispensationalism by establishing a literal hermeneutic, emphasizing the distinction between Israel and the church, and describing the nature of the dispensations.

The next category of dispensationalists has been labeled in a wide variety of ways. Some argue there are only two categories: classical and progressive dispensationalists. For example, Lightner says:

I think that progressive dispensationalists have made this classification of initial, classical, and essential in order to simply argue that there have been these spurts of growth, development, and change; therefore, their view is just another one. I want to categorically reject that thesis because I think there is a world of difference between various differences within the system and altering the foundation of the system. I liken the three essentials, or sine qua non, as the foundation upon which dispensationalism rests. You can’t be a dispensationalist without these essentials, in my opinion.[[2]](#footnote-2)

As a result, Lightner prefers the phrase normative dispensationalism.”[[3]](#footnote-3) While Baker acknowledges Lightner’s approach, he prefers the phrase “traditional dispensationalist.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Bock and Blaising prefer the phrase “revised dispensationalism.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

While I agree with Lightner’s view of the two categories of dispensationalism (normative and progressive), the terms classical, essentialist, and progressive dispensationalism will be employed in this paper. The term essentialist will be used for individuals like Ryrie, Walvoord, Pentecost, Lightner as well as contemporary dispensationalists like Stallard, Cone, and Elliott Johnson. The term essentialist refers to those who embrace three essentials that serve as the *sine qua non* (a Latin term which means without which none or something that is absolutely necessary) of dispensationalism that Ryrie developed: 1) The separation of the church from Israel 2) consistent literal interpretation 3) the doxological purposeof history.[[6]](#footnote-6)The term essentialist also seems less apt to cause offense than normative (especially since essentialist is a term that Bock uses[[7]](#footnote-7)). Regarding the third category of progressive dispensationalism, Bock gives the following definition, “‘Progressive dispensationalism’ focuses on the progress of revelation, so that each subsequent dispensation represents ‘progress’ in the unified plan of God. This approach argues for more continuity in God’s plan than the other categories.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

**Comparing Classical, Essentialist, and Progressive Dispensationalism**

This paper will compare the dispensationalist systems on two aspects of the sine qua non: literal interpretation and the distinction between the church and Israel.[[9]](#footnote-9) Perhaps the most important comparison is between the hermeneutical approach advocated by each category of dispensationalism. Hermeneutics has been defined by many scholars as the art and science of interpretation. Advocates of all three positions argue for a literal hermeneutic but how they define and apply this literal approach differs.

For instance, Chafer demonstrates his literal hermeneutical method when he says:

The prophetic story is largely the fulfillment of the Abrahamic, the Palestinian, and the Davidic Covenants. It includes, also, the realization of the two divine purposes—the earthly purpose centered in Israel and consummated according to Psalm 2:6, and the heavenly purpose centered in the Church and consummated according to Hebrews 2:10. It is here declared with complete assurance that, as prophecies which are now fulfilled were fulfilled in their natural, literal, and grammatical meaning, in like manner all that remains—reaching to eternal ages—will be fulfilled in the natural, literal, and grammatical way which the predictions imply.[[10]](#footnote-10)

In this quote, Chafer uses “natural,” “literal” and “grammatical” to describe his interpretive method and the scope of literal interpretation encompasses the entire Bible (including the literal interpretation of the Old Testament covenants, past prophecies and future prophecies).

One can see similarities between Chafer’s definition of literal interpretation and the essentialist definition of literal interpretation. Ryrie’s famous definition of literal as “clear, plain and normal” is reflected in his definition of literal which he says is “to interpret plainly one must first of all understand what each word means in its normal grammatical historical sense.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

In contrast to Chafer and Ryrie, Blaising and Bock rely on modern developments in scholarship to advocate for a historical-grammatical-literary-theological hermeneutic because this “fourfold description of hermeneutics is really what most mean when they speak simply of the historical-grammatical method.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Of course, this is not how Ryrie and Chafer intended the literal or historical grammatical method. Importing theology into the interpretive process can cause a person to read into the Bible what his or her theology dictates (what scholars call eisegesis) instead of reading the text literally before reaching theological conclusions.

How can they call still call themselves dispensationalists after advocating this position? Bock and Blaising contend that classical dispensationalism cannot claim to employ this method “since they did not seek to practice such a hermeneutic consistently or exclusively.”[[13]](#footnote-13) What are Bock and Blaising referring to? They primarily are referring to the use of typology among classical dispensationalists. For instance, Chafer said, “It is reasonable to suppose that when an account is given of the marriage of any man of the Old Testament who is himself a type of Christ, that marriage may have typical signification. Moses is a type of Christ as Deliverer; thus Zipporah his wife, taken from the Gentiles while he was away from his brethren, is a suggestion of the calling out of the Church during the period between the two advents of Christ.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

In contrast to Chafer, Ryrie puts more limits on Old Testament symbols and types:

Remember that when symbols, parables, types, etc. are used they depend on an underlying literal sense for their very existence, and their interpretation must always be controlled by the concept that God communicates in a normal, plain, or literal manner. Ignoring this will result in the same kind of confused exegesis that characterized the patristic and medieval interpreters.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Ryrie speaks of typology in a much more limited sense by arguing that God’s clear communication would not make hidden messages in the Old Testament very likely. Personally, I prefer to only identify types as those things that the New Testament explicitly refers to as types in order to preserve a consistent literal approach to the Bible.

The progressive dispensationalist approach to typology is used to establish their fourfold hermeneutic. Bock and Blaising write, “Progressive dispensationalists view typology as an aspect of historical-literary interpretation. This is not the same kind of typology as practiced in classical dispensationalism. The latter was oftentimes a form of ‘spiritual interpretation’ in which material objects, persons, or other phenomena represented something in the spiritual world.”[[16]](#footnote-16) While there are differences between Ryrie and Chafer’s use of typology, these differences are not so significant to warrant different labels for each group or to argue that progressive dispensationalism is continuing the process of change started by essentialist dispensationalism.

One of the most significant distinctions between the systems can be found in the approach to prophecy. With regard to hermeneutics and prophecy, Chafer writes, “None could question with fairness that the prophecy now fulfilled has followed the literal method to the last detail. It is therefore both unreasonable and unbelieving to suppose that, to relieve some incredulity, the predictions yet unfulfilled will be realized in some spiritualized manner.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Ryrie argues that conservative interpreters often claim to hold a form of a literal interpretation but some do not consistently apply it to prophetic and eschatological fulfillment. He says, “All conservatives, whatever their eschatological persuasions, use literal or normal interpretation everywhere except eschatology.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

Progressive dispensationalists propose an already not yet hermeneutical approach to prophecy.[[19]](#footnote-19) This approach argues that covenants and kingdom promises have been partially fulfilled in an already sense but the final fulfillment is still future. This already not yet hermeneutic is not unique to progressive dispensationalism. The concept was taught by George Ladd and other advocates of historic premillennialism long before Bock and Blaising published their book. Of course, historical premillennialism endorses a post-tribulational rapture and based on a faulty interpretation of Matthew 21:43–44 historic premillenialists teach that God took the kingdom away from Israel and gave it to the church. Connections with historic premillennialism are not the only concern; the problem with the already not yet approach is that it necessitates a change of meaning that the original Old Testament audience would not have understood. Furthermore, it does not account for the fact that most of the covenants are royal grant covenants that are ultimately only fulfilled in eternity.

To illustrate this, imagine a wedding taking place between Joshua and Rebekah. In that marriage ceremony, Joshua made a covenantal vow to her to love Rebekah “for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, forsaking all others, to love and to cherish until death do us part.” When can it be determined that the covenant has been fulfilled? The vows are clear. This covenant cannot be fulfilled until death. If Joshua loves Rebekah for better or for worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health for fifteen years but then divorces her in the sixteenth year, would a fifteen-year track record fulfill his covenantal obligation? Clearly not. If Joshua loves Rebekah for better or worse and richer or poorer but fails to care for her any time she is sick, has Jacob fulfilled the requirements of the covenant? Clearly not. In the same way, an eternal or perpetual covenant, can only be fulfilled in eternity when all aspects are completed. As opposed to the partial fulfillment that progressive dispensationalists advocate, there may be times when Joshua’s covenantal commitments are observed or realized. If Joshua does take care of her when she is sick or our love stays strong during poverty, that reflects his efforts to comply with his covenantal obligation but it does not fulfill his covenantal obligation because of the time requirement of commitment until death.

With respect to the distinction between the church and Israel, there are other significant differences. Chafer’s distinction between Israel and the church was heavily influenced by his literal hermeneutic as he wrote, “That Israel will yet return to her land and experience great+ national blessing is one of the Bible’s most positive predictions—a forecast which yields to no fanciful notions for its interpretation. It must either be accepted in its literal form or ignored completely.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Ryrie agrees with Chafer when he writes, “The apparent dichotomy between heavenly and earthly purposes means this: The earthly purpose of Israel of which dispensationalists speak concerns the yet unfulfilled national promises that will be fulfilled by Israel during the Millennium as they live on the earth in unresurrected bodies.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

On this topic, progressive dispensationalism moves towards Ladd’s notion of believing in one people of God.[[22]](#footnote-22) They believe that this is true in an already sense through the church and ultimately in a not yet sense after the millennium. By arguing that the church fulfills covenants that were originally given to Israel (even if in a limited already sense), the distinction between the church and Israel is further diminished. Thus, while there is significant agreement between Chafer and Ryrie on this matter, the discontinuity with progressive dispensationalism is significant.

**Why Does This Matter?**

Hopefully this comparison has shown that there are very minor differences between classical dispensationalism and essentialist dispensationalism but progressive dispensationalism departs from the dispensationalist tradition in significant ways. This departure does not merely involve tangential issues but strikes at the two of the core issues of the *sine qua non*. As defined earlier, the *sine qua non* issues of literal interpretation and the distinction between Israel and the church are absolutely necessary to qualify as dispensationalism. Instead, the progressive dispensationalism incorporates theology into the interpretive/hermeneutical process and borrows concepts from historical premillennialism to create a mediating position between dispensationalism and covenant theology. Assuming Walvoord is correct that premillennial dispensationalism with its literal approach to the text is a great antidote to prevent liberal interpretation,[[23]](#footnote-23) then the steps that progressive dispensationalism take should be avoided.

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1. My book on this topic is Joseph Parle, *Dispensational Development and Departure* (Lee’s Summit, MO: Exegetica Publishing & Biblical Resources, 2020). Portions of this paper are adapted from this book. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Robert Lightner, “Progressive Dispensationalism,” *Conservative Theological Journal* 4, no. 11 (April 2000): 47–49. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bruce A. Baker, “Progressive Dispensationalism & Cessationism: Why They Are Incompatible,” *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2004) 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, Ill.: BridgePoint, 1993), 31-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), 43-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Darrell L. Bock, “The Son of David and the Saints’ Task: The Hermeneutics of Initial Fulfillment,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150, no. 600 (October–December 1993): 440. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. This is distinct from Saucy who uses the term “progressive dispensationalism” to distinguish the newer interpretations from the older version of dispensationalism (which he refers to as classical or traditional dispensationalism). See Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface between Dispensational & Non-Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993) 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In the interest of space and time, the doxological purpose of history will not be compared as it is less controversial than the other two. A more extensive comparison of the three systems can be found in my book cited earlier entitled *Dispensational Development and Departure* (see footnote number 1 for more information). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 4, *Ecclesiology, Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 1993), 288. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *A Survey of Bible Doctrine* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 4, 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systemic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago, Ill.: Moody Press, 1999), 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 4, 288. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 517. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. For more information see Bock and Blaising, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 97-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 7, 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, revised and expanded ed. (Chicago, Ill.: Moody Press, 1995), 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For an assessment of the Progressive Dispensationalist teaching of one people of God see John Brumett, “Does Progressive Dispensationalism Teach a Posttribulational Rapture?—Part I,” *Conservative Theological Journal* 2, no. 5 (June 1998): 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. John F. Walvoord, “Millennial Series: Amillennialism as a System of Theology,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 107 (1950): 154-157. For evidence of this, see Bock’s endorsement on the back cover of a book which employs a redemptive movement hermeneutic to endorse egalitarianism. William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), back cover. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)