

Progressive Dispensationalism as Kingdom Theology

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Last year marked the 30th anniversary of the publication of the book, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, which has been used as a standard introduction to progressive dispensationalism as well as to dispensationalism more broadly. The publication was preceded in 1992 by the book *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*, which introduced the term *progressive dispensationalism* into the theological lexicon. Also, in 1993, Robert Saucy published his monograph, *A Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*. These three books are the foundational works setting forth the key tenants of progressive dispensationalism.¹ To them can be added a number of articles by the initial contributors. Various monographs and edited works offering a critique of progressive dispensationalism have also been published but they do not add to the substance of the view.

After 30 years of public discussion, it is surprising to me that there is still confusion about the distinctive theology of progressive dispensationalism. I am speaking, of course, as one who has been quite involved in its development, which arguably gives me a unique perspective on it. In this paper, I would like to address that confusion and speak to what I believe is the distinctive theological contribution of progressive dispensationalism to evangelical theology. My goal is to clarify the distinctive theological vision of progressive dispensationalism and then to offer some reflection on the contribution it can make to evangelical biblical and systematic theology.

I am also proposing the new terminology of *Kingdom Theology* for what has been called progressive dispensationalism. *Kingdom Theology*, or more fully, *New Creation Kingdom Theology*, speaks more directly to the theological vision of progressive dispensationalism. Hence, the title of this paper: "Progressive Dispensationalism as Kingdom Theology."

Stated briefly, the theological vision of progressive dispensationalism, or Kingdom Theology, is a progressively revealed, consummative everlasting Kingdom of God in a New Creation in which Jesus Christ rules forever over a redeemed Israel and redeemed Gentile peoples and nations constituted as the redeemed humanity of his everlasting inheritance shared in mutual glory with the Father, united together and sanctified forever in Christ by the Holy Spirit of God. *Although Kingdom Theology is premillennial, its primary eschatological focus is on the everlasting kingdom.* Understanding that focus on the everlasting kingdom is crucial for grasping its theological contribution.

Kingdom Theology and the Distinction between Israel and the Church

¹ Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Up-To-Date Handbook of Contemporary Dispensational Thought* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1993); Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, eds, *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: the Interface between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).

Much of my writing in several articles as well as essays in both volumes, *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* and *Progressive Dispensationalism*, attempted to clarify what Charles Ryrie had famously identified as the essence of dispensationalism, *the distinction between Israel and the church*. The point which I sought to clarify was that there were differences in the way dispensationalists understood “the distinction,” and that progressive dispensationalism was yet a new way in understanding that distinction.

In the years that followed those publications, the internal debate among dispensationalists over progressive dispensationalism focused on various issues, some of which I will note below. But dispensational critics of progressive dispensationalism chose to leave the issue of *the distinction between Israel and the church* in ambiguity, despite this being, according to Ryrie, the *sine qua non*, the essence of dispensationalism! Those who called themselves *traditional dispensationalists* avoided any review, analysis, or evaluation of the various ways that “distinction” had been expressed in the history of dispensational thought. Even some today who have identified as progressive dispensationalists seem to prefer ambiguity rather than clarity on this crucial issue. The result is that the significantly different distinction that marks progressive dispensationalism in its contribution not only to the dispensational tradition but to evangelical theology generally has been obscured, and its theological development for the benefit of the church has been hindered.

To be clear, what many today call *traditional dispensationalism*, whether classical or revised, saw Israel and the church as exclusive groupings of people with differing eschatologies. This is discussed at length in the books cited above. Very briefly stated, traditional dispensationalists see the church and Israel as separate groups of humanity with separate destinies in the eternal consummation. Classical dispensationalism had heavenly people (primarily the church) in heaven and earthly people (prominently Israel) on earth in dual eternal destinies. Revised dispensationalism, the Charles Ryrie, John Walvoord, J. Dwight Pentecost generation, had the church and Israel as separate peoples in the same location, either eternally distinct in heaven or eternally distinct on earth. The important point is that in both cases, Israel and the church are separate groups of people. Those who are in one cannot be in the other. In a traditional dispensational perspective, when Jews become Christians, they are no longer Jews; they lose their Jewish identities and become exclusively identified with the church, having an eschatology that belongs to the church, not to Israel. The same applies to Gentiles. A new Christian identity replaces Jewish or Gentile identity in the formation of a new people group, the church.

But progressive dispensationalism does not see Christian identity and ethnic/national identity as mutually exclusive. While the church is not a replacement or a redefinition of Israel (as in supersessionism), neither is it an alternative group of people in contrast to Israel (or in contrast to any ethnic, national, territorial people). In progressive dispensationalism, the church is a Holy-Spirit-created communion that penetrates and transverses ethnic, national groupings uniting individuals therein to Jesus Christ and to one another in a *spiritual* renewal network that extends across all people groups and nations. Here the adjective spiritual means *Holy Spirit created and indwelt*, not *transcendental in essence*. This Holy Spirit created renewal network does not erode, replace, or dissolve the ethnic, national, corporate identities of those so renewed any more than it eliminates their diverse personal identities. Rather, it creates a new foundational identity in

Christ that underlays, renews and sanctifies their personal and their corporate identities. This allows for an eschatology that avoids the dilemma of particularity versus universality: It respects the particular promises made to Israel while affirming a unified consummation of salvation for all peoples in Christ.

The church today is the inauguration of this shared renewal in Christ that crosses all existing corporate boundaries. It has come into existence at Christ's direction during the time of his ascension and in anticipation of his return. In this dispensation, Christ has been extending salvation within and among the peoples and nations of the earth, including within and among the people of Israel in whatever mode she has existed corporately—whether as a dispersed people or as a nation among the nations of the earth. The salvation which Christ extends to individuals among these peoples links them to him and relates them to one another across all other identity markers. The inaugural form of this salvation creates an inaugural theological unity embracing those Jewish and Gentiles believers in Jesus. This inaugural unity among these mortal believers anticipates its future completed form in glory in the consummation of the eschatological kingdom, the kingdom of kingdoms. In that consummation, personal salvation has its final fulfillment in glory, and the nations that constitute that kingdom of kingdoms are wholly composed of redeemed and glorified people. **There we find Israel redeemed forever along with the various nations of redeemed Gentiles ruled over by Christ—the eschatological order envisioned by the prophets and depicted in Israel's covenant promises.** What makes that kingdom of kingdoms endure forever is the salvific transformation of the humanity of the various nations and peoples. That salvific transformation creates a unity among those peoples that transverse their individual and corporate distinctions. It eradicates the hostility presently manifested through and thus taking advantage of such distinctions due to sin. That eschatological unity of peace, and its inaugural manifestation among mortal believers today within and across nations, is the church, the Body of Christ. The term *church* is exclusively a redemption term referring to the united Body of all redeemed peoples in Christ. The terms *Israel* and *Gentile* are creation terms, referring to ethnic, national, and even territorial identities in common humanity.

It should be clear, then, that *Israel* and *church* refer to *different aspects of kingdom reality*. Israel and the church simply are not and cannot be groups of people exclusive of each other like they are in traditional dispensationalism, nor are they theologically successive groups as in supersessionism. They are overlapping anthropological/social realities just like humanity and Israel, just like humanity and any other ethnic or national identity. However, *church* refers to a dynamic conversion underway today at the level of humanity that is only complete eschatologically. It is a dynamic conversion process taking place within the ethnic, national, social collectives of humanity. Consequently, ethnic and national categories of humanity do not fully overlap with the category of *church* until the eschaton. In the eschatological kingdom, corporate groupings of humanity, including Israel, will be totally comprised of renewed people expressing the particularities of their collective identities. In the meantime, however, the point to be made is that union with Christ does not dissolve ethnic anthropological realities. It does mean their renewal and sanctification, but not their elimination! It is nonsense in progressive dispensationalism to say that a Jew is exclusively either in Israel or in the church, just as it is nonsense to say that when a Korean, a Greek, or a Kurd believes in Christ, he or she ceases being Korean, Greek, or Kurdish.

It is important to note that *the New Testament does not contrast Israel and the church the way that either supersessionism or traditional dispensationalism does*. Both supersessionism and traditional dispensationalism make the mistake of contrasting Israel and the church as exclusive people groups—the former by replacement, the latter by separation. In the Bible, the opposite of Israel is not church but Gentile, or particular Gentile nations, such as Egypt, or Syria. The opposite of church is world.

Does progressive dispensationalism as kingdom theology hold to a distinction between Israel and the church? Yes, Israel and church are distinct theologically but not in any of the senses promoted by earlier forms of dispensationalism!

Kingdom Theology and Inaugurated Eschatology

Since progressive dispensationalism sees the church today as an inaugural form of the universal spiritual communion that will unite the humanity of the Kingdom of kingdoms, across all national, territorial, and ethnic boundaries (the redeemed people of Israel as well as the various redeemed Gentile peoples), it is apparent that progressive dispensationalism affirms an inaugurated kingdom eschatology. It shares this conviction with a wide spectrum of New Testament scholarship based on the way the kingdom of God is presented in New Testament writings as being in some ways present. *However, progressive dispensational inaugurated eschatology differs from other views in that progressive dispensationalism only sees selected aspects of the future holistic kingdom as presently inaugurated*. This includes the raising up of the Person of the King. It includes spiritual aspects of the holistic kingdom—*spiritual aspects which are a literal part of the full reality of the kingdom* (the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the spiritual communion resulting therefrom)—aspects which the New Testament explicitly cites as presently inaugurated. This is different from other views which claim the whole of eschatological reality is presently inaugurated. Such views hermeneutically *spiritualize* material, national, and territorial promises in order to claim an inaugural fulfillment of those promises today. But progressive dispensationalism does not argue for the spiritualization of literal promises. What is inaugurated today is a partial aspect of the (literally) spiritual part of the holistic reality (material and spiritual) of the kingdom. The progressive revelation of the Kingdom from the beginning of the incarnate ministry of Christ to the final appearing of the eschatological kingdom in its fullness, takes place through a sequence of stages by which aspects (spiritual, material, or political) of that complex future reality are progressively brought into existence by God in accordance with the plan of God for all things in Christ (Eph 1:10).

The contribution of progressive dispensationalism on this matter, however, has been blurred by internal dispensational debates about whether it is appropriate to say that Christ presently “reigns” from his ascended position in heaven prior to his return to earth. This was seen as an issue by traditional dispensationalists who deny that Christ’s relationship to the church can be described as regal since they understand royal reign to be coercive rule, which they believe is not the New Testament teaching on the relationship of Christ to the church but is only descriptive of his millennial rule. Christ is the Head of the church, His Body, not King of the church, they say. And so, they suspect that when progressive dispensationalists use the terminology of an

inaugural presence of Christ's eschatological kingdom, it signals a change of theological perspective. But what exactly is that change?

Many traditional dispensationalists criticized Darrell Bock's interpretation of the literary linkage of *seating* in Peter's sermon in Acts 2, linking Psalm 132.11 to Psalm 110.1, a linkage which informs Peter's declaration to Israel that God has made Jesus Lord and Christ. It was widely reported that progressive dispensationalists believed that Jesus is currently seated on the throne of David, which is to allege that progressive dispensationalists hermeneutically "spiritualize" an aspect of the kingdom which is literally material and political.

On the other hand, non-dispensationalists who applaud "spiritualization" like to quote Bob Saucy as evidence that progressive dispensationalists are just like traditional dispensationalists on the question of the present reign of Christ.

Saucy writes,

It would seem best to say that although Christ has been exalted to receive kingly authority over the entire universe and all its contents, he is not presently exercising that kingship in the sense of "reigning," nor are we as believers doing so.

Again, he writes,

There is . . . no unambiguous reference in the epistles that uses the word "reign" . . . in relation to the present ministry of Christ.²

The final phrase of the first citation ("nor are we as believers doing so") clarifies the argument Saucy is making in context. He is referencing the *future exercise of Christ's millennial reign* when resurrected saints reign with Him. This future millennial reign is something that amillennialists "spiritualize" into a present (inaugurated) reality. Saucy is rejecting the claim that *that reign* is taking place now.

Progressive dispensationalists who speak of the present inaugural form of the eschatological kingdom are not "spiritualizing" Christ's future coercive, millennial rule—his national and international political, economic, and administrative rule. They are not spiritualizing or spiritually redefining any future earthly, political, or material aspect of his rule, including the co-reigning of the saved with Him. They are speaking of an inauguration of the future eschatological kingdom's spiritual aspect. And by *spiritual* is meant the Holy-Spirit-created communion in Christ which is a literal feature of the future holistic kingdom. Bob Saucy also spoke of the presence today of this aspect of the kingdom in spite of a difference on the propriety of the use of the term *reign* to describe it. Perhaps the best way to get beyond the terminological difference among progressive dispensationalists is simply to fall back on a fuller explicit description of what exactly Christ is doing in the present as compared with the future.

As for describing that present activity as reigning *on the throne of David*, all progressive dispensationalists, even Bock, agree that Christ's reign from Jerusalem on earth is in the future.

² Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 106.

Matthew 25:31, *when the Son of Man comes in his glory. . . , then he will sit on his glorious throne*, is describing a future reality. It is not taking place now. *The current reign from heaven is not a spiritualization of that future reign from Jerusalem*. Personally, I do not speak of Christ currently reigning on the throne of David because that language best fits the future reign on earth. But there were several points to be made about Peter's linkage of Psalm texts through the theme of seating and about the current lordship of Christ expressed in other New Testament texts:

First is a point about kingdom authority. Matthew 28 indicates that all authority is already given to him. That *all* has to include the authority of the Davidic throne. It is not a question of whether he has that authority; it is only a question of what he chooses to do with it. It is because of this that Peter implored Israel on that first Pentecost after the resurrection to recognize that Jesus is, not will be, the Christ. He is the Christ of Israel whether they recognize it or not. Recognition is not for his benefit but for theirs.

Secondly, a Christological point: the incarnate Son of God does not act independently of his human nature, as some traditional dispensationalists appear to suggest. Such a suggestion commits the theological error of dividing the Person of Christ. Both natures commune in the unity of His Person (the communion of natures in unified personal action). He is God, the Son, Incarnate as a Davidide, and has been received in the totality of His One Person and two natures in heaven. When **He** is received by his Father and seated on the throne in heaven, it is not, and cannot be, as the divine Son in exclusion of his human identity, but it is precisely as the Son of God Incarnate as Son of David that he is enthroned there in heaven. This is not a spiritualization of his future enthronement on earth; it is a stage in a process of receiving authority, initial actions, and anticipated future actions associated with his future coming. If **the Son of David** is now seated on the **throne of Heaven**, he has all the authority that he could possibly have. The future seating on the throne of David in Jerusalem cannot be the acquisition of authority. It can only be the revelation of authority. That, as I understand it, is why Peter linked the passages. Jesus, Son of David, has been seated on the throne of heaven. The implication is not that anything earthly has been spiritualized but that **He** is now expected to come to exercise here the authority that he has received there. That is why Israel must recognize him as the Christ of Israel now. The Day of the Lord is imminent.

All of us who have written to promote progressive dispensationalism, Saucy, Bock, and myself, have emphasized the importance of the parable in Luke 19: a nobleman went away to a far country where he received a kingdom, then after receiving it, he returned to exercise his rule. The point is that the kingdom was received in the far country before he returned. The authority of the kingdom is granted in the far country, outside of the land. The logic of the situation is that having received the authority, he is now fully able to act on it regarding his realm in any way he chooses. Perhaps he may want to send an emissary, perhaps he may want to send orders ahead of his coming. He can even delay action until he comes to his realm and visibly asserts the authority that he has. For Christ, that future coming and taking his seat for direct action is what reigning from the throne of David is all about.

Progressive dispensationalism is consistent in teaching that Jesus Christ, by right, is, not will be, the Messiah of Israel and King of the nations. He is in heaven now and is coming soon. In

advance of his coming direct rule of Israel and the nations, he is acting even now to secure the obedience of peoples in all nations—people in Israel and peoples in the various Gentile nations—by saving them from sin and death, uniting them to himself by the Holy Spirit and sanctifying them in himself by the power of the Holy Spirit. Thereby, he is creating a communion among those various peoples that traverses all national boundaries and sociological differences, orienting them all to himself in active obedience to him. This Holy Spirit-created-obedience to Christ is **the core aspect of his rule, his reign**, which will make the eschatological kingdom stable forever (unlike any kingdom that has ever existed)! And it is this spiritual rule in the hearts of kingdom subjects which is inaugurated now in the life of the church. There is a coercive aspect to Christ's reign in the millennial phase of the kingdom over subjects that are not or are not fully sanctified and glorified in Him. However, it is not the case in the everlasting kingdom, which is the final fulfillment of kingdom prophecy, because all subjects in that kingdom are fully sanctified in him. Where conversion is fully revealed, coercion is not necessary. It is in this sense that many progressive dispensationalists speak of the present inauguration of reign of Jesus Christ.

The Millennium and the Everlasting Kingdom

There is still today some confusion about what kingdom progressive dispensationalism is referring to when it speaks of the eschatological kingdom. I am sometimes asked when I use the phrase *eschatological kingdom*, don't you mean the millennium? Many years ago, when my contribution to the *Bible Knowledge Commentary* was going through the editing stage, I was surprised to find that everywhere I had used the word *kingdom*, it had been changed to *millennium*. I insisted that it be changed back to kingdom, which it was. But the editor asked me, aren't they the same thing? As has been said on several occasions and in various publications, progressive dispensationalism is premillennial. But the focus of progressive dispensationalism and the primary meaning of the phrase *eschatological kingdom* is on the everlasting kingdom which comes into its fullness after the millennium, after the final judgment in the new creation. Because of this, I have sometimes used the phrase *New Creation Kingdom Theology* to describe progressive dispensationalism.

However, even some non-dispensationalists are confused on this issue. I was very surprised when I read in the book, *Perspectives on Israel and the Church: Four Views*, published by B&H (2015), the following comment:

The progressive dispensational view . . . maintains the land principle of traditional dispensationalism but modifies it by construing it as only lasting through the millennium, and not as an eternal distinction between Israel and the church. The epochal horizon is thus seen as moving from Israel to the church in the new covenant, but then back to Israel for tribulation and millennium, and then back to a unified people in the eternal state. Promises to Israel in the Old Testament are in some sense fulfilled in Christ but also in another sense still fulfilled in a literal way in the millennium.³

³ Chad O. Brand, "Introduction," *Perspectives on Israel and the Church: Four Views*, ed. Chad O. Brand (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 14-15.

Every one of these sentences is wrong! They completely garble and misrepresent progressive dispensationalism! I have already addressed in this paper the progressive dispensational distinction between Israel and the church, of which this statement is utterly ignorant. But how the editor, who wrote this introduction, whom I know, managed to miss *the holistic nature of the everlasting kingdom*, including its multi-particular territorial reality, *in which the promises to Israel, including the land promise, receive everlasting fulfillment*, astounds me. I can only conclude that he hasn't read very carefully, if at all, the writings of progressive dispensationalists. He attributes this distortion to Bob Saucy, who contributed a fine article in the book. But nowhere in that article does Saucy say that Israel's inheritance lasts only to the end of the millennium and such a view runs counter to what he says elsewhere.

Nevertheless, even some who identify with progressive dispensationalism, still speak as if the millennium is the primary meaning of the eschatological kingdom and the ultimate fulfillment of the promises of God to Israel. I say "still" speak in this way because of the continuing influence of *Revised Dispensationalism*, the dispensationalism of the generation of Ryrie, Walvoord, Pentecost, McClain, and Hoyt.

What justified the label *revised*, in contradistinction from *classical* dispensationalism, was the replacement of the classical dispensationalist two-sphere heavenly/earthly eternal order with a single sphere—heavenly for some revised dispensationalists (e.g. Walvoord and Ryrie) or earthly for others (e.g. Pentecost and Hoyt). Because the eternal order was heavenly for those revised dispensationalists that chose that option, the national and territorial promises to Israel, could only be literally fulfilled in the millennium. The millennium was thus for them the ultimate goal, the ultimate fulfillment of kingdom prophecy. For those revised dispensationalists who believed the everlasting consummation would take place on the new earth, the millennium was a penultimate stage of fulfillment—an important one to be sure, but not the final fulfillment of kingdom promise. Progressive dispensationalism is a development of this latter form of revised dispensationalism.

The millennium does fulfill a certain line of kingdom prophecy which speaks of mortal conditions and coercive rule (e.g. Isaiah 11 and Zechariah 14). Certain patterns of the day of the Lord correlate with John's vision of the millennial kingdom in Revelation 20 (e.g. Isaiah 24). As important as the millennium is, however, it is not the ultimate fulfillment of biblical kingdom prophecy. *The millennium is not, and cannot be, the ultimate fulfillment of the promises to Israel.*

The prophecies of the kingdom repeatedly describe it as *everlasting* (e.g. Dan 2:4; 7:14; Isa 9:7; 2 Sam 7:13-16; 1 Chron 17:12-14; Luke 1:32-33; Rev 11:15). It will not do to say, as one prominent revised dispensationalist said to me years ago when asked how the promise of a kingdom of everlasting duration can be fulfilled in the limited time of a millennium, a kingdom that lasts only 1000 years: "well, it's everlasting if the promises are in a state of fulfillment when time comes to an end." The Bible never says that time comes to an end. On the contrary, the Bible consistently projects a New Creation kingdom order that is unending. It is *eternal*, not in the sense of being timeless, but in the sense of being *everlasting*. This is not a pagan concept of an unending natural order any more than it is a pagan concept of timelessness. It is a

redeemed creation in which God dwells with His peoples, who are blessed and glorified by His presence in accordance with His plan and promise for a kingdom of kingdoms forever.

What is new in the New Testament about the promised eschatological kingdom is its progressive revelation in stages, beginning with (1) the presence and ministry of Christ before the cross, (2) the church prior to Christ's return as his inauguration of the key defining and stabilizing feature of the eschatological kingdom--the Holy Spirit sanctification and union of kingdom peoples in Christ, (3) the millennial kingdom as the institution of Christ's direct administrative rule over Israel and the nations under mortal conditions (which because of the continuing presence of sin is in some respects coercive), and then (4) following the final judgment, the everlasting fullness of the eschatological kingdom in which Christ is present, all redeemed peoples are sanctified, glorified, and united by the Holy Spirit personally to Christ and to one another in Christ, and the administrative rule over Israel and the nations brings forth the new creation glory of the kingdom to the honor of the triune God forever.

Christocentric or Israel-centric?

This brings us to the final point of clarification about Kingdom Theology. Critics of dispensationalism have alleged that it has obscured the proper Christocentric focus of biblical and systematic theology by focusing on Israel instead of on Christ. But this is not true of progressive dispensationalism as kingdom theology. The eschatological kingdom which is the *telos* of progressive revelation is a multi-personal, multi-ethnic, multi-national, multi-territorial, multi-particular, supra-administrative order renewed by, oriented to, and unified under Christ. It is through Christ that the presence and rule of the Triune God with and over the creation comes to its full and everlasting expression. The canonical narrative of the Bible progressively reveals this divine plan, and Israel is a major feature in the narrative story. But in that story, Israel is dependent on Someone to come and resolve the historical conflict of sin and death, not only for her, but for all peoples and nations. It is a particular blessing for Israel that the God of Israel has become Incarnate in the house of David to save her and grant her *shalom* together with the nations of the world. As a result, the whole world of redeemed nations and peoples relate to one another in peace because they are redeemed, united, and glorified in Him.

Potential of Kingdom Theology

Biblical Theology

Kingdom and *New Creation* are the conclusion, the resolution of the canonical narrative. As such, they should be the key integrating themes of a canonical narrative biblical theology. They should not be construed as a thematic *center*, in the sense proposed by biblical theologies under the influence of German idealism. Rather they should be seen as the directional unity of a coherent plot structure unfolding a divine plan leading to a goal, a *telos*, of a created order in which God dwells with His creation, which he rules as an everlasting kingdom of redeemed peoples by His Son, God Incarnate, Messiah of Israel, Lord of the Nations. All the theological

themes embedded in the canonical narrative should be studied for their development in the progressive movement of the biblical story line toward its final resolution and everlasting reality.

Kingdom-History Biblical Theology is like Redemption-History Biblical Theology, but its theological scope is wider than redemption viewed as personal salvation, as crucial as personal salvation is to the plan and purpose of God. Kingdom-History Biblical Theology includes the elements of the usual plot structure of Redemption-History—Creation, Fall, Redemption, New Creation—but sees them as deficient for describing the biblical narrative. Missing from this four-stage sequence is Israel’s distinctive history, from its creation to its prophesied future. Israel is either omitted or downgraded to the status of a vast metaphor or type of personal spiritual conflict. In keeping with this, Redemption-History Biblical Theology typically omits from theological consideration the collective social realities of family, tribal, and national life as well as their environmental habitations. It is an egregious misreading of Scripture to apply the theology of “types and shadows” in Hebrews and Colossians, which have to do with festivals and the ministry of the High Priesthood, to the entire earthly, political, national dimension of created human life especially since that dimension is featured in irrevocable covenant promises indicating the composition of the everlasting kingdom. Dispensationalists have rightly called this into question. But the solution is not to accept redemption-history as *church* theology and then lay on top of that—or underneath it—another plot structure for Israel: the resulting two-story structure of traditional dispensationalism. Progressive dispensationalism affirms a unified theological plot structure of Scripture, recasting the thin vision of Redemption-History into the thick view of a Redemptive Kingdom-History which belongs to a New Creation Kingdom Theology.

Systematic Theology

It would be fruitful to consider the implications of Kingdom Theology for the several loci that make up traditional systematic theology. This is a much larger project than what can be done at the end of this presentation. However, I’d like to make some brief remarks on four areas: theological anthropology, Christology, ecclesiology and eschatology.

Anthropology

An obvious area of impact for Kingdom Theology would be theological anthropology. To begin this consideration with anthropology is not to suggest an anthropocentric theological system. As has already been noted, kingdom theology is properly Christocentric in its theological reflection. However, anthropological considerations have been central to the discussion in this paper about Israel and the church, and with that in mind, it seems prudent to list this area at the beginning of this concluding section.

Traditional theological anthropology is focused on the individual person, asking compositional questions about body, soul, spirit, etc. Kingdom theology, however, would also include the corporate, social, and national dimensions of human life. These corporate features belong to the divine plan for creation which developed in the multiplication of humanity. They are not merely a result of the Fall, something to escape from or be redeemed from. Rather, they themselves are included in the divine plan of redemption leading to a new creation order situating a kingdom of kingdoms. Theological anthropological analysis, consequently, should include the various levels

of relationship that define the corporate dimension of human life: family, people, and nation, as well as the whole international order of humanity. To be sure, the accomplishments of traditional anthropology should not be lost but brought into consideration with the broader scope of corporate anthropology.

What drives this consideration of corporate anthropology is, of course, the importance of corporate Israel in the plan and purpose of God. Traditional theology has treated the particularity of Israel as a problem to be overcome in a general, universal theology, one that focuses on generic human individuality within one universal corporate entity, the church. But Kingdom theology would see the universal as a collection of corporate particularities, which is required by the limited corporate particularity of Israel, one that cannot be superseded or “fulfilled” in some new universal homogeneity. The fact that Israel is the recipient of everlasting covenant promises and gives birth to the Messiah to whom is given the everlasting kingdom of kingdoms gives to Israel a prominent place in the multi-particular anthropology of the eschatological kingdom. Certainly, in and through Israel are revealed types and patterns that carry theological significance, but Israel’s significance is not merely typological. Israel is a significant portion of kingdom humanity, whose indissoluble particularity anchors the multi-particular reality of human life extending through redemption to the new creation.

Christology

The great theological accomplishments in Christology need to be related to the plan of God for the coming eschatological Kingdom of Kingdoms. Certainly, this means that Christology is not fully understood without eschatology. But the implications are greater than the addition of an eschatological conclusion to the redemption story line. The humanity of Christ needs to be understood with respect to a holistic personal, corporate anthropology, one that affirms ethnic particularity and specifically the particularity of Israel. The mediatorial function of God Incarnate, the Son of God as **Son of David**, Son of Man must be understood within the Kingdom of Kingdoms where the particular and common aspects of his humanity are related to an order in which ethnic particularity and common humanity are harmonized according to God’s plan for creation through redemption, his plan for Israel and the nations brought to fulfillment in the new creation.

Currently, there is much discussion about Christ as the *telos*, the goal of the canonical narrative. I have already noted the allegation that dispensational theologies eclipse Christ with Israel or the Kingdom. It should be apparent that a Kingdom Theology would have the King as its focal center. All other aspects are subordinate to Him. He reigns with the power of an indestructible life, and his reign never ends. Everything else is not only subordinate to Him, but constitutes his inheritance. From the human side, his creation wide inheritance, including Israel and the nations, is the wealth that belongs to His person humanly, Davidically, Messianically. While possessions do not define the person, they enrich it and contribute to its glory. *The New Creation Kingdom is the inheritance of Christ shared as a mutual possession with His Father, sanctified by the Holy Spirit, in all of its particularities including Israel, which is specifically said in Isaiah to be God’s glory.* Theologies that exclude Israel or other aspects of the holistic kingdom rob Christ of His inheritance and diminish the biblical account of the glory of God. *The difference here is between*

a thick Christology, which theologically holds Christ the King together with His Kingdom, and thin Christologies which diminish Christ by diminishing His Kingdom inheritance, removing glorious aspects from it, especially ethnic, national, and territorial Israel.

Ecclesiology

As has been stated in this paper, Kingdom Theology understands the church as the Holy-Spirit-created communion penetrating and transversing ethnic and national distinctions uniting individuals therein to Jesus Christ through personal faith in him and relating them to one another in Christ. This union in and communion with Christ is the key feature of kingdom humanity which will appear in glory in the everlasting kingdom, and it is that entire glorious kingdom humanity, composing redeemed Israel and the nations of redeemed Gentiles, which is the final state of the church. What we know now as the church is the inaugural form of that kingdom reality, a network of redeemed persons situated in the various nations and people groups, including Israel, directly connected to Christ and related to one another across corporate boundaries by the Holy Spirit. This inaugural form of the Body of Christ began to appear on that first Pentecost after the resurrection when Christ began to baptize believers into union with himself by the Holy Spirit, and it continues in that inaugural form today.

Given that the church is identified with kingdom humanity, it is clear that the church does not end as a program in the plan of God prior to the final consummation. Rather, it points to the goal for all the redeemed through the entire story line of redemption. All are to be brought into the unity with Christ which we experience now in inaugural form. Tribulation saints and millennial believers are not isolated into yet some other people group classification. While the rapture removes the living church at that time, it does not close God's plan for the redeemed in Christ. More about this in the comments on eschatology below.

Understanding the nature of the universal church is crucial for understanding the local church in its calling and mission. So much needs to be said here in an exposition of kingdom ecclesiology. However, one obvious application can be drawn with respect to the debate over the so-called homogeneous principle of the church growth movement. Without implying anything about proposed church growth principles, one can say, from a kingdom theology perspective, that of course, congregational composition will reflect the collective sociality of the community in which the church is located. Both homogeneous and heterogeneous congregations are to be expected given the homogeneous and heterogeneous features of human life. Primarily homogeneous congregations were known in the New Testament and have continued through church history to today, and this is undoubtedly due to the corporate, collective aspects of human life and social identity. However, there were also heterogeneous congregations in the New Testament and in the history of the church, especially in urban areas where people from various ethnicities and nationalities can be found with various levels of social overlap. The key is not the enforcement of some supposed ideal of diversity or uniformity but openness to the work of the Holy Spirit within and across corporate social boundaries. Much more could be said on this, but the point is that Kingdom Theology offers a new opportunity to address these issues.

Eschatology

Of course the most obvious theological contribution of Kingdom Theology comes in the area of eschatology with its view of the everlasting, new creation order and multi-national kingdom as

the consummation of the biblical story line and its divinely revealed plan for all creation. In Kingdom Theology, eschatology is not just a collection of last things tacked on at the end of one's theological studies. Rather it is the reference point which gives meaning to the whole. And that whole includes Israel and various Gentile peoples and nations in the process of being brought into the kingdom in fulfillment of the promises and prophecies of Scripture. It includes the spiritual communion characteristic of that kingdom which has now been inaugurated among Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus as the church, the spiritual communion of kingdom peoples which in its fullness will characterize the whole of the Kingdom of God in everlasting glory.

Traditional dispensationalism is known for having given theological significance and relevance to the kingdom predictions and tribulational patterns of biblical prophecy and apocalyptic discourse. But it has done so in accordance with its distinction between Israel and the church as separate people groups, assigned to separate and parallel eschatologies. This has divided the process of eschatological fulfillment into dual story lines separating the spiritual communion of the kingdom from the kingdom's other aspects and from the eschatological process that leads to kingdom fulfillment. The solution is not a reunion of the story line in a supersessionist mode, which is the only alternative considered by most dispensationalists and their opponents, who likewise consider the church as a people in contrast to the Israel of the Hebrew Scriptures—only as a replacement (or fulfillment) people rather than a parallel people. Rather, what is needed is a reunion of the story line in a holistic mode, which is what Kingdom Theology offers.

Progressive dispensationalism seeks to preserve exegetical accomplishments of traditional dispensational eschatology together with a proper regard for the movement of the one holistic story line of Scripture to its final consummation. Here the rapture, the tribulation, and the millennial kingdom structure a sequence of eschatological events in and through which God also continues the salvation plan that brings Jews and Gentiles into the everlasting communion of the redeemed in the everlasting Kingdom of God.

There is obviously much more that could be said and needs to be said in light of the many details of biblical eschatology. An obvious question is whether progressive dispensationalism is pretribulational? The answer is yes. Kingdom theology, at least as I have formulated it, is premillennial and pretribulational. But the argument for premillennialism and pretribulationism is different from that in traditional dispensationalism, because it is not based on a prior supposition of the church as a separate people group from Israel and Gentiles. Rather it is strictly an exegetical argument and should be evaluated on that basis. To see an example of this, one could compare my defense of premillennialism and pretribulationism in two Zondervan Counterpoints books with their multiple-view book predecessors in which those positions were defended by traditional dispensationalists⁴.

⁴ On premillennialism, compare Craig A. Blaising, "Premillennialism." In *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1999), to the arguments of Herman A. Hoyt on "Dispensational Premillennialism" and George Eldon Ladd on "Historic Premillennialism" in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 1977). On pretribulationism, compare Craig Blaising, "A Case for the Pretribulational Rapture," in *Three Views on the Rapture: Pretribulation, Prewrath, or Posttribulation*, ed. Alan Hultberg (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), to the argument of Paul D. Feinberg in "A Case for the Pretribulation Rapture Position," in *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulational?*, ed. Richard R. Reiter (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).

Conclusion

All in all, progressive dispensationalism needs to be understood as Kingdom Theology, or perhaps better, New Creation Kingdom Theology. This is not a mere variant of traditional dispensationalism. Rather, it developed from an internal biblical re-assessment of dispensationalism to make a distinctive contribution to evangelical theology. It has built upon many exegetical and theological achievements of dispensationalism while critiquing others in a fundamental readjustment of (1) its conception of progressive revelation in favor of a unified biblical narrative and (2) its understanding of Israel and the church, not as contrasting people groups, but as different aspects of one holistic, everlasting, multi-national kingdom of God. Tracing the progressive revelation of this holistic kingdom plan is the challenge kingdom theology presents to evangelical biblical theology. Mining its promise for theological reflection is the challenge it presents to systematic theology. There is much work to be done.