

PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM
AND THE
DISTINCTIONS OF
EARLY DISPENSATIONALISM

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Introduction

Dispensational theology has been one of the strongest forces of biblical teaching within the evangelical/fundamentalist camps. With the recovery of the Bible as the sole ground for faith during the Reformation, there was a great desire among the people, layman and scholar alike, to study and learn the Scriptures so that they could intelligently apply them to their daily lives. Dispensationalism met this need. It espoused a system of biblical teaching that challenged the scholar by placing the Scriptures within a framework that displayed its richness and depth while at the same time remaining accessible to those Scofield identified as “the people of God in their homes”, the wives and children, and “the far away missionaries,” all who had limited time and resources to invest in forming “clearer and more spiritual apprehensions of the Word of God.”¹

To a large degree, dispensationalism successfully reached this goal. Nearly one hundred years after it was made available popularly in the *Scofield Reference Bible*, Karleen said this about Scofield’s theology in specific and dispensational theology in general:

“The resulting stress on orthodox doctrines of the faith and vital prophetic truths...caused the Scofield study system to be of great value for millions. It enabled them to appropriate for their faith and service a unified biblical message. Bible students could see the Scriptures as a progressive revelation of varying dealings of God with humanity...This emphasis on dispensations and covenants is indeed a doctrinal distinctive of the Scofield (*Bible*). But it is one that lies at the heart of dispensationalism, *the most fruitful approach to the Bible known until now.*”² (italics mine)

Early dispensationalism was highly successful in withstanding the attacks of its enemies over the last two centuries. Recently, however, it has been facing attacks unlike any experienced before; attacks especially dangerous because they are coming from within the dispensational camp itself. Those on the offense today claim to have the best interests of dispensationalism at heart, yet at the same time they strike hammer blows against the very foundation on which it rests. Known as progressive dispensationalists, this group insists that they are nothing more than the next progressive stage in the gradual development of dispensational theology. To prove this assertion, they find within the teachings of some recent dispensationalists the ‘missing links’ they need to prove their assertions. This paper will attempt to identify the fundamental and foundational elements of dispensational theology (the real sine qua non of dispensationalism, if you will), show how early dispensationalists embraced them, note the changes more recent

¹ C.I. Scofield, D.D., *The Scofield Reference Bible*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1909), p. iv.

² P.S. Karleen, *The Handbook to Bible Study*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 5.

dispensationalists have made to them and, lastly, determine the validity of what progressive dispensationalists are proposing today.³ In light of the goal of continuing to reach the multitudes throughout the world with an accessible Bible that reveals an accessible God, what we are at risk of loosing is priceless.

Part I: What Did Early Dispensationalists Believe and Teach?

What ED believed with regard to God’s plans and purposes as revealed in the Bible is critical to an accurate understanding of dispensationalism. PD make much of the fact that RD are, for the most part, ignorant of the foundational teachings that support the superstructure of the dispensational theology they embrace. This ignorance plays into the hands of PD in their effort to modify traditional dispensationalism. Therefore, it will be well worth our time to gain a solid understanding of what ED believed and taught. Having done this, we will be better prepared to appreciate the ramifications of changes made to these fundamentals by RD and will be better able to understand the remarkable challenges being made by PD today.

One cannot read far into the writings of ED without noting the great importance they placed on three basic distinctions: the heavenly/earthly, the mystery/prophecy and the Church/Israel distinctions. Together these distinctions form the foundation of and serve as the starting point for the positions ED took and the stands that they made. Starting with Darby, listen to their own words as they stress the importance these preliminary distinctions had on their theology:

A. John Nelson Darby

One of the most prolific writer in ED was J.N. Darby, who left us with an abundance of information on how he viewed the programs and purposes of God. In his essay entitled The Purpose of God, under the heading “The Church and the Jews the Respective Centres of the Heavenly Glory and of the Earthly Glory in Christ,” he wrote this:

“Although the Church and the people of Israel are each respectively the centers of the heavenly glory and of the earthly glory, in their connection with Christ, and although they cast on each other a mutual brightness of blessedness and joy, yet each of them has a sphere which is proper to itself, and in which all things are subordinate to it. With

³ For the sake of time and space, the following abbreviations will be used: early dispensationalist/s/ism represented by Darby, Scofield and Chafer—ED; recent dispensationalist/s/ism represented by Walvoord, Ryrie and Pentecost—RD; and progressive dispensationalist/s/ism represented by Blaising, Bock and Saucy—PD. In addition, all Bible quotes are from the King James Version unless otherwise indicated.

respect to the church, angels, principalities and powers, with all that belongs to heaven—the domain of its glory; with respect to the people of Israel, the nations of the earth.”⁴

He reiterated these statements again in his essay entitled “What is the Church?”

“God has willed that His Son, Ruler of all things as Son of Man, should have a bride to share His glory and His dominion. Glorious position! Testimony of the infinite grace of God! Such is the church—the companion of Jesus in the heavenly glory. This will take place at the same time with the earthly glory, which will be their fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament.”⁵

Whatever we think about the fine points of his theology, there is no doubt that Darby placed a strong emphasis on the heavenly position of the Church and the earthly position of Israel. In “The Character of Office in the Present Dispensation,” he wrote this:

“Whatever God’s way upon the earth may be, it is evident that all question of Jew and Gentile was at an end when the question was about the Lord of glory and the members of His body. The relations became heavenly, and in the unity of the body of Christ thus known in heaven, there was neither Jew nor Gentile. The Church was upon the earth according to this revelation of her position, for she was persecuted; but she was identified with the Lord in heaven.”⁶

And again:

“As to us, it is in the ‘heavenly places’ that we shall find our abode. The spiritual blessings in heavenly places which we enjoy even now in hope...but the earth will not fail to feel the effects of it. ‘Wicked spirits in heavenly places’...whose place will be then filled by Christ and His church will cease to be the...causes of the misery of a world subjected to their power by sin.”⁷

No doubt the glory of what God does with the Body of Christ in the heavenly sphere will reflect on earth, but it is nonetheless distinct from the earthly sphere. In summary:

“There are two great subjects which occupy the sphere of millennial prophecy and testimony: the church and its glory in Christ; and the Jews and their glory as a redeemed nation in Christ: the heavenly people and the earthly people; the habitation and scene of the glory of the one being the heavens; of the other, the earth. Christ shall display His glory in the one according to that which is celestial; in the other, according to that which is terrestrial...each has its respective sphere, all things in the heavens being subordinate and the scene of the glory—angels, principalities and powers in the one; the nations of the earth in the other.”⁸

Darby stressed that the foundation on which he built his biblical understanding was based on a clear distinction between God’s people in the heavenly realm (the Church) and God’s people in

⁴ J.N. Darby, “The Purpose of God,” in *The Collected Writings of J.N. Darby*, 34 vols., W. Kelly, ed., reprint edition (Sunbury, PA: Believer’s Bookshelf, 1971), 2:267.

⁵ Ibid., “What is the Church,” 3:393.

⁶ Ibid., “The Character of Office in the Present Dispensation,” 1:93-94.

⁷ Ibid., “The Hopes of the Church of God,” 1:288-289.

⁸ Ibid., “Divine Mercy in the Church and Towards Israel,” 1:122-123.

the earthly realm (Israel), a distinction that is eternal. Whenever Darby delineates the great subject of God's purposes for the universe, he always placed the heavenly/earthly distinction at the forefront; it was a critical piece in his understanding of the Scriptures. It also served as the basis for many other distinctions typical of ED, especially that of the mystery/prophecy and Church/Israel. Listen to what he said regarding these two distinctions in his essay on the "Elements of Prophecy."

"The church, properly speaking, is not the subject of prophecy. As to Old Testament prophecy, the New declares in the most absolute and positive manner that it was a mystery hidden in all ages, and now revealed to the apostles and prophets by the Spirit. The church belongs to heaven, the body of Christ is seated there...Prophecy relates to the earth."⁹

The heavenly/earthly and mystery/prophecy distinctions go hand in hand, together providing the basis for other distinctions typical of ED. This is what he had to say about the covenants and dispensations.

"Thus the heavenly and distinct character of the dispensation is most plainly brought out; and we find that our place is to be identified with the Mediator, as gone within the veil, not in the blessings which result to Israel in consequence of His title and power to bless in grace therefrom resulting."¹⁰

Again, with regard to the dispensation of grace he wrote this:

"It was a secret of God hidden from ages and generations, and formed an extraordinary break in the dispensations, to the rejection, for their unbelief, of the proper earthly people of God; a forming out of the earth, but not for it, a body for Christ—a heavenly people associated with Him in glory...The church has sought to settle itself here; but it has no place on earth...This subject, as to the special distinctiveness of the dispensation...I believe it to be the most important point for the church to consider...but though making a most instructive parenthesis, it forms no part of the regular order of God's earthly plans."¹¹

Darby understood that in the current Dispensation of Grace God is fulfilling another aspect of His plan for the universe; a heavenly purpose fulfilled by a mystery or secret program through the Church. He went to great lengths to distinguish this purpose, program and people from the earthly program fulfilled by the prophecies regarding Israel and the nations. This is what undergirds Darby's fundamental theological understanding.

His understood the distinction between law and grace in this way:

"The law gave to man a perfect and divine rule for his conduct upon the earth. But it never took him up into heaven. Heavenly beings, indeed, such as angels, act upon the

⁹ Ibid., "Elements of Prophecy," 4:45-46.

¹⁰ Ibid., "The Covenants," 3:53.

¹¹ Ibid., "The Character of Office in the Present Dispensation," 1:93-94.

abstract perfection of the divine rule as it is stated by the Lord Himself...It (the law) shews what is right on earth in the creature, but how far is it from taking man into heavenly places...Now, grace works quite otherwise.”¹²

The same reasoning formed his distinction between the Rapture and the Second Coming of Christ.

“No general prophecy of the church itself is found in the course of the Apocalypse...The reason is evident to one who know what the church is. It is not of the world. I, as such, sit in heavenly places in Christ, where prophecy reaches not. It never will be established on earth, as the Jews. It is not its calling...His blessing for it will be to take it away from earth, to be with the Lord in the air...Accordingly we find, as we have said, the church in heaven at the end in connection with the earth, when all is united with Christ.”¹³

From these excerpts, it is clear that for Darby the heavenly/earthly, mystery/prophecy and Church/Israel distinctions were not minor, unimportant points of interest. They were vital because they formed the very foundation of his biblical understanding and were the fundamentals of his theological system. Darby was not alone among ED.

B. C.I. Scofield

In the study Bible that bears his name, Scofield wrote a short introduction to Paul’s Epistles. Limited by space, he must have included only those things that he believed were of critical importance to an accurate understanding of the Pauline texts. This is some of what he stressed:

“The Epistles of the Apostle Paul have a very distinctive character...All scripture up to the gospel accounts...has primarily in view Israel and the blessings of the earth through the Messianic kingdom. But ‘hid in God’ (Eph. 3:9) was an unrevealed time...the church which is Christ’s body...the church, the ‘mystery which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God is fully revealed, and fully instructed as to her unique place in the counsels and purposes of God...instinct with His life, and heavenly in calling, promise, and destiny...But to Paul was also committed the unfolding of the doctrines of grace...the relation of the Gospel to the law and...to the great Jewish promises, needed clear adjustment if Christianity was to be a reasonable faith...Furthermore, the new thing, the church...”¹⁴

In this brief review, Scofield referred to all the fundamental distinctions of ED theology. Paul’s writings are distinct, he said, because they reveal a new heavenly purpose that God had before kept secret, hiding it within Himself. But now He is making it known to earth and heaven through the agency of a new ‘called out’ people, whom He identifies as the Body of Christ, the Church of this dispensation, whose Head is the Lord Jesus Christ. Scofield distinguished God’s dealings with man throughout the biblical record, laying the foundation with the heavenly/earthly

¹² Ibid., “A Man in Christ,” 7:239-240.

¹³ Ibid., “Elements of Prophecy,” 11:46-47.

¹⁴ C.I. Scofield, D.D., *The Scofield Reference Bible*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1909), p. 1189.

and the mystery/prophecy distinctions, upon which is built the further distinctions between the Church and Israel, grace and law, and the other distinctions found in ED. For Scofield, to recognize these things was to enter into the Divine counsels and purposes of God Himself.

C. L.S. Chafer

In the first pages of the Preface to his eight volume Systematic Theology, Chafer summarized the most important aspects of his theological understanding:

“The one who cannot recognize that the Church is a new, heavenly purpose of God, absolutely disassociated from both Jew and Gentile (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11), but sees the Church only as an ever increasing company of redeemed people gathered alike from all ages of human history, will perhaps do well to ponder the following questions: Why the rent veil? Why Pentecost? Why the distinctive message of the Epistles?...Why two companies of redeemed in the new Jerusalem? Why only earthly promises to Israel and only heavenly promises to the Church? Why should the divinely given rule of life be changed from law to grace?...Why the ‘mysteries’ of the New Testament, including the Body of Christ?...”¹⁵

And:

“...failing to recognize those distinctions between Israel and the Church which, being so radical in character, serve to indicate the widest possible difference between them—difference as to origin, difference as to character and responsibility, and difference to destiny...Israel...natural birth...Christians...spiritual birth...Israel...appointed to live and serve under a meritorious, legal system...Christians live and serve under a gracious system...Israel have their citizenship...only in the earth...Christians have their citizenship...centered only in heaven.”¹⁶

Therefore, while there may be some differences between the specific teachings of ED, all were unified in describing their theology as consisting of three main distinctions—the heavenly/earthly, mystery/prophecy and Church/Israel. All other distinctions flowed from these. To them, the Church was a unique group of saved sinners, who participate in God’s program that had been kept secret until New Testament times. And this Mystery program for the Church was to fulfill His purpose for the heavenly realm. Israel, on the other hand, was a unique group of saved sinners, who participate in God’s program that had been revealed and developed in the Old Testament. And this Prophetic program for Israel was to fulfill His purpose for the earthly realm. These were the basic distinctions ED used to forge a system of biblical instruction that made the Bible understandable to scholar and layman alike.¹⁷

In a sense, the heavenly/earthly and mystery/prophecy distinctions formed the four sides of a square into which snugly fit all the other aspects of their theology. Logically, if God created the Church to fulfill His purpose for the heavenlies, then it must be distinct from the nation Israel

¹⁵ L.S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), 1:xix.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:xiv.

which He created to fulfill His purpose for the earth. Since the Dispensation of Grace was a mystery, unrevealed before Paul's time, hidden in God, it must be distinct from the Law and Kingdom Dispensations, which were well attested to in the Old Testament record. On and on the examples could go showing that ED formed their theological conclusions from logic and reason. Therefore, these preliminary distinctions were foundational to their understanding of Scripture and formed the framework for the development of early dispensational thought.

Part II: Progressive Dispensationalists and the Early Dispensationalists

With this in mind, it is easy to see why PD invest so much energy in disqualifying and blurring the three basic distinctions of ED. Their frustration comes through in their writings. Wherever they look in early dispensationalism they see "dualisms" that disallow the theological system they envisioned.¹⁸ P.D. realized that these distinctions were insurmountable obstacles that blocked their way to modifying dispensational theology. As long as these distinctions remained, they would be faced with the proverbial problem of trying to fit the round peg of their theology into the square hole of early dispensationalism. Something had to give.

To accomplish this, they have written two noteworthy books--*Progressive Dispensationalism* by Blaising and Bock and *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, a collection of essays edited by Saucy. The former deals primarily with the removal of the heavenly/earthly distinction and the effect this has on the two groups of God's people, Israel and the Church. The latter deals primarily with the removal of the mystery/prophecy distinction and the effect this has on the two groups of God's people, the Church and Israel.

A. PD and the Heavenly/Earthly Distinction

Blaising and Bock go about ridding dispensationalism of the heavenly/earthly distinction in an interesting manner. Instead of doing the hard work of biblical exegesis to determine whether this distinction is scriptural, or even of investigating why it was theologically important to early dispensationalism, they simply turn the tables on the argument and claim that RD have already abandoned the heavenly/earthly distinction; therefore, it should be abandoned. No scholarly discussion, no investigation of the biblical basis of such a distinction, just easy words. Since RD

¹⁷ P. S. Karleen, *The Handbook to Bible Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) pp. 5-6.

¹⁸ C. A. Blaising and D. L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Up-To-Date Handbook of Contemporary Dispensational Thought* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1993), pp. 24-27.

have already conceded the point, they say, it is unworthy of further thought and must be accepted. This is curious conduct on their part because they have no problem re-analyzing and discarding many other positions espoused by RD; one wonders, with raised eyebrows, why they rest so assuredly on this one. Their book is peppered with comments like this: “The most important revision introduced by the dispensationalist of the 50’s and 60’s (*ie., recent dispensationalists*) was their abandonment of the eternal dualism of the heavenly and earthly peoples...Consequently they (*ie., recent dispensationalists*) dropped the terms heavenly and earthly peoples”¹⁹ (italics mine). For PD, this evidently settles the case and ends the discussion and ought to for all the rest of us as well.

But one senses that they may be overstating their case. They go on to admit that RD have not completely abandoned the heavenly/earthly distinction; they have only abandoned the eternality of that distinction. While the implications of this will be developed later, here it is important to observe that PD (with what must have been a great sigh of relief) have saved themselves the hard work of supporting their own ideas with regard to the heavenly/earthly distinction by simply making implications from the writings of others and by stretching those implications far beyond what the original writers intended. PD say this is the first step that opened the way for the development of their own theological system, and a very uncertain first step it is.

B. PD and the Mystery/Prophecy Distinction

In contrast to the heavenly/earthly distinction, PD work hard to discredit the mystery/prophecy distinction; RD have not already done it for them. In *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, Saucy and others tackle this distinction and the effect its removal has on Israel and the Church. This proves to be a difficult task because the Scriptures seem to teach it so clearly. The Bible refers to a prophesied time when the nations would be blessed through Israel’s permanent rise (Lev. 25 and 26, Jer. 31, 32-33, Ez. 28, Is. 49) on the one hand. On the other, it also refers to a previously unprophesied time when all people (without regard of nationality) would be blessed in spite of Israel’s temporary fall (Acts 28, Rom. 11, Eph. 3). Several essays collected in this book work to explain this away. One essayist, for instance, re-defines the term

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 7 (Preface) and 31-32.

‘mystery.’ Another suggests different levels of meaning in the word ‘Israel.’ Another re-identifies the “new man of Ephesians 2.” Yet another explains away the “future of ethnic Israel.”²⁰

Saucy, for one, gets around the traditional definition of the mystery in this way. First, he acknowledges up front that “it is now generally agreed that this Semitic meaning of the term—namely, a secret of God that He alone makes known through revelation at the appointed time”²¹ provides for the basic understanding of the term. But then he departs rapidly from this accepted definition and creates his own, saying, “a mystery may be hidden in the sense that its truth has not yet been realized.”²² This quick maneuver allows him to conclude that the mystery was, in fact, not really a secret, but had been revealed in the Old Testament though not *realized* until the New. With this sleight of hand, he minimizes the role of the mystery as a new, unique revelation of God, tying it to the continuing development of the prophetically revealed earthly program of the Old Testament.

Having gotten this far, Saucy completes the break and concludes that mystery truth “may have been a part of previous prophecy,” thereby reaching his exegetical goal in stating categorically that “the revelation of this previously hidden mystery relates primarily to the actualization or realization through Christ of that which the prophets foretold and longingly anticipated.”²³ Whatever else is implied in this conclusion, one thing is certain—if it is true, the mystery was not a mystery in the biblical sense of ‘secret.’ Rather, it was revealed in the Old Testament, merely a part of the progressive revelation of the earthly prophetic program that involved the nation of Israel, albeit not actually “realized” until New Testament times.

With these arguments, PD believe they (with the help of RD) have done away with the foundation of early dispensationalism, removing the heavenly/earthly and mystery/prophecy distinctions and with them, ultimately, the Church/Israel distinction as well. They rightly understand that the heavenly/earthly and mystery/prophecy distinctions were foundational to the theological constructs of ED. These distinctions formed the foundation on which the strong framework of dispensationalism was built and that was capable of restricting the type of theological modifications theologians could make. For instance, if there is a *heavenly* program, previously *unrevealed*, kept secret since before the world began, and in which a redeemed humanity (*the Church*) is to play a role (Rom. 16:25; Eph. 3), then of necessity it must be

²⁰ C. A. Blaising and Bock, eds., *Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), pp. 98, 127, 188, and 230.

²¹ see Saucy’s essay entitled “The Church as the Mystery of God” in *Dispensationalism*.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 144.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 138, 149.

distinguished from God's *earthly* program that was previously *revealed*, announced from the beginning of the world, and in which a redeemed humanity (*Israel*) is to play a role (Lk. 1:70; Acts 3:21). The sturdy theological superstructure built on this foundation accounts for much of the stability and unity exhibited within ED. It is only by abandoning the heavenly/earthly distinction and nullifying the mystery/prophecy distinction that this unity could be broken and alternate theological approaches pursued. In the last decade, PD believe they have done just that.

At this point the question is not whether these distinctions were foundational to ED; it is clear that they were. Rather the question left to be answered is whether ED were correct in making them. Are they biblical? Should they be adhered to, or should they be modified or abandoned in the way PD suggest? Have RD abandoned one or both of them, and if they have are they right in doing so? To answer these questions, we must turn to the Bible itself and learn there if these distinctions are essential to an adequate understanding of God's Word and to the development of a sound theological system.

Part III: The Biblical Basis for the Heavenly/Earthly and Mystery/Prophecy Distinctions

A. God Created the Heaven and the Earth

It is of great significance that the scriptures open and close with reference to the heaven and earth. "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth," says the very first verse, and in nearly the last it refers to "a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away . . ." (Rev. 21:1). When God sets forth His creation and reveals truths regarding it, He views it as consisting of two basic spheres or realms—one heavenly and the other earthly, and God placed the Bible within this context.

The heaven and the earth are to be in some sense God's abode,²⁴ ultimately created to display His infinite and unsurpassing glory throughout the entire universe. "The heavens declare His glory" (Ps. 19:1), declared the psalmist, and the whole earth is to be "full of His glory" (Is. 6:3), proclaimed the prophet Isaiah. Together they work to fulfill the ultimate goal of creation, that of making known the infinite glory of God throughout all of God's abode.

But it is equally true that this goal is not now being fulfilled. While created perfect and declared "good" (Gen.1) in God's sight, the creation is not now displaying His glory perfectly. Something

²⁴ See G. Wenham's comments on this in *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1987), p. 61, referring to Gen. 3:8, says, "So it seems likely that this description of 'garden of Eden' is symbolic of a place where God dwells." Few have trouble envisioning heaven as God's abode, but God here surprises us with the fact that the earth is also His abode. Perhaps knowing this, it will be easier for us to envision man abiding not only on the earth but also in the heavenlies.

happened to mar creation's ability to manifest the glory of God. Genesis explains this situation to us with regard to the earth by introducing us to Satan, sin and death in the first few chapters of Genesis. Here we find the Fall of mankind because they choose to follow Satan's lies rather than relying on the Creator's truth. As a result the whole earthly sphere fell (Gen.3, Rom. 8:20-23).

But this is not the only sphere that fell. We learn later that the heavenly sphere fell through the deceptive work of Satan, the would be Usurper of God's creation, as well. He summed up his heart's desire in five "I wills." "I will ascend into heaven," he proclaimed, "I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the Most High" (Is. 14:13-14). Satan has actively pursued his goal of usurping God the Creator's rightful authority over the universe, resulting in the fall of mankind and the earth and the fall of the angels and heaven. God's whole creation, heaven and earth, became marred with the sin and rebellion against His established governance of the universe. Yet they were created to display His glory completely, and one day they will.²⁵ The rest of the Bible tells us how.

B. God's Plan for the Earth

Fortunately, Satan's activities are not the only ones recorded in the scriptures. God's are there as well, demonstrating that He is committed to His original purpose for the creation of the heavens and the earth and declaring that He intends to regain sole possession and rule of them. God begins with man and his role on the earth. The Bible starts with a broad, panoramic statement: "God created the heaven and the earth," but immediately zooms in on the world. Bullinger identifies the transition between verses 1 and 2 is an *anadiplosis*, a figure of speech wherein the "same word or words at the end of one sentence" are repeated "at the beginning of another," thereby drawing "our attention to, and emphasize, the fact that, while the first statement refers to two things, "the heaven and the earth"; the following statement proceeds to speak of only one of them, leaving the other entirely out of consideration."²⁶ In this case, God places before the reader the whole universe, but immediately focuses his attention on the earth and man's role there.

That God intends to make the earth His abode is a difficult concept for us to grasp. Natural human reasoning is more comfortable with God residing in heaven and man residing on the earth. But here in the first chapters of Genesis, our understanding is challenged, and we find that God intends to reside on the earth. Wenham, speaking with regard to the Garden states "that

²⁵ See Chafer's *Satan: His Motives and Methods*, especially chapters 1 and 5 for more details.

²⁶ E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1968), p. 251.

this description of ‘the garden in Eden in the East’ is symbolic of a place where God dwells. Indeed, there are many other features of the garden that suggest it is seen as an archetypal sanctuary... Knowing this, we better understand the purpose for man’s creation here on earth. Man is told to ‘subdue and rule’ the earth and its animal inhabitants, thereby fulfilling his role as God’s image-bearer on earth (cf. v 26)... Because man is created in God’s image, he is king over nature. He rules the world on God’s behalf.”²⁷

Man was to “subdue” the earth and “have dominion” over every living creature (Gen. 1:28). When the Bible uses the word ‘subdue,’ it is in the context of driving out one’s enemies as in Num. 32:21-22: “And will go all of you armed over Jordan before the LORD, until he hath driven out his enemies from before him, And the land be subdued before the LORD...” Alter sums up the meaning well when he writes that man is to “conquer” the earth.²⁸ Evidently then, something on earth needed to be driven out before God would abide there. God intended to accomplish this with human agents. But with the Fall, man rebelled against God, followed Satan’s lies and destroyed his ability to fulfill God’s plan.

At this point, God could have simply destroyed mankind or left him forever lost and dead in sin with no hope of escape. Instead, He began to fulfill His purpose for human creation by establishing a line of promises, from which all theologies must start. This line of promises includes the redemption of man, and therefore is a redemptive history, but it must not be limited solely to that. God’s plan is bigger and involves His actions to completely repossess the earth for the purpose of displaying His glory there. If we begin our theology in Gen. 3 with the promise of redemption (“the seed of the woman”) rather than in Gen. 1 with God’s purpose for the earth and man’s role in that, we lose much of the thrust the scriptures make and will tend to form an inadequate theology at best and a man-centered theology at its worst. More important than man’s redemption, as precious as that is, is God’s glory and the fulfillment of all He plans for the earth, which culminate in the Kingdom of God on earth, where God and His people rule the world in righteousness and peace.

An overview of this can be seen in *the* progressive presentation of the unconditional biblical covenants. The word ‘covenant’ is first used in reference to the Noahic Covenant (Gen. 9:9). After removing the unrighteous “mighty men which were of old, men of renown” from power in the flood, God promised to never again destroy the earth in the same way. He put the fear of man in the animal kingdom and gave man the authority to carry out capital punishment,

²⁷ C. J. Wenham, *WBC: Genesis 1-15*(electronic ed.)Logos Library System, (Dallas: Word. 1998), vol. 1.

²⁸ R. Alter, *Genesis*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1996), p. 5.

thereby establishing man in his rightful position of earthly authority. Next, in response to the activities at the Tower of Babel, where the idolatrous people of the earth came together in rebellion against God and aligned themselves with Satan and his plan for the earth, God confused man's language and dispersed the people throughout the world to form their own nations. Out of this, God established the Abrahamic Covenant, in which God chose out from among all these people one man, Abraham, of whom He would make His own peculiar nation, Israel, by whom the entire world would be blessed (Gen. 12:1-3).

He granted this people a land (Gen. 13:14-18), exemplified in the Palestinian Covenant (Deut. 30:1-10); a king, a throne and a kingdom, exemplified in the Davidic Covenant (II Sam. 7:12-16); and a spiritual awakening of His people in that land, exemplified in the New Covenant (Jer. 31:34). The resulting kingdom of righteousness will bless the whole earthly creation and display God's glory to its uttermost corners. With these covenants, God returns man to his rightful position of authority over the earth, while at the same time guaranteeing Satan's defeat. God overturned the Adversary's plans for the earth with His Own plan, which centered on the 'seed of the woman,' the 'Son of Man,' the 'Son of Abraham' and the 'Son of David'—the Redeemer and Ruler of the earth, the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is important to note that God anchored all of these promises to the earth. He told Abraham to arise and "walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for I will give it to thee" (Gen. 13:16). In this way He declared His ownership of it. We see something similar in Job, only there it is Satan who is walking "to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it" (Job 2:2), not Abraham. Satan assumed ownership of the earth, but God declared in the covenants that He owned it and that He would decide who exercised authority over it. The "most high God" is the possessor of heaven and earth (Gen. 14:19), not Satan, and it pleased Him to assign positions of earthly authority to man and more specifically the nation Israel. Any supposed usurpation by the Adversary is temporary and doomed to failure because God intends to rule the earth through Abraham's line, the line of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob or Israel.

To accomplish this, He gave this line the land. "The land shall not be sold forever, for the land is mine" (Lev. 25:23). "Yea, I will plant them in this land assuredly with my whole heart and with my whole soul" (Jer. 32:41). Even under the conditional Mosaic Covenant, the fulfillment of these promises was postponed but not abrogated.

"If ye walk in my statutes and commandments, and do them; Then I will give you rain in due season, and the land shall yield her increase...and ye shall eat your bread to the full, and dwell in your land safely...And ye shall chase your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword...For I will have respect unto you, and make you fruitful, and multiply you, and establish my covenant with you" (Lev. 26:1-9).

Again when speaking in the context of the New Covenant, which guaranteed a spiritual revival of the people, the Holy Spirit wrote this:

“Behold, I will gather them out of all countries where I have driven them in My anger, in My fury, and in great wrath; I will bring them back to this place, and I will cause them to dwell safely. They shall be My people, and I will be their God” (Jer. 32:37-38).

And one day all of this will be fulfilled and the earth will proclaim God’s glory. The Bible describes that day like this:

“Behold, I will bring it health and cure, and I will cure them, and will reveal unto them the abundance of peace and truth. And I will cause the captivity of Judah and the captivity of Israel to return, and will build them, as at the first. And I will cleanse them from all their iniquity, whereby they have sinned against me; and I will pardon all their iniquities, whereby they have sinned, and whereby they have transgressed against me. And it shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and an honour before all the nations of the earth, which shall hear all the good that I do unto them: and they shall fear and tremble for all the goodness and for all the prosperity that I procure unto it” (Jer. 33:6-9).

While Israel’s program reached its zenith in the Gospel accounts with the appearance of the King and His Kingdom, it came to its crisis point in early Acts where Peter and the 12 preached these sorrowful yet hopeful words:

“Ye men of Israel . . . the God of our fathers, hath glorified his Son Jesus; whom ye delivered up, and denied him in the presence of Pilate . . . But ye denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you; And killed the Prince of life, whom God hath raised from the dead; whereof we are witnesses . . . I wot that through ignorance ye did *it*, as *did* also your rulers. But those things, which God before had shewed by the mouth of all his prophets, that Christ should suffer, he hath so fulfilled. Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord; And he shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you: Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began . . . Yea, and all the prophets from Samuel and those that follow after, as many as have spoken, have likewise foretold of these days. Ye are the children of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying unto Abraham, And in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed.” (Acts 3:12ff)

Several points stand out from this passage. First, Peter (and the 12) addressed himself to the men of Israel, the Jews. The other nations entered the picture only secondarily through Israel. Second, for Peter the death of Jesus Christ was in no sense ‘good news.’ Crucifying their Messiah was the worst thing the Jews could do, and the only hope for them was to repent of it before it was too late. Third, he went out of his way to stress the fact that what he referred to was something they should have known because God had revealed it through His prophets “since the world began.” And fourth, he connected his message to the earth. Jesus was then in heaven only until Israel accepted Him as Messiah. At that time He would return to the earth and usher in the “times of refreshing” for the world. Thus Peter spoke of a divinely originated purpose that involved the earth, a divinely originated program revealed since the beginning of the world

(recorded in the Old Testament and Gospels), and a divinely originated people, the nation of Israel.

C. God's Plan for the Heavens: His Program & Purpose in Paul's Epistles

Israel, however, refused to repent and accept Jesus as her Messiah. All hope appears to have vanished: Israel was conquered, Jerusalem was sacked, and the people were scattered and cast out of the land, leaving David's throne desolate. God brought Israel's program to a grinding halt. The next thing on God's prophetic clock should have been Christ's return to earth, first to judge it and then to bless it through the nation Israel. But with Israel's refusal to participate, God stopped His prophetic clock and started something completely unexpected. The Holy Spirit through Paul explained this new program in a startling manner. Paul followed the same format that Peter had used, yet he presented the specifics of his message in very contrasting terms.

“For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles...If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward...How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery . . . Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit...That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel...Whereof I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power...Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ; And to make all *men* see what *is* the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ: To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly *places* might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God, according to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Eph. 3:1ff)

Where Peter had addressed the Jew alone, Paul addressed all nations, especially the Gentiles. Where Peter had stressed the bad news of Christ's death, Paul stressed it as good news, as “gospel.” In fact, he preached the death, burial and resurrection of Christ as the source of all the good things that come from God to undeserving sinners. The message of God's grace centered on the cross formed the very heart and soul of his writings. Where Peter had made it clear that his message was previously known, Paul said his was kept secret²⁹ “from the beginning of the world,” something not revealed before. God had hid it in His Own heart (not in the Old Testament) until He made it known by direct revelation to the Apostle Paul, who in turn proclaimed it to the whole world in accordance with the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit.

²⁹ As will be discussed, the word ‘mystery’ simply refers to something kept secret but is now revealed for everyone to see.”In the NT it denotes, not the mysterious (as with the Eng. word), but that which, being

Where Peter had tied his message to the earth, Paul tied his message to the heavenly sphere and the ruling government there. Thus Paul spoke of a divinely originated purpose that involved the *heavenlies*, a divinely originated program that had been *kept secret* since the beginning of the world and a divinely originated people, *the Church, the Body of Christ*.

Just as forcefully as Peter proclaimed a message that had to do with God's *prophetic program* for fulfilling His *earthly purpose* through His nation *Israel*, Paul proclaimed a message that had to do with God's *mystery (secret) program* for fulfilling His *heavenly purpose* through His *Church, the Body of Christ*. This sheds much light on why Paul warned later, after the canon of Scripture was nearly complete, that the careful student strives to show himself "approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (II Tim. 2:15). And it is these three basic distinctions that form the starting point for "rightly dividing" the Bible; the dotted line we follow to cut straight the fabric of God's Word. Doing this, the Bible student places each passage within its proper context, making the same distinctions Peter and Paul made between the purposes of God (one for the earth and one for the heavenlies), the programs of God (one revealed since the beginning of the world and the other kept secret), and the peoples of God (one being Israel and the other the Church), all of which work together, side-by-side in perfect harmony, to display God's glory perfectly throughout the entire universe.

Paul explained that this new heavenly/mystery program came about because of the "casting away of them (*Israel*) be the reconciling of the world," and that "blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles come in" (Rom. 11:15,25; italics mine). The fullest revelation of all that is involved with this new program is found in Ephesians. Scofield said within Ephesians we find "the highest church truth"³⁰ and there God sets forth His purpose for it most clearly. The word "mystery" is defined by Hoehner as a "previously hidden truth unveiled by God's revelation." He goes on to define "in the heavenlies" as being "opposed to the earthly realm of the Ephesian goddess Artemis. Thus these blessings are spiritual not physical, heavenly not earthly, eternal not temporal"³¹ and, therefore, clearly distinguishable as a new development in God's plan that is distinct from His plan for the earth found in the Old Testament.

outside the range of unassisted natural apprehension, can be made known only by divine revelation, and is made known in a manner and at a time appointed by God..."(Vine's Dictionary).

³⁰ C. I. Scofield, "Preface to Ephesians," *The Scofield Reference Bible*, (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1909), p. 1249. Even some non-dispensationalists recognize the uniqueness of the Church in Ephesians, albeit without enthusiasm. See Lincoln's comments in *Word Biblical Commentary: Ephesians*, pp. 159-163.

³¹J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Ephesians*, (Wheaton, IL: Scripture Press, 1983), pp. 616-618.

God had kept it secret that He intended for the “seed of the woman” to not only re-establish His glory in the earthly sphere through Israel, but to also re-establish His glory in the heavenly sphere through the Church. Paul described this as the “wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory: Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory” (I Cor. 2:7-8). In short, God took Satan in his own craftiness.

The New Testament uses the word “mystery” or its derivatives 27 times, mostly by the Apostle Paul and mostly in His Prison Epistles.

Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself: That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him . . .” (Eph. 1:9)

Describing it as a Mystery, Paul placed strong emphasis on the hidden nature of this revelation. It was “kept secret since the world began” (Rom. 16:25); it was the “hidden wisdom of God” (I Cor. 2:7); it was “in other ages not made known” (Eph. 3:5); it “from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God” (Eph. 3:9); and it “hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints” (Col. 1:26). Since the mystery is what establishes believers today, Paul’s primary goal was to make it known. He prayed to visit the Romans, for instance, so that he might impart to them “some spiritual gift, to the end ye may be established,” which he identifies later as the “preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery” (Rom. 1:11; cf. 16:25). To accomplish this, he requested the continual prayers of others “... that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel” (Eph. 6:19; cf. Col. 4:3).

Paul described the Mystery as not only hidden, but also as heavenly. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ” (Eph. 1:3). Believers in this dispensation shall “bear the image of the heavenly” (I Cor. 5:1), said Paul, having been raised “up together (*with Christ*) and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ” (Eph. 2:6, italics mine). Their “conversation is in heaven” (Phil. 3:20); their “hope is laid up” in heaven (Col. 1:5); they are to “seek those thing which are above” and set “their affections on things above, not on things on the earth” (Col. 3:1-2); and they are to “wait for His Son from heaven” to be raised up “to meet the Lord in the air” and so shall they ever “be with the Lord” (I Thes. 1:10).³²

³² See Eph. 2:6-7; 3:9-10; Col. 2:2-8 and 3:1-4 for additional references that juxtapose the Mystery and its heavenly character.

How strange all these things would sound in the ears of the Jew who was familiar with God's plan and purpose for the earth in the Old Testament.³³ No wonder Paul suffered such great and persistent persecution from both believing and unbelieving Jews everywhere he went. The Old Testament had little to say about the heavenlies, and nothing of man's role in displaying God's glory there.

Paul's Epistles, however, say a great deal about this. The Church is evidently *right now* displaying the wisdom of God "unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places" (Eph. 3:10); battling "against principalities and powers, against rulers of darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Eph. 6:12);³⁴ and having "raised us up together, and made us to sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus," will show in the ages to come "the exceeding riches of His grace and kindness" forevermore (Eph. 2:6-7). The Church is involved in a battle against the powers and authorities in the heavenlies. Rev. 12 seems to depict the culmination of this battle. There we see Satan overthrown and deposed from his heavenly office and power, expelled from heaven and banished to the earth where he will engage in one further battle against God, which God end by casting him into the Lake of Fire with his followers. Having deposed Satan from his self-proclaimed position of authority as "prince of the air," God will place the Church in these vacated positions of authority according to His will. "Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world," wrote Paul, "know ye not that we shall judge angels" (I Cor. 6:2-3)? The Church then has special responsibilities and privileges in the heavenlies that had previously been kept secret by God and that are distinct from those He revealed before regarding the nation Israel on earth.

D. Conclusion

When these clear biblical statements are taken seriously, it becomes evident that the new interpretations offered up recently by PD cannot be accurate and should not be accepted. With considerable hermeneutical sleight of hand, they conclude that mystery truth may, in fact, "have been a part of previous prophecy," and that "the revelation of this previously hidden mystery relates primarily to the actualization or realization through Christ of that which the prophets foretold and longingly anticipated." But Paul states categorically that the Mystery was "hid in

³³ Interestingly, Peter writes about the delay of the Day of the Lord and the unexpected intervening period of God's longsuffering by referring to Paul's unique and unprophecied ministry of the Mystery, informing the scattered Jews as follows: "even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood..." Misuse of which leads to destruction (II Peter 3:15-16).

God” (Eph. 3:9), not in the Old Testament. It was “kept secret since the world began” (Rom. 16:25), not spoken of by the prophets “since the world began” (Lk. 1:69). And it concerns the “unsearchable riches of Christ” (Eph. 3:8), not those capable of being traced out in prophecy. Baxter summarized it well this way:

“What is the ‘mystery’. . . It was no hidden thing that Christ was to come, was to bear the sins of the many. . . nor that the Holy Spirit was to be outpoured. . . that Christ should take the throne of David. . . the ‘mystery’ is that Christ, instead of immediately taking over the ‘kingdom’ when he came to earth—the kingdom foretold in the Old Testament. . . should be exalted in heaven to the right hand of God, high over every power and sphere. . . and that during the present age and elect people, the church, should be gathered out, irrespective of nationality. . . brought collectively into such an intimate union of life and love and eternal glory with Him.”³⁵

Therefore with a plain, literal hermeneutic, the scriptural evidence indicates that God’s ultimate goal for the universe involves two purposes and programs, one revealed in prophecy regarding the earthly sphere and another God kept secret regarding the heavenly. While created in perfection, both heaven and earth fell and became corrupted, losing their ability to carry out God’s original purpose of manifesting His glory. Accordingly, God did two things. With the fall of man, He immediately made known His intention to fulfill His plan for the earth through a program that would repossess it from the Satanic usurpers and place Israel in positions of authority under the Lord Jesus Christ there. The progressive, unconditional covenants manifest this, culminating in the destruction of the power of Satan and sin at the cross of Jesus Christ, as revealed in the progressive revelation of the Old Testament and Gospels.

But at the pivotal point in history Israel rejected her Messiah, and God placed that program on hold and made known to Paul a secret, a secret He had kept perfectly since before the world began. This Mystery or secret involved His intention to fulfill His plan for the heavenlies through a program that would repossess them from the Satanic usurpers and place the Church in positions of authority under the Lord Jesus Christ there. The teachings of God’s grace found primarily in Paul’s epistles manifest this. With both programs fulfilled, Jesus Christ is established as the “Lord of Glory” (I Cor. 2:8), who by His cross defeated all the plans of Satan and provided for Himself two groups of redeemed people, one to serve His purpose on earth and the other to serve His purpose in the heavenlies, thereby unifying the entire creation under Him.

Of course, the Person and Work of the Lord Jesus Christ is the foundation of both the earthly and heavenly programs. The former rests on the preaching of Jesus Christ according to

³⁴ More literally, “in the heavenly places;” see Vincent’s *Word Studies in the New Testament at this verse*.

Prophecy (Lk. 24:20-27), where Christ is seen as Israel's ruling King. The latter rests on the preaching of Christ according to the Mystery (Rom. 16:25) where Christ is the Head of the Church. The former presents Israel as specially designed and equipped by God to manifest His glory on earth before earthly powers and earthly rulers. The latter presents the Church as specially designed and equipped by God to manifest His glory in heaven before heavenly powers and heavenly rulers. Together the two purposes and programs operate together under Christ to form a complete unity that functions in perfect harmony with God's will, flawlessly expressing His glory throughout the universe. The forced unity of a "holistic redemption," as suggested by PD, is an inadequate replacement for this splendid manifestation of God's glory.

Part IV: The State of Recent Dispensationalism

PD acknowledge that their modifications to dispensational theology could not have occurred within the confines of early dispensationalism due to the limitations enforced by the heavenly/earthly and mystery/prophecy distinctions. The recent advances of PD have resulted largely because of the implications they make about the abandonment of the eternality of the heavenly/earthly distinction by RD on the one hand, and by their own inadequate interpretation of the Mystery as used in Paul's Epistles on the other. With this in place, PD insist that the support structure of early dispensationalism has been destroyed, and this, they believe, allows them to modify it. Reversal of these gains will depend on how today's dispensationalists respond. Have RD made a strategic error that makes it easier for those who have no love loss for early dispensationalism or Dallas Theological Seminary to attack, modify, and ultimately destroy dispensational theology?³⁶ Have they abandoned the eternal dualism of a heavenly and earthly people? If so have they at the same time broken the mold of dispensational theology, destroying much of its foundation and consistency? If so what must today's dispensationalists in the traditional line do?

A. RD and the Heavenly/Earthly and Mystery/Prophecy Distinctions

On the surface this assertion appears false. RD still envision the heavenly/earthly distinction as fundamental to their theology. Pentecost seems to envision it as being so fundamental that it is hardly worth mentioning. "No one will deny that the destiny of the church is a heavenly destiny. All her promises and expectations are heavenly in character. When we

³⁵ J. S. Baxter, *Explore the Book*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1966), pp. 175-176.

³⁶ See Blaising and Bock's book, where Gundry presents his personal experience with Scofield dispensationalism and his father's feelings toward Dallas Theological Seminary, pp. 10-12.

study the destiny of the saved in the seventieth week we find that their expectation and promise is not heavenly but earthly.”³⁷ Even as late as 1974 Walvoord, in his revision of Chafer’s book, *Major Bible Themes*, wrote: “That God had purposes for Israel, or for the Gentiles, was no secret since it is the theme of Old Testament prophecy; but the secret ‘hid in God’ was the making of a new heavenly order of beings from both Jews and Gentiles.”³⁸ He still embraces the basic distinctions of the heavenly/earthly and prophecy/mystery. Twenty years later in 1993 he again says much the same: “Dispensational ecclesiology . . . maintains sharply the distinctions between law and grace, between Israel and the Church, between the earthly and the heavenly.”³⁹

Beneath this surface, however, we observe an undertow pulling away from these distinctions. Comparing the teachings of ED with those of RD of the 1950’s and 60’s, we see a significant change in the way RD stressed these distinctions. RD seem to consider it a preliminary truth that is there and obvious but hardly worth mentioning and of little importance beyond a basic recognition. For RD, these distinctions were a tie to ED that no longer held the importance they once had, yet RD were not quite ready to cut loose from them either. This coincided with a shift in their teaching that emphasized less and less the mystery program with its heavenly purpose for the Church and emphasized more and more the prophetic program with its earthly purpose for Israel and the Kingdom. They held conferences and wrote books on such topics as the Rapture, the Tribulation, the Second Coming, the Millenium and other ‘end time’ events, satiating man’s inherent wish to know the future, yet resulting in a weakened Church which knew more about ‘things to come’ than about what God is actually doing today in the Dispensation of Grace.⁴⁰

Ryrie was a key figure in the de-emphasizing of the heavenly/earthly distinction, and he paved the way for others to follow. When describing the dispensational hermeneutic in his book *Dispensationalism*, he acknowledges that a literal interpretation results in the recognition of “two purposes of God and insists on maintaining the distinction between Israel and the Church.”⁴¹ One familiar with ED writings will immediately note that the usual adjectives ‘heavenly’ and ‘earthly’ are missing, not to be found in the context of the quote nor in the context of the whole

³⁷ J. D. Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1964), p. 212.

³⁸ L. S. Chafer, ed., J. Walvoord, *Major Bible Themes*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), p. 240.

³⁹ J. F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993), pp. 223-224.

⁴⁰ One need only remember the innumerable prophecy meetings earlier in this century, and the great preponderance of titles having to do with Israel’s prophetic program in the writings of ED and RD.

⁴¹ C. C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), p. 85.

chapter. Later in his chapter about the Church he explains why. At first he acknowledges that early “dispensationalists have sometimes made a sharp distinction between the heavenly future of the church and the earthly future for national Israel,” and he goes on to quote Chafer, who distinguished between an earthly purpose, an earthly people, and an earthly objective for Israel and a heavenly purpose, a heavenly people, and a heavenly objective for the Church. But then he strays from this by indicating that by the heavenlies the Bible really means the heavenly Jerusalem. With this understanding, he delineates three groups of saved people—those who died before the Church, the Church saints and the Millennial saints⁴²--and suggests that the Old Testament saints and the Church have a heavenly destiny in the heavenly Jerusalem, while the believing Israelites and Gentiles saved in the Millennium have an earthly destiny. In summary, he quotes Pentecost:

“The individual Old Testament saint’s hope of an eternal city will be realized through resurrection in the heavenly Jerusalem, where, without losing distinction or identity, Israel will join with the resurrected and translated of the church age to share in the glory of His reign forever. The nature of the millennium, as the period of the test of fallen humanity under the righteous reign of the King, precludes the participation of resurrected individuals.”⁴³

And this is what PD are referring to when they speak of RD’s abandonment of the heavenly/earthly distinction. The above quotes show that they are largely accurate. RD have abandoned the eternal distinction and have, therefore, made a major modification to dispensationalism that reaches its logical end in this notable quote from Fructenbaum in 1994:

Dispensationalists have correctly seen the consistent distinction the Bible makes between Israel and the Church, but have not always used the best terminology in trying to show the nature of this distinction. A common distinction some dispensationalists make is to describe Israel as an ‘earthly people’ with ‘earthly promises,’ while the church is a ‘heavenly people’ with ‘heavenly promises.’ However, such a distinction is not correct, nor is it necessary to dispensationalism. Each entity has both an earthly future with earthly promises and a heavenly future with heavenly promises. The distinction between Israel and the church is a biblical one. . . but the contrast between earthly and heavenly is not one. . .”⁴⁴

Fructenbaum does not support his statement here; he only asserts it. At this point it is irrefutable that RD have modified one of the fundamental distinctions of early dispensationalism, removing the heavenly/earthly destinies for the Church and Israel though maintaining their distinctive groups. The two purposes of God are brought together in eternity, and PD consider this to be the most important revision made to ED. And it is about this time that PD began to

⁴² J. D. Pentecost, *Things to Come*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1964), p. 539.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁴⁴ C. C. Ryrie, J. R. Master and W. R. Willis, eds., *Issues in Dispensationalism*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), p. 116.

make significant inroads against traditional dispensationalism that allowed them to merge the historical dispensational distinctions and produce what they call a “holistic and unified” view whereby the heavenly blurs into the earthly, the mystery blurs into prophecy, the Church blurs into Israel, covenant inauguration blurs into its fulfillment, the New Testament blurs into the Old, and the kingdoms of God blur into one eschatological kingdom.

B. A Response to RD Understanding of the Heavenly Jerusalem

RD conclusion that “since Scripture reveals that the church will be with Christ, it is concluded that the eternal abode of the church will likewise be in the new earth, in that heavenly city, the New Jerusalem, that has been especially prepared by God for the saints.”⁴⁵ Much of this confusion revolves around the prophetic identity of the New or Heavenly Jerusalem and who will reside there. But is this conclusion necessary and accurate interpretations of the biblical record? The New Jerusalem is mentioned only a couple of times in the Bible, and there is great disagreement among scholars as to what it really is. Therefore, we should not speculate with the sparse information we have regarding this city and allow notions formed with inadequate scriptural support to outweigh the great weight of clear evidence on the subject found elsewhere.

Several things must be noted. First, the New Jerusalem is not “in the heavenlies.” Rev. 21:2 states that it comes “down from God out of heaven.” Its place is within the sphere of the earth; it is a city originated in heaven but residing in the earthly realm. Similar terms are used in reference to the Kingdom—it is the Kingdom of Heaven that is established on the earth, not in the heavenlies. God promised Abraham a city, the New Jerusalem, and He connected it to the earth and the Kingdom of Israel, not to the heavenlies and the Church. Therefore, the Heavenly Jerusalem cannot be also the heavenlies. They are distinct places.

Not only are the places distinct, but so are the people. The Scriptures identify three areas of abode for the saved: The New Jerusalem, the Earth and the Heavenlies, and these seem to correlate well with Ryrie’s identification of three groups of believers in the Scriptures: Those saved before the cross (predominantly Jews); those saved after the cross (the Church); and those saved during the Millennium (Israel).⁴⁶ Old Testament saints looked for a city, but it was a city connected to the earthly kingdom (Gen. 12:1-3). This seems to fit well with a destiny in the New Jerusalem. Millennial Israel and the nations looked to the world, and this correlates well with a destiny on the earth (Ps. 72:8-19). The Church has a heavenly hope and calling, and this

⁴⁵ J. D. Pentecost, *Things to Come*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1964), p. 539.

⁴⁶ C. C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), pp. 136-137.

correlates well with a destiny in the heavenlies (Phil. 3:14). These conclusions harmonize well with the plain statements of Scripture.

No doubt, the New/Heavenly Jerusalem will be a place where all God's people can come together to worship their Lord. But this fact in no way proves that all the groups will merge together into one destiny in eternity. Rather it shows that while remaining distinct in their destinies, they are not exclusive of each other and come together with all their distinctions to form a perfect chorus of worship throughout eternity. Heb. 12 describes this, and Lane says the following regarding verse 22, "The accent in the full expression falls on the density of the angelic population, as innumerable multitudes gather in plenary assembly for an exultant celebration of worship."⁴⁷ Here the heavenly Jerusalem is described as a place of praise to the glory of God, a place where all the saints of all the dispensations come together to sing songs of worship to God. To conclude from this that being seen in the New Jerusalem, even to dwell in it, negates the eternal heavenly and earthly distinction is unwarranted. For the festal picture presented here includes not only the Church, Millennial Israel and Old Testament saints, but also the angels and God the Father and God the Son, and the latter three do not lose their heavenly character by being observed in that city. The members of the Church, the Body of Christ, need not as well. Here we simply see all groups of believers converging to worship God, forming a great day of worship for their Creator and Savior and Ruler of the universe. A similar type of worship occurs on earth during the Millennial Kingdom (Is. 66), and it will no doubt occur in the heavenlies as well.

While the Church has many things in common with other groups of God's people and is not exclusive of them, she was created to fulfill the specific role of manifesting God's glory in the heavenlies. She is seen in the New Jerusalem participating in worship towards God as the angels do, reigning with Christ over the earth from heaven. This should not be hard for us to understand. Heavenly beings engaged in earthly activities previously (Dan. 10; the Nativity Scenes), and it is not unreasonable to expect that they will in the future as well. It is as we come to know and understand the distinctions between God's heavenly and earthly purposes, between His prophetic and secret programs and between His nation Israel and His Church that we begin to appreciate the great truth found in Eph. 1: "That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; *even* in him". God gathers 'together in one' all of His distinct plans and purposes, peoples and programs, bringing them all into perfect harmony. Vincent explains it like this: "God contemplates a

⁴⁷ W. L. Lane, *Word Biblical Commentary: Hebrews 9-13*, (Dallas: Word, 1991), p. 467.

regathering, as restoration to that former condition when all things were in perfect unity, and normally combined to serve God's ends."⁴⁸ The parts are seen as making up the whole.

And here Fructenbaum's statement that the heavenly/earthly distinctive is not one that characterizes the Church and Israel goes too far. To say, "Each entity has both an earthly future with earthly promises and a heavenly future with heavenly promises," while stating the obvious also misses the point. The Church is heavenly because that is the unique sphere in which she fulfills God's purpose for her. Israel is earthly because that is the unique sphere in which she fulfills God's purpose for her. They both work together in perfect harmony, partaking in and displaying abroad the glory of God throughout the whole universe under the Lord Jesus Christ. No doubt the Church will exhibit God's glory on earth to a degree, and no doubt Israel will do likewise in the heavens. But their unique and primary purposes remain within the spheres for which God created them. The blessings and destinies and responsibilities are all secondary issues that flow out of these fundamental distinctions, yet they also overlap because of the common traits of man and the unchangeable attributes of God.

ED recognized the fact that the Church could be found at various times in her eternal destiny in the heavenlies and in the New Jerusalem and on the earth. This did not, however, shake the biblical emphasis they placed on the heavenly/earthly and mystery/prophecy distinctions. Chafer exemplified this when, after establishing the scriptural support for the Church reigning with Christ over the earth, said, "There is no intimation in these Scriptures that the Church does not possess and enjoy her home in heaven. She goes whithersoever the Lamb goes, and there is no reason to believe that He in this time of His angelic judgments (cf. I Cor. 15:25-26) will be confined to the earth. Similarly, as Christ will continue to reign forever, it is to be accepted that the Church, His Bride, will continue to reign with Him forever."⁴⁹ RD have therefore neglected the great weight of biblical evidence for the heavenly/earthly and mystery/prophecy distinctions that were fundamental to the theology of ED. Because of this, the structural basis of dispensationalism has been weakened, allowing for error to attack aggressively from the inside. PD is symptomatic of the ill state of current dispensationalism.

⁴⁸ M. R. Vincent, *Vincent's Word Studies of the New Testament: The Epistles of Paul*, 4 vols., (Peabody, MA: Hendricksen, no date), p. 368.

⁴⁹ L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols., (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), IV:378.

C. Conclusion

At this point, everything rests on what response today's dispensationalists will make. To date, their response has been insufficient to stem the tide of change brought in by PD. Instead of recognizing the theological errors that have been made and correcting them, they admit nothing and cling solely to the Church/Israel distinction as if that is the only one that matters. They have placed themselves in the ludicrous position of trying to shore up the falling edifice of dispensational theology with the single two-by-four of the Church/Israel distinction.⁵⁰ The Church/Israel distinction flows logically out of the heavenly/earthly and mystery/prophecy distinctions, not vice versa. As the Bible student cuts straight along the line that the latter two sets of distinctions form, the Church falls logically on one side and Israel on the other; the Dispensation of Grace falls logically on one side and the Dispensations of Law and the Kingdom on the other; and on and on it goes. Simple adherence to the Church/Israel distinction will not be enough to ensure the survival of dispensationalism. More is needed. If both groups are to enjoy the same blessings and destinies in eternity, it is no wonder that Bible students question whether or not the Israel/Church distinction holds any real, practical, life-changing value. Perhaps it is really just an academic novelty of no interest to those in the pew; something for scholars to squabble over but of little real significance in the believer's position and daily walk.

How different this is from the enthusiastic teachings given to Bible students by ED, who taught of the believer's unique, heavenly position in Christ, from which he is to glorify God before angels. How this must have motivated believers under the teachings of ED, encouraging them to reach out to the lost and edify fellow members of Christ's Body. God's purposes go far beyond man's redemption. They center on the Lord Jesus Christ, who will gather together the heavenly and earthly realms under His authority, resulting in the manifestation of God's glory perfectly throughout the universe forevermore.

What a message to the lost! They have the opportunity to not only be saved from sin and condemnation, as wonderful as that is, but to be involved in the chorus of God's glory throughout the universe. What a message to the saved! They are involved in a function that reaches far beyond the limitations of earth and her powers, and reaches up into the heavenlies before the powers and principalities and authorities found there, where they proclaim the wisdom of the glorious God.

⁵⁰ See Fructenbaum's essay Israel and the Church in *Issues in Dispensationalism* where he lists out every reference to Israel in the New Testament and proves its distinctiveness from the Church.

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