

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY: HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLES OF PROGRESSIVE REVELATION

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Introduction

To interpret the Bible properly, one's hermeneutical principles must be based upon a correct understanding of biblical revelation. For some years now, God has been illuminating His Church with the understanding that biblical revelation is progressive.¹ However, an unbiblical view of progressive revelation has been proposed by the religious evolutionists, who recognized the progressive waves upon the surface of the divine ocean, but viewed evolutionary development as the cause.² They assumed that Israel's religion, along with that of the pagans, arose from polytheism and then gradually progressed in the minds of the Israelites into a monotheistic concept. This view is advocated by W. O. E. Oesterley and Theodore H. Robinson, who say, "Hebrew religion, as the study of Semitic Comparative Religion abundantly proves, was very closely related to the religion of all the Semitic nations; indeed it was made up of elements common to the religions of all early Semites."³ Thus they believe that biblical revelation is a record of man's search for God and not the scriptural view of God's revealing Himself to man in infallible words.

Neither does neo-orthodoxy rise higher than classical liberalism in its view of biblical revelation. For example, Karl Barth's view of the inspiration of Scripture closely parallels that of Oesterley and Robinson.

Not for all ages and countries, but certainly for our own, it is part of the stumbling-block that like all ancient literature the Old and New Testament know nothing of the distinction of fact and value which is so important to us, between history, on the one hand, and saga and legend on the other...But the vulnerability of the Bible, *i.e.*, its capacity for error, also extends to religious or theological content...It amounts to this, that, as we see it, many parts, especially of the Old Testament, cannot be accepted as religious and theological literature, but only as documents of secular legislation and history and practical

¹ Joseph Addison Alexander, *Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, reprint, 1953), II, 91; Thomas Dehany Bernard, *The Progress of Doctrine in the New Testament – Eight Lectures Delivered before the University of Oxford on the Bampton Foundation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961); John Edward Carnell, *The Case for Orthodox Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1959), 52-64; James Orr, *Revelation and Inspiration* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952); J. Barton Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), 18-19; Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: W. A. Wilde Company, 1956), 101-104; W. Graham Scroggie, *Ruling Lines of Progressive Revelation* (London: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, Ltd., n. d.); Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology, Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 14; and "The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline," www.bsmi.org, 7; Daniel B. Wallace, "New Testament Eschatology in the Light of Progressive Revelation: Special Focus on the Coming Kingdom," www.bible.org/docs/soapbox/nteschat; Benjamin B. Warfield, "Revelation," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), IV, 2576, 2577.

² On page 24 of his book, *The Modern Use of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1924), Harry Emerson Fosdick uses the term "progressive revelation." What he really means by it, however, is the evolutionary development of man's religious thinking, as he makes plain in *A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1938), ix.

³ *Hebrew Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1930), xvii.

wisdom and poetry, although the Synagogue and later the Church claimed to find in them witness of revelation.⁴

Both of these views hold that man's search for God evolved from much error mixed with little truth to less error mixed with more truth. J. Barton Payne comments, "The Old Testament is thus made [by liberal theologians] to conform to the contemporary thought patterns of the pagan world and to an assumed evolutionary progress."⁵ So, neither classical liberalism nor neo-orthodoxy has any concept of an authoritative, final revelation of God to man in infallibly recorded words, for both maintain that revelation is imperfect and still continues.⁶

In contrast to classical liberalism and neo-orthodoxy, biblical progressive revelation with its organic unity of Scripture requires perfection of doctrine at every stage, from Genesis to Revelation. A valid, that is to say, biblical, definition of the proper attitude toward progressive revelation is given by Bernard Ramm and Geerhardus Vos:

By progressive revelation we mean that the Bible sets forth a movement of God, with the initiative coming from God and not man, in which God brings man up through the theological infancy of the Old Testament to the maturity of the New Testament.⁷

The truth of revelation, if it is to retain its divine and absolute character at all, must be perfect from the beginning. Biblical Theology deals with the product of a supernatural divine activity, and is therefore bound by its own principle to maintain the perfection of revealed truth in all its stages.⁸

Both definitions firmly reject any evolutionary development of biblical truths by describing revelation as God's action, not man's quest.

Organic Growth of Revelation

As other growth, progressive revelation is (1) organic, (2) periodic, and (3) climactic. By being organic, revelation is understood to be absolutely perfect at all stages of progression; therefore, it can increase in complexity and quantity but not in quality as Vos notes:

It is sometimes contended that the assumption of progress in revelation excludes its absolute perfection at all stages. This would actually be so if the progress were non-organic. The organic process is from seed form to the attainment of full growth; yet we do not say in the qualitative sense the seed is less perfect than the tree. The feature in question explains further how the soteric sufficiency of the truth could belong to it in its first stage of emergence: in the seed form the minimum of indispensable knowledge was already present.⁹

The DNA in the apple seed has all the information needed to progress from a seed to a seedling to a sapling to a mature, apple-bearing tree. Because of its organic nature, the seed is not less perfect than the full-grown tree. An untrained eye examining a seed might not conclude that it would develop into a fruit tree. But it will, because of the

⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Part 2 The Doctrine of the Word of God* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), I, 1, 203.

⁵ Payne, *op. cit.*, 527, 528.

⁶ Barth, *op. cit.*, 23; Fosdick, *A Guide to Understanding the Bible, op. cit.*, xiv.

⁷ *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: W. A. Wilde Company, 1956), 102.

⁸ "The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline," *op. cit.*, was Dr. Vos' inaugural address as Professor of Biblical Theology in Princeton Seminary, May 8, 1894.

⁹ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 15-16.

indispensable minimum of information contained in its DNA. Similarly, the first revelation has in seed form all the truth of later stages. Apple seeds and God's revelation both grow just as Jesus illustrated the growth of God's Kingdom:

This is what the Kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head, (Mark 4:26-28, NIV).

Moreover, Scripture's organic nature is demonstrated by the progressive revelation of salvation through the Lamb of God from Genesis to The Revelation:

In Genesis the lamb is a **necessity**. The lamb is the sacrifice slain by an offended, yet compassionate, LORD God to provide salvation for our guilty ancestors ("The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife, and clothed them," 3:21). Then, Abel "brought of the firstlings of his flock," (4:4; cf. Heb. 9:22). Later, God provided a lamb as a substitute to die in the place of Isaac whom his father Abraham had been instructed to slay, ([God] "said, take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering...and Abraham went and took the **lamb** and offered him up for a burnt offering **in the place of his son**," 22:1-19).

In Exodus the lamb has **efficacy**. God had promised that when He came in judgment upon the land of Egypt, if He saw the lamb's blood sprinkled upon the doorpost, "When I see the blood I will pass over you" (12:13). The sprinkled lamb's blood effects deliverance from God's judgment for all who take refuge under it, then and now.

In Leviticus the lamb has **purity** (without blemish): "take two male lambs without blemish and one ewe lamb of the first year without blemish...and the priest shall offer the sin offering, and make an atonement for him that is to be cleansed from his uncleanness" (14:10, 19). This unblemished yearling male represented the perfection of the species, even as did Christ who was "a lamb unblemished and spotless" (1 Peter 1:19) and "who has been tempted in all things as we *are*, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). The blood of both the type (the lamb) and the reality (Christ) made atonement for sin, which was not merely a covering for sin (the older sense) but a true "at-one-ment" with God.¹⁰

In Isaiah the lamb has **personality**. At this point in God's progressive revelation, the Lamb becomes a man: "He was pierced for our transgressions," (53:5, NIV) and "led like a lamb to the slaughter" (v. 7, NIV) and "cut off out of the land of the living for the transgression of my people" (v. 8). The personified Lamb's "grave was assigned with wicked men" (v. 9), after which "the LORD will prolong His days" (v. 10) by resurrection to life, followed by great honor from God (v. 12).

All earlier revelation of the lamb reaches its full maturity and development in the New Testament. H. D. McDonald concurs, "All the ideas surrounding the figure of the lamb

¹⁰ See R. H. Harrison, *Leviticus*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 67.

built up through the progressive revelation of the Old Testament may indeed go into the concept as it occurs in the New Testament.”¹¹

In the Gospel of John the Lamb is **identified**. The personified lamb in Isaiah is revealed by John the Baptist to be the promised “Messiah” (John 1:41), even “Jesus...the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (1:29). Heaven itself testifies to the power of the Lamb’s blood to cleanse from sin. “After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count...clothed in white robes...These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Rev. 7:9, 13, 14). Thus both John the Baptist and John the Apostle took all guesswork out of our quest for a personal Savior.

In the Gospel accounts, the Lamb is **crucified**, telling us in what manner His blood would be “poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28; *cf.* Is. 53:5; 1 Peter 1:18-21) and as a result His death would establish God’s “new covenant” with His Church (Luke 22:20).

In the Epistles the lamb is **typified**. To instruct us that the Passover lamb with its efficacious blood pointed directly to Jesus, the Holy Spirit moved Paul to write, “For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed” (1 Cor. 5:7). Peter also under the Spirit’s inspiration added more detail to the effectiveness of the Lamb’s blood to cleanse every sin, “Knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things...but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, *the blood of Christ*” (1 Peter 1:18-19).

In Revelation five the Lamb is **magnified** with worship (vv. 8, 14) and praise from all creation (vv. 11-13), because “with your blood You purchased men for God” (v. 9).

In Revelation twenty-two the Lamb Jesus is **glorified** because of His own inherent worth and obedience in bringing mankind into rulership in God’s Kingdom through the cross. He and the Father sit upon one “throne of God and of the Lamb” as co-rulers over the eternal Kingdom of God, (v. 3).

In this manner, salvation through the Lamb progressed from seed form in Genesis (“the LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife,” 3:21) to the attainment of full growth and development in The Revelation (“worthy [is the Lamb]...because you were slain and with your blood you purchased men for God,” 5:9, NIV; and “the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and His bond-servants will serve Him; and they will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads...and they will reign forever and forever,” 22:3-5). This last revelation in which the Lamb rules jointly with His bond-servants over the eternal Kingdom of God clearly shows that justification is not an end in itself, but that salvation through the Lamb is God’s means to bring fallen, sinful men into rulership in His eternal Kingdom (*cf.* Rom. 8:16-17; Rev. 5:9-10), where God had intended for man to be from the very beginning (Gen. 1:26; Heb. 2:5-8).¹²

¹¹ “Lamb of God,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1984), 618-619.

¹² This is the revised form of a previous article I wrote on “The Lamb of God,” with thanks to H. D. McDonald for help with assonance in the Old Testament part. *Ibid.*

Vos likewise illustrated the organic nature of Scripture by demonstrating the progressive revelation of salvation through the covenants.

Although the knowledge of God has received material increase through the ages, this increase nowhere shows the features of external accretion, but throughout appears as an internal expansion, an organic unfolding from within. The elements of truth, far from being added one to the other in lifeless succession, are seen to grow out of each other, each richer and fuller disclosure of the knowledge of God having been prepared by what preceded, and being in its turn preparatory for what follows...each subsequent increase consisted in what was germinally contained in the beginning revelation. The Gospel of Paradise is such a germ in which the Gospel of Paul is potentially present; and the Gospel of Abraham, of Moses, of David, of Isaiah and Jeremiah, are all expansions of this original message of salvation, each pointing toward the next stage of growth, and bringing the Gospel idea one step nearer to its full realization. In this Gospel of Paradise we already discern the essential features of a covenant relation, though the formal notion of a covenant does not attach to it. And in the covenant-promises given to Abraham these very features reappear, assume greater distinctness, and are seen to grow together, to crystallize as it were, into the formal covenant. From this time onward the expansive character of the covenant-idea shows itself. The covenant of Abraham contains the promise of the Sinaitic covenant; the latter again from its very nature gives rise to prophecy; and prophecy guards the covenant of Sinai from assuming a fixed, unalterable form, the prophetic word being a creative word under the influence of which the spiritual, universal germs of the covenant are quickened and a new, higher order of things is organically developed from the Mosaic Theocracy, that new covenant of which Jeremiah spoke, and which our Savior brought to light by the shedding of His blood. So dispensation grows out of dispensation and the newest is but the fullest expanded flower of the oldest.¹³

Scripture further manifested its organic nature through the progressive unfolding of the doctrine of the Trinity: beginning in Genesis (“Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness,” 1:26); continued by the Angel of the LORD in Exodus (“My name is in him,” 23:21); and further developed in the virgin-born Son (Is. 7:14) who would be the “Mighty God, Eternal Father,” (9:6). The perfect seed form of earlier revelation concerning the Trinity burst into full bloom in the New Testament which identified Jesus Christ as the “only begotten [Son, Himself] God” (John 1:18, author’s translation), who fulfilled the Old Testament prophecy of the coming virgin-born Son who would be God in human flesh (Is. 7:14; 9:6; *cf.* Matt. 1:23). Later revelation associated Jesus with the manifested Trinity (Matt. 3:16-17) and then furthered the progression by revealing the glorified Jesus Christ in heaven receiving equal worship with the Father (Rev. 5:13-14) and the two reigning co-equally upon one “Throne of God and of the Lamb” (22:3) over the universal kingdom of God “forever and forever” (22:5). Robert H. Mounce comments on Revelation 5:13, “The praise of the entire created order

¹³ Vos, “The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline,” *op. cit.*, 7.

is addressed to the One who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb. Throughout the Apocalypse the two are regularly joined.”¹⁴ Leon Morris concurs with Mounce,

This song ends by linking Him that sitteth upon the throne with the Lamb. The two are joined in a way which is characteristic of this book (6:16; 7:9, 10, 17; 14:1, 4; 21:22, 23; 22:1, 3). There cannot be the slightest doubt that the Lamb is to be reckoned with God and as God.¹⁵

The Holy Spirit, of course, appears in The Revelation as the One who speaks to the churches through Christ’s Word (2:7; *etc.*) and is manifested there as the “seven lamps of fire burning before the Throne, which are the seven Spirits of God” (4:5, *cf.* Zech. 4:1-6 where the seven lamps are equated to the one Spirit).

Further still, the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the Old and New Testaments should not be viewed as inferior old covenant empowering by God’s Spirit in believers’ lives versus a richer, fuller new covenant empowering. One is the earlier and germinal revelation of the Spirit’s work, and the other is a later, fuller, and more detailed revelation of the earlier universal principle.¹⁶ After all, Old Testament believers were indwelt by the Spirit (1 Peter 1:11), filled with the Spirit (Ex. 35:31; Num. 27:18), empowered by the Spirit (Judges 13:25; 14:19), spoke by the Spirit’s power (Num. 11:25-26; *cf.* Luke 1:67), wrote by the Spirit’s inspiration (Acts 4:25-26), and at times grieved the Holy Spirit (Judges 16:17-20; Ps. 51:11). Can anyone really find a major difference between Noah’s Spirit-empowered preaching to the wicked people of his day (1 Peter 3:18-20; *cf.* 4:6; 2 Peter 2:5) and that of Spirit-filled Peter’s proclaiming the Gospel to his rebellious countrymen at Pentecost, or between Isaiah’s divine inspiration and that of Paul? It seems somehow a little bit out of place to think that if Abraham, Moses, Samuel, David, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, *et al.*, had by the Spirit what we have today, they would have really been blessed and more effective in God’s work. God’s revelation and progressive illumination have always been divinely given to meet the current needs of His people for further enlightenment and spiritual strength. God’s grace in giving advanced revelation in the New Testament and then later progressive illumination upon particular aspects of certain truths might mean nothing more than our present rebellion against God and the darkness of our spiritual understanding is much greater than that of earlier generations.

Divine revelation is also periodic with its growth periods corresponding roughly to God’s giving of the several biblical covenants. These divinely revealed truths develop organically in cycles of varying degrees and times, with the degree of doctrinal growth depending upon the need for that particular truth in the lives of God’s people. Lastly, revelation is also climactic, which is to say, the doctrine reaches a stage where it is fully developed. There may be later reflection upon it but nothing new is added. The periodic and climactic characteristics of progressive revelation are self-evident and require no further proof.¹⁷

¹⁴ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 150.

¹⁵ *The Revelation of St. John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 102.

¹⁶ Neither is there a difference in principle in the Old Testament statement (“the Spirit came upon, fell upon”) and the New Testament phrase (“filled with the Holy Spirit”). See Timothy Lin, *How the Holy Spirit Works in Believers’ Lives Today*, www.BSMI.org, 23.

¹⁷ Vos, *ibid.*, 16.

Progressive Revelation Is the Key to Biblical Hermeneutics

“The concept of progressive revelation is the Key to Biblical hermeneutics,” wrote Edward John Carnell.¹⁸ He then set down five hermeneutical rules to interpret progressive revelation:

- (1) The New Testament interprets the Old Testament,
- (2) The Epistles interpret the Gospels,
- (3) Systematic passages interpret the incidental,
- (4) Universal passages interpret the local, and
- (5) Didactic passages interpret the symbolic.¹⁹

Carnell’s rules are basically sound; but it is best to condense his five rules into two, to add an entirely new one, and then to explain clearly their proper use. Carnell’s first two rules can be shortened into one: (1) Later revelation interprets earlier revelation. One principle of interpretation should be added to Carnell’s list: (2) Earlier revelation elucidates later revelation. Otherwise, the Old Testament would be unable to aid in interpreting the New Testament. Then Carnell’s last three rules can be condensed into one: (3) Individual instances, local application, and symbolic passages in biblical revelation are to be interpreted according to universal principles.

As deduced, therefore, from the progressive and organic nature of revelation, three Hermeneutical Principles²⁰ by which to interpret Scripture are:

Principle One. Earlier revelation (*e.g.*, the Lamb personified in Isaiah fifty-three) should be interpreted according to later revelation of the same truth (*e.g.*, the Lamb identified and crucified in the Gospel accounts). Further, not only should the “Lamb” in the New Testament interpret the “Lamb” in the Old Testament, but within the Old Testament itself, Isaiah fifty-three interprets the Passover Lamb in Exodus twelve, and both interpret God’s salvation implied by “garments of skin” in Genesis 3:21. Further still, within the New Testament, the revelation that the atonement of Christ makes possible our own justification, sanctification, and glorification²¹ interprets more fully what Christ Himself said, “This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” and what Peter preached at Pentecost, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins,” Acts 2:38. Hence, we should conclude, I would suggest, (1) there was progression in biblical revelation before as well as after Christ’s earthly ministry, and (2) all later revelation concerning a certain truth sheds light upon earlier revelation of the same truth. Concerning the first conclusion Daniel B. Wallace says, “I am simply arguing that we need to read the Bible in light of the progress of revelation—not only between the testaments but also within each testament. Even within the New Testament there is progressive understanding.”²² Concerning the second conclusion, I will later argue that

¹⁸ Edward John Carnell, *The Case for Orthodox Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1959), 52.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 53-64.

²⁰ These principles relate only to the progressive nature of revelation as it touches upon hermeneutics. Other rules and approaches must also be utilized to arrive at a proper understanding of Scripture.

²¹ See all of Romans 4:24-8:29, but especially, “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification,” Rom. 4:25, NIV; “For we know that our old self was crucified with Him so that the body of sin might be rendered powerless, that we should no longer be slaves to sin,” 6:6, NIV; “For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son,” 8:29.

²² Wallace, *op. cit.*, 2.

instead of using earlier revelation to interpret the Apocalypse, as is frequently done, that book should govern and guide all earlier interpretations of the same truth. This principle applies to many truths (*e. g.*, personal salvation through the Lamb of God, the Trinity, the millennium, the full deity of Christ, the believers' rulership in the eternal Kingdom of God, *etc.*). However, I will use the Apocalypse primarily to interpret earlier revelation concerning the fact of the Rapture, the judgment seat of Christ, and His Second Coming in the light of progressive revelation.

This principle, that later revelation of a particular truth interprets earlier revelation, extends from The Revelation to Genesis. For example, the full revelation of God's intention for man to be joint-heir with the Lord Jesus Christ over the universal Kingdom of God is given in The Revelation ("To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations—He will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery—just as I have received authority from my Father," 2:26-27; see also, 3:21, 5:10, 12:5; 20:4, 21:7, 22:5); and clearly shows that God's original plan for man ("Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule...,'" Gen. 1:26) has been brought to a triumphant conclusion, despite man's sinfulness and Satan's schemes.

Principle Two. Conversely, earlier revelation (*e.g.*, the Kingdom of God in the Old Testament, Gen. 1:26 and subsequent passages) elucidates later revelation of the same truth (*e.g.*, the Kingdom in the synoptic Gospels and The Revelation). Moreover, the sacrificial, atoning death of the Lamb in Exodus twelve and Isaiah fifty-three strengthens the truth that Christ's crucifixion for sin was more than a mere moral example of selflessness, and that it certainly was not just a first century method of explaining Christ's death, which, as a doctrine, is no longer binding.²³ Rather, the Old Testament truth of the Lamb's substitutionary atonement (*e.g.*, Is. 53:5-7) strengthens the later revelation that Christ willingly gave Himself upon the cross to die for us (Matt. 26:42) and then presented His Own blood to God the Father to placate His holy wrath against our rebellion and sin (Heb. 9:11-28). In fact, "Hebrews nine and ten show that the same basic system of sacrifice underlies both testaments."²⁴

The book of Hebrews' description of the Old Testament institution as a "figure," a "copy," and a "shadow,"²⁵ has reference to their illustrating by visible means eternal realities which the New Testament further explains through Christ's death; however, the illustration (earlier revelation) is by no mean inferior to the explanation (later revelation), for both are simply means of revealing to man the eternal truth of God's plan of salvation completed before the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8).

The Old Testament serves as an illustration to the New Testament in two ways. (1) It taught spiritual and moral principles that are equally applicable to every age through the use of historical events and symbolical ceremonies. (2) It prepared for New Testament revelation through prophesying future events as well as illustrating them by types. Old Testament history and poetry are written for didactic example for every age ("Now these things happened [to Israel] as examples for us," 1 Cor. 10:6; *cf.* 10:11; Rom, 15:4) and are a rich source for devotional and homiletical study. For example, the lives of the main

²³ Ramm, *op. cit.*, 101.

²⁴ Ramm, *ibid.*, 229.

²⁵ Hebrews 9:9; 9:23; 10:1.

Genesis patriarchs vividly portray the Christian's spiritual life from beginning to end with Adam representing the sinner saved by grace, Cain and Abel indicating the distinction between lost and saved, Noah showing the deliverance from great destruction that God's grace brings ("But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD," Gen. 6:8 NKJV), Abraham demonstrating the trials and triumphs of faith, Isaac suggesting the life and growth of sonship, Jacob evidencing the responsibility of serving God through one's life and work as a servant, and finally Joseph representing the reigning with the powerful king (Gen. 41:38-43) which awaits every good and faithful servant of Christ ("He who overcomes, and he who keeps my deeds until the end, TO HIM I WILL GIVE AUTHORITY OVER THE NATIONS," Rev. 2:26). Old Testament prophecy of Messiah's virgin birth (Is. 7:14, 9:6-7), Spirit-filled ministry (11:1-5; 42:1-4), and death by crucifixion as the Suffering Servant (52:13-53:12) clearly prepared the way for the Gospels. The Passover and the tabernacle served as dramatic symbols of the future work of Christ as God's Paschal Lamb slain for sinners ("For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed," 1 Cor. 5:7) and as the victorious High Priest Who entered the eternal Holy of Holies once for all on every sinner's behalf ("He entered the holy place once for all...who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God," Heb. 9:12, 14; cf. 9:1-28; 10:10-14, 19-22). By keeping in mind the organic nature of progressive revelation and carefully avoiding allegorical or typological extremes, the Christian exegete can use the historical and poetic sections of the Old Testament to illustrate eternal principles for spiritual and moral living and can use Old Testament prophecy and types to illustrate vividly Christ's work. Because of its tremendous importance in laying the foundation for the New Testament, it may be validly asserted that no man can fully understand New Testament theology without an adequate understanding of its Old Testament background.

Therefore, it is not hermeneutically sound to say that the New Testament interprets the Old, without stating the converse, that the Old Testament elucidates the New. In other words, later and earlier revelations of the same truth strengthen and clarify each other. Without this second principle, the Old Testament becomes useless as our authority for theology, preaching, and practical living. Regarding this point, Ramm states as one of his rules of hermeneutics, "The Old Testament must be continuously searched for help in interpreting the New Testament."²⁶ J. C. K. von Hofmann adds:

Just as the Old Testament would lose its saving significance if its contents were interpreted as ordinary history rather than as holy history, so also the spiritual value of the New Testament would be diminished by such a purely historical interpretation in which the antitypical character of its events and the Old Testament forms of expressing its message were not appreciated.²⁷

Jesus never discredited the Old Testament but exalted it as the inspired eternal Word of God whose basis principles are valid in every age. Anyone who disregards the earlier revelation God gave in the Old Testament in any way is not following the example of Christ.

Thus the organic nature of progressive revelation insures its perfection and saving sufficiency at every stage. A lesser degree of detail does not mean inferiority of revelation, neither should any part of Scripture ever be exalted above another, but each

²⁶ Ramm, *op. cit.*, 116.

²⁷ *Interpreting the Bible*, trans. Christian Press, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1959), 169.

should be treated as an integral part of an organic whole that mutually strengthens and interprets each part.

Principle Three. Individual instances, local application, and symbolic passages²⁸ of revelation are to be interpreted according to universal principles. Later revelation (*e.g.*, the Epistles) elucidates earlier revelation (*e.g.*, the Gospels) in two ways: (1) by giving the divine interpretation of the significance of the facts recorded in the Gospels and (2) by further applying the ethical principles of Christ to the local problems of the church. This rule, however, should not be applied in such a way as to consult only the Epistles for a doctrine, because in every case to properly interpret a doctrine or moral principle every reference to it in the Old Testament, the Gospels, and the Epistles in a progressive order should be collected and examined in order to establish the complete biblical teaching.

The organic whole of revelation is made up of all the systematic passages and individual instances and thereby forms certain universal principles that must be followed in interpreting each particular revelation. Whereas certain passages deal with specific truths in a systematic way (*e.g.*, justification by faith in Romans and Galatians), other passages deal with these truths only incidentally (*e.g.*, 1 Peter 1:18-25; Rev. 5:9). All of the passages related to a specific truth, whether systematic or incidental, together make up the universal principle. This means that the unity of the whole of revelation is tremendously important to proper interpretation. J. C. K. von Hofmann's comment is instructive:

“It is in its totality and intrinsic unity that [Scripture] forms the object of Biblical hermeneutics. The foremost question is how the activity of the interpreter of Holy Scripture is determined by the specific way in which he is confronted by the Bible in its totality.”²⁹

Further, the systematic passages in the Epistles (*e.g.*, justification by faith in Romans and Galatians) should interpret all the incidental references to this doctrine (*e.g.*, Phil. 3:6-9; Titus 3:5-7). But they cannot be used to explain all other doctrines. Neither Romans nor Galatians systematically teaches reigning with Christ; yet this is the ultimate end of justification.³⁰

To teach justification as the ultimate goal and chief emphasis of Christianity shows a two-fold error of failing to understand the general theme of Scripture and of neglecting the progression of illumination. The Kingdom is the theme of all Scripture from Genesis 1:26 to Revelation 22:5, and justification is actually the means to the end of reigning with Christ. Failure to emphasize the end leaves the Christian life after justification with only a vague indefinite purpose. Since justification by faith was the Reformation doctrine used by God at that time to be especially stressed to correct the Catholic Church's concept of justification by works, to insist that it should be the chief doctrine emphasized in every age is to deny progressive illumination, for in successive ages, as Strong has pointed out, God has illumined men to explain certain doctrines never understood before to meet the particular need of the times.³¹ Finally, the systematic principle of various

²⁸ The interpretation of individual instances, local application, and symbolic passages are Carnell's rules 3 through 5.

²⁹ *Op. cit.*, 18.

³⁰ Revelation 5:9-10; 22:3-5.

³¹ Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1958), 340. Progressive revelation must be viewed as complementary and not as contradictory to Systematic Theology. Both are tools enabling the interpreter to better understand God's Holy Scriptures.

doctrines must be properly related to each other by comparison of their biblical revelation; for example, the purpose of justification by faith, sanctification, and glorification is to prepare the redeemed to reign with Christ (“His bondservants will serve Him...the Lord God will illumine them; and they will reign forever and forever,” Rev. 22:3, 5). Hence, these doctrines can never be completely understood except in light of their relation to the Kingdom.

Moreover, **local application** of revelation should be interpreted by the universal principle. This principle is necessary for the practical use of the Bible as the contemporary authority for the spiritual life, even though it was written to meet particular needs in ancient times. The distinction must be made between local application and the essential universal principle, or else Scripture has no relevance for succeeding generations and diverse cultures. For example, the solemn apostolic injunction for Christian women to have long hair and to wear veils³² was a local application to teach, “The head of the woman is the man”,³³ for in first century Corinthian society no virtuous woman wore short hair or went unveiled. To obey the essential principle of subordination to the husband, the Christian wife of Paul’s day needed to have long hair and to wear a veil; however, in the twenty-first century a Christian wife does not need to wear her hair by the first century style nor does she need to wear a veil in order to obey the universal principle of the Pauline injunction. To insist that women wear a heavy veil similar to that intended by Paul would certainly not *per se* be a public testimony to the scriptural obedience of a wife to her husband. Therefore, to understand proper application of Scripture to the present and to avoid hindering the Gospel by extreme reactionary practices, every local application must be interpreted in the light of its intended principle.

Finally, **symbolic passages** must be interpreted by the universal principle. The universal principle for symbolic passages is obtained by means of first understanding the symbol, then to take the definition of that symbol as clearly stated in an obviously literal passage and to apply its meaning to a highly figurative passage. For example, the Lamb who had been slain in Revelation 5:6-14 is identified by John 1:29 and 1 Peter 1:19 as Christ Jesus Himself. The explanation of the vision of one like the Son of Man in Revelation 1:12-18 is made plain by considering that over eighty times in the Gospels Christ called Himself the Son of Man. Sometimes the interpreter must go as far back as Genesis to get the incidental revelations. However, in making the final interpretation, extra weight should be given to information the author places in his own book to be sure the interpretation fits his context. Also, special attention should be given to the use of double symbols in Scripture; for example, sin is pictured as a crouching lion in Genesis 4:7, and Satan is clearly called a roaring lion in 1 Peter 5:8; yet in Revelation 5:5 Christ, “the Root of David,” is called “the Lion of the tribe of Judah.” In every instance the local context of the symbolic passage must determine the validity of the identification suggested by the literal passage. Later, I will use this principle as an aid to interpret “Throw out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place where will be weeping and gnashing of teeth,” (Matt. 25:30).

³² 1 Corinthians 11:3-16.

³³ 1 Corinthians 11:3.

Conclusion

Progressive revelation is not an evolutionary development of biblical truths but a movement of God, with the initiative coming from Him and not from man, in which God makes Himself, His Word, and His plans known to mankind by a gradually advancing organic growth from perfect seed form to the full manifestation. Such disclosure is perfect at every stage because of its organic nature and the perfection of God. Because of its organic nature, possessing a minimum of soteric knowledge at every stage, later revelation interprets earlier revelation; and conversely, earlier revelation elucidates later revelation and both hermeneutical principles can be illustrated by the progression of salvation revealed through the Lamb of God, as well as through the covenant-idea existing in Eden in germinal form and fully revealed in the new covenant which was ratified at the cross by the shed blood of our Lord Jesus Christ (“and in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, ‘This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood,’” (Luke 22:20).

All biblical truths progress as the historic, linear unfolding of the mind and will of God—even prophetic/apocalyptic truths. Charles Augustus Briggs said more than a century ago,

The [Olivet] discourse of Jesus...is intermediate between the apocalypse of Daniel and the apocalypse of John. As it depends upon the former and advances upon the Messianic idea contained therein so it is the prelude to the latter and the key to its interpretation...We ought to expect that Jesus in His predictions would bridge the time between the apocalypse of Daniel and the apocalypse of John, and give an intermediate stage in the development of apocalyptic prophecy.³⁴

Daniel B. Wallace speaks even more specifically to the topic I will address when he writes,

Curiously, most students of the Bible assume progress between the Testaments, but deny it within the New Testament. To be sure, the time frame is much shorter. But there is ample evidence of progressive revelation within the New Testament about several themes—that is, certain themes are not developed/recognized until after some time (including the deity of Christ and of the Spirit, the idea that our souls go immediately to heaven, the fact of the rapture, *etc.*)³⁵

Therefore, I will use the first and second hermeneutical principles of progressive revelation as an aid to interpret the fact of the Rapture, the Judgment Seat of Christ, and the Second Coming of the Son of Man primarily in the Gospels, the Epistles, and The Revelation with a glance at Daniel. Further, when I get to Revelation 12:5 (“and she gave birth to a son, a male *child*, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron; and her child was caught up to God and His throne”) I will use hermeneutical principle three of progressive revelation as an aid to answer the question, “Who is this child?”

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³⁴ *The Messiah of the Gospels* (Edinburg: 1894), 132, 134.

³⁵ www.bible.org/docs/soapbox/netschat, 1. In his brief article, Dr. Wallace gives the caveat, “The following *rough* essay is intended to be something to think about; it is neither a polished piece nor altogether finalized in my own thinking. I welcome interaction and criticism from all quarters.”

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