

A Practical Look at Progressive Revelation

I Corinthians 15:49 “And as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly.”

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Introduction:

There are a variety of ways to edify fellow believers. One way is to teach them a method of studying the scriptures that would guide them to more truth in the Word of God. In this study, I hope to show how the revelation of Paul is progressive throughout his writings. I trust that what I present in this message can be applied in your own study, and will add to your knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. If what is presented is useful to you, I will have accomplished my purpose.

I intend to discuss the subject of progressive revelation within the revelation of Paul. I’ve found that considering his revelation in a progressive manner has given me a greater understanding of my responsibilities in my relationship to the Lord. This study will follow how Paul developed his teaching of the personal identification of the believer with the gospel. In order to do this we must first define some terms.

I. The Basics

We all have been taught many things over the years, about the study of scripture. One thing that I have learned in speaking, is to always make sure, to the best of your ability, that everyone is on the same page! To do this let’s define some terms.

A. Definition of terms

When I use the term ‘progressive revelation’, what I mean is ‘the way that the truth of God moves through time’. God, in His word, revealed His truth in a progressive manner to men. What is the truth to God has always been true, for He is the father of truth. His manner of the revelation of truth to men is progressive. The truth of God is revealed to men throughout the Bible in a progressive manner. One truth is built upon another. In this day we possess much more truth than the saints of the Old Testament because of the manner in which God chose to reveal it! In our own walk with the Lord we are to progressively keep learning more truth. A good indication of a correct walk with Christ is that we are searching the scriptures and seeking to learn new things about Him and our relationship to Him!

If we look back over our Christian experience we should be able to say with all certainty that indeed, I have learned things from the Lord in a progressive manner! In considering the revelation of Paul in a progressive manner we must first understand the authority of this apostle.

B. The authority of Paul.

There was a time in my life when I had no idea of the authority of the Apostle Paul. Since then the Lord has shown me, in a progressive manner, that this Apostle was a man chosen in due time to receive a revelation from God that was uniquely given to him. In fact, this message has no meaning without an understanding of Paul’s God given authority. I believe that it is the understanding of Paul’s authority that causes us to separate him from the other Apostles. Much confusion in Christendom results from a failure to put Paul in his God-given place, as one born in due time, for a special revelation from God. I believe many devoted children of God, both past and present, have missed the richest blessings from God, by failing to understand Paul’s authority!

You may see how this was revealed to him progressively, by reading his letters in the order in which they are written, which is: I & II Thessalonians, I & II Corinthians, Romans, Galatians, Hebrews (these are his inner-Acts letters). Then come: Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, Philemon, Titus, and the letters to Timothy (these are his post-Acts letters).

A careful reading of these letters will show you that in the Thessalonian letters Paul has no knowledge of his authority. No where in them will you find the use of a personal pronoun, by Paul for himself. The first glimpse of Paul’s progressive understanding of his authority is I Corinthians chapter 14:37. In this passage Paul displays a growing understanding of the authority he has been given;

“If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that **I** write unto you are the commandments of the Lord.”

What Paul is telling these believers is that any man who considers himself as an inspired speaker, or spiritual, would know that Paul has taught them directly from the Lord. This

is a claim to authority from God, especially in consideration of the new things that are taught in this letter to the Corinthian assembly.

In his prior Thessalonian letters he never uses personal pronouns concerning his authority. It is interesting to note that in Paul's post-Acts writings he does use personal pronouns concerning his authority, more times than the inner-Acts writings. I believe this is because at this time in his life he knew, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that he had received unique authority directly from his Lord and Saviour.

II. Studying Paul's revelations

A. They were progressive

A search through the writings of Paul, in the order in which they were written, will show you that he learned of his authority in a progressive manner. His use of personal pronouns concerning his authority, as one called out by the Lord for a specific purpose, develops gradually through out his life. They occur more times in his post-Acts Epistles. It culminates in his presentation of the mystery in Ephesians chapter 3:5-11.

Ephesians 3: 8, "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"

The mystery of the church of the Body of Christ is indeed part of the unsearchable riches of Christ for the believer.

By understanding that the revelation of the truth from God is progressive through time, we find a good way to study the revelation given to Paul. I personally have learned a lot of truth by the study of the writings of this Apostle in a progressive manner. There was a time in my life when I made a concentrated effort to consistently read Paul's letters in the order in which they are written. This was a great benefit to me in many ways. I learned that truth was revealed to Paul gradually throughout his life. He is constantly learning new things! As I began to see the doctrines or teachings of Paul develop progressively over time, I learned to trace the development of his doctrine from the inner-Acts books to the post-Acts books. This was a great benefit to me personally, because I came to see how the Lord taught Paul the truth. And by this same method He teaches me!

B. Importance - What would Christianity be without Paul?

You might ask me, Brother, why should we study Paul's writings? I would say to you, what is Christianity without them?

It was Martin Luther understanding Paul's truth of "the just shall live by faith" that launched the reformation, resulting in the formation of protestant theology, and freeing mankind from the blindness of Roman Catholicism.

How much would be understood concerning the doctrine of grace and our personal responsibilities in our walk as believers without Paul's revelation?

I think that it is the failure to earnestly seek to understand the writings of Paul that has resulted in the present weakened state of modern evangelicalism! Many is the poor weakened believer who tries to understand and practice things that are not directly to him in God's Word, and as a result, does not understand how to stand as the completely armored New Man in Ephesians chapter 6!

It is through the revelation given to Paul, that we as believers learn how to live the Christian life to its fullest! How could we possibly come to understand how to live by faith alone, apart from the teachings of this apostle?

C. Paul's teachings provide a standard of measure for our Christian walk

It is through the revelation given to Paul that the believer learns how to measure the fruitfulness of his walk with Christ. What better man to use to measure our Christian walk? Paul was directly called by a risen Christ. So are we! Paul lived his life constantly seeking to learn more about his Lord. So should we! Paul sought to apply to his life what he had learned from the Lord, as should every true child of faith! Near the end of his life Paul exhorts the believer to press on towards the mark of perfection, which is our highest and loftiest goal as believers!

Philippians 3: 13-17 "Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in anything ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you. Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing. Brethren, be followers together of me, and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample."

Paul tells us as believers to continually seek the high road of perfection in Christ, from a position of one who also presses towards this higher calling. What better measure of the walk of a Christian, but to press onward towards the highest and noblest goal of perfection!

D. Paul's doctrine is of the Lord

The word doctrine means teaching. We have read in I Corinthians 14: 37 Paul's claim to have received commandments or doctrine from the Lord. Always remembering this is crucial to understanding what he taught. Often, many believers stay continually within the Gospels, which are accounts of the life of our Lord. What they seem to fail to see is that the earthly ministry of the Lord is now over, until the Second Advent. We are now in the time of the heavenly ministry of our Lord, following his ascension. The teachings of the resurrected Lord, directly for us, are found within the revelation of Paul.

III. Progressive revelation in I Corinthians chapter 15

It is within the letters written to the assembly in Corinth that Paul begins to teach things that are unique. Remember that I Corinthians is the 3rd letter written by Paul, and it is here that we first catch a glimpse of his growing awareness of his authority from the Lord.

In the first chapters of this letter Paul addresses problems that arose in this congregation due to ignorance and misunderstanding of what Paul had taught them. The presence of false teachers and their own willful ignorance didn't help! We as believers should be aware that misunderstanding and ignorance of scripture is a cause of error and is often exploited by those that would keep us from the truth. For this reason a believer should seek the guidance of the Spirit and search the scriptures diligently. The Spirit will guide us in the truth!

It is in chapter 15 of this letter that Paul teaches some truths that I believe are the foundation to understanding his later revelation after the Acts period came to a close. We will cover some of the highlights.

I think verse 11 holds the key to putting the truth here into its context. In verses 1-9 Paul reminds these believers of what he had taught them concerning the gospel. They were saved by this (vs.2) unless they had believed in vain. This good news was that Christ died for their sins, was buried, and rose from the dead on the 3rd day, according to the scriptures. This was the same message preached by all the apostles and is what they believed (vs.11).

Verse 10 reveals much about the ministry of Paul. The word grace appears three times here. I believe that the best way to understand this word is to remember that it means 'unmerited favor'. In the days of the translators of the King James Bible people were more conscious of its meaning. England at that time England was ruled by a King. A subject so held the King in awe over himself, that to even approach the King required a leave of grace or unmerited favor from the monarch.

In this country we are governed by a democratic republic. We do not have to have a leave of grace to approach those that rule over us. The full weight of the idea of grace is not as deeply ingrained in our thinking as it was in the days of the King. It is no less true; grace is unmerited favor!

Substituting the definition for the word grace into this verse will clarify the intent of the ideas Paul is communicating. I Cor. 15:10

“But by the grace (unmerited favor) of God I am what I am: and his grace (unmerited favor) which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all (the twelve): yet not I, but the grace (unmerited favor) of God which was with me.”

Paul realizes that even though he is unworthy of the benefits of favor with God, he has been given it. It is the unmerited favor of God that drives him to perform the work he has been given. What he is about to teach them, is a result of unmerited favor from God!

Understanding grace is the foundation of understanding the revelation of Paul. We would know little about this subject without his teachings. An understanding of verse 10 enables us to comprehend verses 11 & 12.

Verse 11 gives some information that places the rest of this chapter in its correct context. The use of the word ‘therefore’ is important. This word denotes a looking forward, based upon what is behind. Another way of saying this would be: because of this, then this other. What Paul is saying here is that he and the other apostles (the twelve), have all taught what is spoken of in the previous verses. These believers in Corinth had all believed in truth that they had been taught, concerning the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ.

“Therefore (because of this) whether it were I or they, so we preach, and so ye believed”
The word “now” that begins verse 12, denotes that Paul is going to speak to them concerning truth that is new to them. The things that they are going to hear are based upon the previous truths that they understood concerning the gospel.

The word therefore in verse 10 denotes a looking forward. The word now in verse 12 denotes the present tense. Truth is the subject; it is seen moving through time. This is progressive revelation

I Corinthians chapter 15 is considered by many to be the resurrection chapter of the Bible. This is true, for it is the subject to be addressed by Paul in the next verses and is one of the foundation stones of Paul’s later revelation. The other foundation stone found in this chapter is the identification of the believer with Christ. I believe that as we understand more of these two subjects we are led to understand the mystery of the Body of Christ, which is Paul’s later revelation. The foundational teaching of Paul’s later revelation is first found clearly in this chapter. As we move on in this study, I hope to show you how Paul progressed in his understanding of these gracious truths!

I believe the meat of this chapter may be seen by dividing it into two sections. The first begins with verse 13 and ends with verse 23. The second section begins with verse 34 and ends with verse 50. The foundation for understanding this new truth lies in the first 11 verses of this chapter. This meat lies close to the bone, and will require some thought!

The verses in between these sections deal with advents concerning believers in the inner-Acts period, not to those who love his appearing. We will not consider them in this study. There is an interrelationship between these two sections that act as the muscle in the meat and bind the two together. This should not surprise us, for the New Man of the post-Acts, is completely bound together and stands completely in the grace of God!

A. The resurrection section (verses 13-23)

The believers addressed by Paul had allowed some teachings of false doctrine concerning the resurrection to have sway over them. This was due to lack of diligence in the truth. If they had remained diligent to the truth taught to them, they wouldn't have been influenced by the error they were encountering.

In the days of Paul, there were many followers of a belief system known as Gnosticism. This had many different forms, and was a combination of pagan religions and Greek philosophy. Remember, Christianity was just beginning to be established by grace in the hearts of men!

One of the basic tenets of Gnostics was that spirit and matter could never mix. This belief, entering into Christian thought, would deny the earthly presence of Christ upon the earth in the form of a man. All matter (flesh) dies, and can never enter the realm of the spirit. The resurrection of the man, Jesus, would have been impossible to them. These Gnostic teachers had somehow entered into this assembly, and gotten sway over their thinking. The current goal of Paul was to refute this Gnostic teaching. Paul's handling of this error was dependant upon the believer having received faith from God already (vs. 11).

“Therefore whether it were I or they, so we preach, and so ye believed”

Their believing what he said was dependant upon their faith being from God, and this is evident by the four times the word ‘vain’ is used in this passage (verses 2,14 & 17). Man needs the help of God to succeed against the vanity of man!

Paul refutes these false teachers by explaining that without the resurrection, the faith of the believer would be vain, or empty (verses 14 & 17). It is the resurrection that gives the believer victory over sins (verse 17). The believer has hope in the present and in the future because of the resurrection of Christ (verses 18 & 19).

In the last verses of this passage, (verses 20-23) the foundation stones of Paul's later revelations are laid. Paul mentions the firstfruits. In the Old Testament, the first of the fruit of a man's harvest was to be given to God, resulting in the blessing of the Lord on the harvest. Christ, by the resurrection, is the evidence of the blessing of God upon the firstfruits. The resurrection of Jesus declared him Christ, and was the firstfruit of many other believers who will be resurrected. Paul tells these believers that their resurrection at the coming of Christ is dependant upon the resurrection of the Lord. The resurrection is their hope, both present and future (verses 20 & 23).

In these last few verses I believe verses 20 and 23 go together, as one explains the other.

“But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept. But everyman in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming.”

Verses 21 & 22 are the muscle in the meat; they join the resurrection truth with the other foundation stone of Paul's latter revelation. To help understand what they say, I think they should be read beginning with verse 22.

“For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead.”

Looking at these verses in this way, helps me to more easily see what is taught in them. Here are the main ideas:

Adam: all die, by man came death

Christ: all be made alive, by man came the resurrection of the dead

In one man came death; by one man came life. To the true believer this is the center of his faith. Faith is the only factor that applies the truth of God coming in the flesh and is the mode of the resurrection to the believer. (verse 19)

“If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.”

Verse 21 and 22 in this chapter (which is the third letter written by Paul), is the first time the truth of the identification by faith of the believer is clearly stated. The believer is identified with Christ, because Christ is identified with the believer.

B. The identification section (verses 34 - 50)

The second section in this chapter (verses 34-50), is tied together by verses 21 and 22 of the previous passage. We can see this by combining verses 22,21 and 47-49

“For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. The first man is of the earth, earthy: the second man is the Lord from heaven. As is the earthy, such are they also that are earthy: and is the heavenly, such are they also that are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly.”

The combination of these verses within these passages of scripture clearly brings out the doctrine of identification of the believer with Christ by faith! (Verses 45 & 46)

“And so it is written, the first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit. Howbeit that was not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural; and afterward that which is spiritual.”

Jesus, who is God (spiritual), became of the earth (natural). He died in the flesh, and was raised in the spirit. Because this is a fact, we that are in the flesh, may become alive in the

spirit. This is accomplished through faith in his resurrection. In verses 35-44 of this passage Paul explains this idea in detail.

Paul has refuted the incursions of Gnostic teaching by explaining, to those who have truly believed, the gospel of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. Faith in the resurrection has given them the ability to understand how they have become identified with Christ. It was by faith!

In this message a presentation has been made of the role of progressive revelation in the life of Paul. This is reflected through a look at his doctrinal teachings in a progressive manner. The great truth of the resurrection is seen as the mode of identification of Christ with the believer. We understand that “the word became flesh and dwelt among men” (the spiritual entered the realm of the physical). The Word that was spiritual died a physical death and was risen once again in the spiritual real (verses 42 - 44).

We that are of the earth are made not of the earth through the accomplished truth of the resurrection of Christ. We are made spiritual through identification by faith in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. We have the resurrection as a proof of this fact. It remains our responsibility to apply this truth to our thoughts and to our lives on this earth.

“So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: it is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: it is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body.”

C. Foundation of later revelation

By dividing the 15th chapter of I Corinthians into verses 13-23, and then verses 44-50, we as believers are able to see the progressive revelation of Paul’s teaching on identification. The believer first comes to understand how the heavenly became earthly, and was risen from the dead. This enables the believer, through faith in the resurrection, to become identified with the heavenly. I believe this is the development of the truth of identification by faith of the believer with the gospel, and is the foundation of Paul’s later revelation.

In the next message we will consider this truth of ‘identification of the believer’ in the gospel, and see how it develops progressively through the revelation of Paul, God’s Apostle (messenger) to the Gentiles.

