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PROGRESSIVE REVELATION

THE Protevangelium, God's word of salvation to fallen man in Paradise, is the beginning of the special revelation contained in the Bible. Only in Eden has general revelation been adequate to the needs of man. Man having fallen, "God breaks His way in a round-about fashion into man's darkened heart to reveal there His redemptive love. By slow steps and gradual stages He at once works out His saving purpose and moulds the world for its reception, choosing a people for Himself and training it through long and weary ages, until at last when the fulness of time has come, He bares His arm and sends out the proclamation of His great salvation to all the earth" (Warfield). The whole history of salvation is one coming of God to His people, one speech of grace to man. It is an historical revelation given first through patriarchs and prophets and ultimately in the Son—a revelation essentially different from the general manifestation of God, e.g. in the works of His hands or in the rational nature of man, because it is redemptive in purpose and soteriological in character. This "word" of God is a revelation of grace and salvation. Under the old covenant men served as the medium through which this word was sounded, until finally the whole revelation is summed up in the one moment of incarnation, when the Word Himself became flesh.

It seems quite evident, therefore, that God chose to give the revelation of His grace only progressively, or in other words through the process of an historical development. The Scriptures embody in their own growth the record of this steady advance of the special revelation through various stages from its first faint beginnings to its glorious completion in Jesus Christ. Both from the material point of view—in the development of the contents—and from the formal point of view—in method or mode—there is a marked advance and progress in the special revelation of God to man.

This aspect of the Scriptural revelation has not yet received from the side of our Reformed theology the attention it deserves, and a closer study of the *historia revelationis* is imperative. The Bible is no arsenal full of *loca probantia* ready for use for the theologian; it has an historic-organical character which cannot

be disputed, seeing that it has been compiled by scores of authors in the course of many centuries, and thus offers us a revelation of spiritual realities in historical process.

I

THE PLURIFORMITY OF REVELATION WITH THE PROPHET

Perhaps no single passage from Scripture states the fact of a progressive revelation more definitely than Hebrews i. 1, 2. "*God, who at sundry times and divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son.*" The diversity of the revelation and its coming into existence bit by bit and in many parts—for this is the plain meaning of the Greek *polumerōs*—is the important truth taught here.

The author of the epistle, addressing his Hebrew readers, begins with a general statement as to the excellence and superior position of the Gospel over the Law, of the new covenant over the old, the Christian over the Judaistic. This contrast forms the principal theme of the epistle, but already in the first verses the pre-eminence of the New Testament final revelation over the Old is found in the different way and manner in which God communicated Himself under these covenants. Both were good and both were of God, but there was a great difference in the way in which the revelation took place. Both received a *word* of revelation, and not only symbols or signs or vague indications. Even in the long ages past God was never silent but ever revealed His word through new messengers in various and diverse ways. But whereas He spoke the full, final and perfect word of salvation in the Son, He communicated His word only bit by bit and in diverse ways to and through the prophets, i.e. under the old covenant. And this fragmentary and multiform mode of existence stamps the Old Testament revelation as still imperfect and "in part".

Under the old covenant the revelation took place in various ways: law and prophecy, type and allegory, doctrine and admonition, warning and consolation, threat and promise interchange and present a many-coloured mosaic of forms of revelation. There is also variety in the way different prophets receive, deliver or clothe their messages: Isaiah differs from Ezekiel, Moses is other than David. Man, the receiver and

communicant of God's revelation, is no passive flute played by the Spirit, but is a living organism, a rational active being, honoured and used as such by God. The Word of God in and through him is realized in very intimate connection with his personality, character, culture and experience. Thence the rich variety and pluriformity we meet in the Scriptures.

There is a great variety of bearers of the revelation, of different individuality: seers, kings, warriors or priests, all serve as prophets, interpreters of God, people who speak *for* Another, as the derivation of "pro-phet" signifies. This variety becomes still greater when we realize that God did not always reveal Himself by direct word-communication, but also through dream and vision, through deed and miracle, through symbol and symbolical act, through urim and thummim and the lot.

The pluriformity of revelation can also be understood as signifying the various periods under the old covenant, viz. the patriarchal, Mosaic and the prophetic; or the variety can be found in the many stages in which the message of a coming Redeemer came to mankind, e.g. to Adam that the Messiah would be born of the seed of the woman; to Abraham that He would be one of his posterity; to Jacob that He would be of the tribe of Judah; to David that He would emerge from his house; to Micah that He would be born in Bethlehem; and to Isaiah that He would be born of a virgin.

From all this it is clear that the Word of God was given or spoken at different times, to different persons and organs, and in different and various ways. In a fragmentary and imperfect way His word was sounded and His plan of salvation regularly unfolded from time to time. This fragmentary way of coming into existence and the imperfection which unavoidably cleaves to it, does, however, not make the revelation less reliable or less true. The Word of God to man was infallible, though imperfect; the primary authorship of God in all the various forms of revelation is sufficient guarantee for its truth and reliability, however much the instruments through which God spoke might have differed from one another.

Let us note here that in all this God was pedagogically preparing and training His people for His coming and their reception of the Messiah. The various revelations are not apart from or without connection with one another, but it is one great revelation of salvation and redemption which is unveiled in

various stages and episodes. Conceived bit by bit, in different times and manners, all are parts, organically united, of one great whole . . . which in progressive order prepared and moulded Israel for the advent of the Logos of God in the flesh. The necessity for such preparation and training, however, did not lie objectively in God, as if He were mutable ; nor in Jesus Christ, for He is the same yesterday, to-day and for evermore ; nor even in the spiritual blessings, as if they could not immediately be bestowed ; but it lay subjectively in the state and condition of the human race, which was to be redeemed as race, and therefore had to be educated and prepared for the salvation in Jesus Christ by various and manifold revelations. By slow steps and gradual stages all and everything was being led to the Cross, the centre of the history of the world. The prophecies and revelations of the old covenant all pointed forward to the perfect and final revelation, the last and ever-sufficient Word of God, which the Father would speak in the Son. In this Revelation the law and the prophets—the imperfect and fragmentary word of revelation under the old covenant—was to be fulfilled, enriched and perfected.

II

THE CONSUMMATION OF THE REVELATION IN JESUS CHRIST

“God . . . hath in these last days spoken to us by his Son.” This is the consummation and grand finale in the age-long history of the revelation of salvation, the culmination of the speaking of God to His people. The end of the “time past” has come. Now God speaks in His Son. And this *in* is to be taken in its most pregnant sense. In Christ dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. In Christ God Himself speaks on earth.

Apparently Christ (in the quoted passage from Hebrews) is put on the same line with the prophets as a personal instrument for the revelation of God, but He is also essentially other than they. He is our greatest prophet, a prophet, interpreter of God, *par excellence*. He is more than Moses the law-giver, for He explains and fulfils the law Himself ; He is more than any prophet preaching the word of God, for He Himself is that Word of God ; He is more than the prophets who receive the Spirit sporadically, for He receives the Spirit without measure ; He is

one with the Holy Ghost ; He speaks on His own, divine authority. He is *the* prophet, eternally infallible, pure and sinless, the Saviour of the world. Whereas the prophets became instruments of God through their calling or office—the Son is in a personal and unique way connected with God, which makes Him a perfect revealer of the will and Word of God. Yea, this organ of the divine revelation is essentially different from the prophets. God no longer avails Himself of impure and sinful instruments, but speaks in a direct way to man by and in His Son . . . in His Son who is the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person ; in His Son, for nobody knows the Father save the Son. He is the most perfect vehicle of revelation ; through Him the word of salvation could be communicated in its whole fulness and glory and purity and perfection.

But—the Son is not only the most excellent instrument of revelation, He is Himself also revelation, He is Himself the Word of God. The incarnation was the summary of all previous oracles and the perfect and final revelation of God. The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. Jesus Christ is God revealed in the flesh. He is *the* Word of God to fallen creation ; He is *the* word of life to dying mankind ; He is *the* word of truth to an erring human race ; He is *the* word of redemption to lost sinners.

Jesus Christ is at the same time the consummation and the personal fulfilment of what was foreshadowed under the old covenant. He is God-on-earth, He is both prophet and prophecy, He is the absolute miracle, in the presence of which all others dwindle away to nothing. His person is unique, His work is unique, His death and resurrection are unique, His merits are unique. He is the living Word of God, the perfect revelation of the Most High.

Let us note here that this also implies that Jesus Christ is the final revelation of God. In Him God has spoken for the last time : what comes after Christ does not add anything material to the revelation of salvation. It is only re-working and application and subjective appropriation of what has objectively been given in Christ. The Apostles in their epistles give clear proof of this : they have no other revelation and no other gospel to preach than Christ the Crucified. He is the final revelation : in Him the last word of God for our salvation was

spoken—spoken for all ages until He cometh again. It is a sinful error to be looking for something more than Christ, to be expecting a new and higher revelation. Popery adds extra-biblical tradition and the worship of saints to the sufficient and clear Word of God in Christ. Modernism, enthused by the spirit of evolution in all its thinking, cherishes the expectation that a religion better than Christianity might still evolve, with probably a better and more perfect Saviour of the world than our blessed Lord Jesus Christ. This vain hope can only be cherished where religion is regarded (on the basis of naturalistic evolution) as product of man's search after God, the creation of God in the image of man—and is utterly irreconcilable with the religion the Bible presents, viz. a (and the only) *revealed* religion. As long as we believe the Bible to be true and Christianity the product of a supernatural revelation of God, so long will we also be bound to accept as final the Word God spoke in Jesus Christ. In Him we have enough. He is adequate to and sufficient for all our needs. He, the Saviour of the world, the perfect revelation of God, sitteth now at the right hand of God whence He will come to judge the quick and the dead. "Neither is there salvation in any other; for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved."

III

UNITY IN THE DIVERSITY OF REVELATION

Judaism being a menace in the early Christian church, the difference between the old and the new covenant, the Old Testament—and the New Testament—revelations had rightly to be stressed. But it became just as necessary in the conflict of the church against Gnosticism, to maintain and stress the unity of the special revelation. Marcion, the heretic, was one of the first to conjure up an unlawful contrast between the "grave and wrathful God" of the Old Testament and the "good God of love" of the New Testament. Such a view and also that of many modern theologians who deny or regard as inferior the value and authority of the Old Testament, is the result, *inter alia*, of lack of insight into the unity of the revelation of God.

There is no fundamental difference between the two covenants. Both are one in origin and contents: God is the author of both, and in both one belief and one way of salvation

is taught. The difference concerns only the form, the physiognomy: the object itself is the same. The Old Testament points forward, the New Testament backward to Christ. The prophets and the apostles stand on the same ground, the first as futuric, the latter as perfect witnesses of the same Christ. The way which the saints of the old and the new covenants trod was the same, but the light in which they walked differed greatly. The Old Testament and the New Testament are different stages of the same covenant of mercy, and stand over against each other as promise and fulfilment, shade and light, slavery and freedom, symbol and truth, fear and love, a coming Messiah and a Redeemer who has come. Law and Gospel can therefore be distinguished but never separated from each other. The New Testament lies hid in the Old, and the Old Testament is explained from the New. It is one revelation, one organic whole, with the Cross of Christ as centre and consummation.

The fact that the revelation came into existence bit by bit and in diverse manners, does not touch our argument in any way. On the contrary, every part is in its place and fulfils a necessary function in the one great drama of salvation, which is unfolded in the course of many ages. The so many separate revelations, organically united in a whole, form the one special revelation of God, which was realized in the course of history and was history itself, a revelation which progressed and developed with the ages, until it received its fulness and perfection in Jesus Christ. It was, however, no revelation which in naturalistic manner progressed in consequence of own immanent power to the following and higher revelations, but every time it was God who rent the heavens and revealed Himself in a fuller and clearer way. It is one revelation, which begins in Paradise and grows under the ever fuller light God sheds on it by patriarchs and prophets, until it attains its culmination in the incarnate Son of God.

There is also unity of contents in all the various revelations. In all its forms the revelation is the Word of God, and all interpret to us the one counsel of God for our salvation. All the revelations, under both covenants, bring us the one unspeakable gift, Christ, the Son of God, the Logos of the Father. And He, as the contents of all, is the One in the diversity. Just as a sentence consists of many words, but has only one meaning, so the revelations of God under both covenants, in law and gospel, have only one meaning: Jesus Christ. That is why the revelations are not

the *words* of God, but the *Word* of God. Christ is that one and only Word. Without Him, the Logos, there would be no Word of God in all the revelations. Of course all these do not stand on the same plane of revelation, and differ in place and importance. But even as in man head and heart are much more important than hair or feet, so the various revelations attain more or less importance according as they lie nearer to or farther from the centre of the revelation. They remain, however, one organism, one revelation, one Word of God.

This unity finally lies in the fact that God is author of all the various revelations. It is the same God who spoke by the prophets and by the Son; it is the same Spirit who inspired the prophets and dwelt in the Son. We often hear as preamble to the prophetic messages: "Thus saith the Lord!" Even sinful and imperfect instruments were used of God to proclaim His Word, and by speaking in and through them He made their word His Word. So that even in artificially constructed genealogies and seemingly uninteresting stipulations of the law, we may expect to hear God, their primary author, speak to us His Word. All is breathed of God and spoken of God. And this is guarantee, not only of its reliability, but also of its unbreakable unity, which combines the great variety and diversity of revelations in one great whole, one Word of God.

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