

Progressive Revelation

The term “progressive revelation” refers to the idea and teaching that God revealed various aspects of His will and overall plan for humanity over different periods of time, which have been referred to as “dispensations” by some theologians. To dispensationalists, a dispensation is a distinguishable economy (i.e., an ordered condition of things) in the outworking of God’s purpose. Whereas dispensationalists debate the number of dispensations that have occurred through history, all believe that God revealed only certain aspects of Himself and His plan of salvation in each dispensation, with each new dispensation building upon the prior one.

Nearly all students of the Bible recognize the fact that certain truths contained in Scripture were not fully revealed by God to prior generations. Anyone today who does not bring an animal sacrifice with him when he wishes to approach God or who worships on the first day of the week rather than the last understands that such distinctions in practice and knowledge have been progressively revealed and applied throughout history.

In addition, there are weightier matters concerning the concept of progressive revelation. One example is the birth and composition of the Church, which Paul speaks of: “I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Eph 3:1-6).

Paul states nearly the same thing in Romans: “Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God” (Rom 16:25-26).

In discussions of progressive revelation, one of the first questions people have is how it applies to salvation. Were those living before the first advent of Christ saved in a different way than people are saved today? In the NT era, people are told to place their faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ and believe that God raised Him from the dead, and they will be saved (Rom 10:9-10; Acts 16:31). Yet OT expert Allen Ross notes, “It is most improbable that everyone who believed unto salvation [in the OT] consciously believed in the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” John Feinberg adds, “The people of

the OT era did not know that Jesus was the Messiah, that Jesus would die, and that His death would be the basis of salvation." If Ross and Feinberg are correct, then what exactly did God reveal to those who lived before Christ, and how were the OT saints saved? What, if anything, changed in the salvation of the OT to the salvation of the NT?

Progressive Revelation - Two Ways or One Way of Salvation?

Some charge that those holding to progressive revelation espouse two different methods of salvation—one that was in place before the first coming of Christ, and another that came after His death and resurrection. Such a claim is refuted by L.S. Chafer who writes, "Are there two ways by which one may be saved? In reply to this question it may be stated that salvation of whatever specific character is always the work of God in behalf of man and never a work of man in behalf of God.... There is, therefore, but one way to be saved and that is by the power of God made possible through the sacrifice of Christ."

If this is true, then how can the revelations in the Old and New Testaments concerning salvation be reconciled? Charles Ryrie sums up the matter succinctly in this way: "The basis of salvation in every age is the death of Christ; the requirement for salvation in every age is faith; the object of faith in every age is God; the content of faith changes in the various ages." In other words, no matter when a person has lived, their salvation is ultimately dependent on the work of Christ and a faith placed in God, but the amount of knowledge a person had concerning the specifics of God's plan has increased through the ages via God's progressive revelation.

Regarding the OT saints, Norman Geisler offers the following: "In short, it appears that at most, the normative OT salvific requirements (in terms of explicit belief) were (1) faith in God's unity, (2) acknowledgment of human sinfulness, (3) acceptance of God's necessary grace, and possibly (4) understanding that there would be a coming Messiah."

Is there evidence in Scripture to support Geisler's claim? Consider this passage, which contains the first three requirements, in Luke's Gospel:

"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 18:10-14).

This event took place before the death and resurrection of Christ, so it clearly involves a person who has no knowledge of the NT gospel message as it is articulated today. In the tax collector's simple statement ("God be merciful to me, the sinner!") we find (1) a faith in

God, (2) an acknowledgement of sin, and (3) an acceptance of mercy. Then Jesus makes a very interesting statement: He says the man went home “justified.” This is the exact term used by Paul to describe the position of a NT saint who has believed the gospel message and put his trust in Christ: “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 5:1).

The fourth on Geisler’s list is missing in Luke’s account—the understanding of a coming Messiah. However, other NT passages indicate that this may have been a common teaching. For example, in John’s account of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, the woman says, “I know that Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ); when that One comes, He will declare all things to us” (John 4:25). However, as Geisler himself acknowledged, faith in Messiah was not a “must have” for Old Testament salvation.

Progressive Revelation - More Evidence from Scripture

A quick search of Scripture reveals the following verses in both the Old and New Testaments that support the fact that faith in God has always been the avenue of salvation:

- “Then [Abraham] believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6)
- “And it will come about that whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be delivered” (Joel 2:32)
- “For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb 10:4)
- “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old gained approval” (Heb 11:1-2)
- And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Heb 11:6)

Scripture plainly states that faith is the key to salvation for all people down through history, but how could God save people without their knowing of Christ’s sacrifice for them? The answer is that God saved them based on their response to the knowledge that they did have. Their faith looked forward to something that they could not see, whereas today, believers look back on events that they can see. The following graphic depicts this understanding:



Scripture teaches that God has always given people enough revelation to exercise faith. Now that Christ's work is accomplished, the requirement has changed; the "times of ignorance" are over:

- "In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; and yet He did not leave Himself without witness" (Acts 14:16)
- "Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent" (Acts 17:30)
- "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over [literally "let go unpunished"] the sins previously committed" (Rom 3:25).

Prior to Christ's coming, God was foreshadowing Jesus' death via the sacrificial system and conditioning His people to understand that sin leads to death. The Law was given to be a tutor to lead people to the understanding that they were sinners in need of God's grace (Gal 3:24). But the Law did not revoke the prior Abrahamic Covenant, which was based on faith; it is Abraham's covenant that is the pattern for salvation today (Rom 4). But as Ryrie stated above, the detailed content of our faith—the amount of revelation given—has increased through the ages so that people today have a more direct understanding of what God requires of them.

Progressive Revelation – Conclusions

Referring to God's progressive revelation, John Calvin writes, "The Lord held to this orderly plan in administering the covenant of his mercy: as the day of full revelation approached with the passing of time, the more he increased each day the brightness of its manifestation. Accordingly, at the beginning when the first promise of salvation was given to Adam (Gen 3:15) it glowed like a feeble spark. Then, as it was added to, the light grew in fullness, breaking forth increasingly and shedding its radiance more widely. At last—when all the clouds were dispersed—Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, fully illumined the whole earth" [Institutes, 2.10.20].

Progressive revelation does not mean that God's people in the OT were without any revelation or understanding. Those living before Christ, says Calvin, were not "without the preaching that contains the hope of salvation and of eternal life, but...they only glimpsed from afar and in shadowy outline what we see today in full daylight" [Institutes, 2.7.16; 2.9.1; commentary on Gal 3:23].

The fact that no one is saved apart from the death and resurrection of Christ is clearly stated in Scripture (John 14:6). The basis of salvation has been, and will always be, the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, and the means of salvation has always been faith in God. However, the content of a person's faith has always depended on the amount of revelation that God was pleased to give at a certain time.