

Dwarves on the Shoulders of Giants: Progressive Illumination in History

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In his Second Annual Address to Congress, Abraham Lincoln said, “Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history.” Certainly Christians cannot escape history as it concerns their faith. The apostle Paul hinged the validity of the whole Christian faith on the historical veracity of the resurrection of Jesus Christ: “For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised: and if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins” (1 Cor 15:16–17). Christianity is not simply an ethical religion like Confucianism, enunciating timeless principles of right and wrong. Instead the Bible insists that God acted in time and history to accomplish the work of redemption and call out a people for Himself. As J. Gresham Machen notes, “It is true that the Christian gospel is an account, not of something that happened yesterday, but of something that happened long ago; but the important thing is that it really happened. If it really happened, then it makes little difference when it happened. No matter when it happened, whether yesterday or in the first century, it remains a real gospel, a real piece of news.”²

At the same time, history poses challenges for the orthodox Protestant. During the heated exchanges of the Reformation, Roman Catholics hurled at the Protestants the taunt, “Where was your church before Luther?” The central doctrines of the Reformation, particularly the teaching of justification by faith alone, appeared to be novelties in the light of Christian history. If Protestant teachings are biblical, the critic challenges, how does one explain their apparent absence for centuries of church history? Even apart from Protestant-Catholic polemics, this discussion raises questions of the role of history in hermeneutics and interpretation. If the orthodox Protestant interpretation is indeed true, then how precisely did it come from the pages of Scripture to be held by the contemporary Christian? Has there been a succession that preserved apostolic truth from NT times to the present? Did the true interpretation of Scripture somehow circumvent the historical process, perhaps through the work of the Holy Spirit? Or is there a historical process of growth or development that has played a role in this question?

The Concept of Progressive Illumination

One way to confront these questions is with the theory of the progressive illumination of the church through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In other words, the centuries have seen a cumulative deepening of human understanding of the teachings of Scripture. Over the centuries, the church has

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² J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 122.

experienced a growth in grace and knowledge much as an individual Christian experiences through a lifetime of progressive sanctification and maturing (2 Pt 3:18). The present generation owes a debt to past generations for their labors in studying and explicating the Scripture. The allusion in the title of this paper illustrates the concept: dwarves on the shoulders of giants. In the twelfth century John of Salisbury wrote, “Bernard of Chartres used to say that we are like dwarves standing on the shoulders of giants, so that we are able to see more and further—certainly not because of our sharp vision or the height of our bodies—but because we are transported and lifted high by their gigantic size.”³ The work of the “giants” of previous centuries has provided the present generation with a vantage point that enables it to comprehend the teachings of Scripture with even greater clarity.

I wish to insert a personal word here. I first heard of the idea of progressive illumination from Dr. Edward M. Panosian, long-time professor of history and church history at Bob Jones University. He enunciated this principle in the classes and seminars I took in graduate school, where I found that the idea satisfied many questions I had concerning thorny questions of doctrinal development, the apparent absence of essential teachings (such as justification by faith alone) from the church’s history during some periods, and the basic role history plays in biblical interpretation. A few years ago I attempted in a much more limited way to set forth this idea in print.⁴ It is important that I credit Dr. Panosian with originating and teaching this concept to me, but I hasten to add that the responsibility is entirely my own for the statement of the concept in this paper.

The phrase “progressive illumination” begs for a definition of terms. The word *progressive* immediately calls to mind the idea of progressive revelation. This term refers to the manner in which God unfolds and develops revelation within the canon of Scripture. As Strong notes, “There is progress in revelation from the earlier to the later books of the Bible, but this is not progress through successive steps of falsehood; it is rather progress from a less to a more clear and full unfolding of the truth.”⁵ One can see examples of this kind of progression in Christ’s words in the Sermon on the Mount⁶ and in the declaration by the author of Hebrews that God had spoken in the past “in divers manners” by the prophets but “in these last days” has spoken by Christ (Heb 1:1–2). Progressive illumination differs from this concept in that it assumes the final and universally authoritative character of God’s revelation in Scripture; it assumes there is no further universal special revelation from God for the church.

More important—and in fact central—to the concept of progressive illumination is the doctrine of illumination. The term *illumination* can have various meanings in theology. It can refer to

³ *Dicebat Bernardus Carnotensis nos esse quasi nanos, gigantium humeris incidentes, ut possimus plura eis et remotiora videre, non utique proprii visus acumine, aut eminentia corporis, sed quia in altum subvehimur ex extollimur magnitudine gigantea.* John of Salisbury, *Metalogicus*, 3.4, in J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus ... Series latina* (Paris, 1857–1904), 199:900.

⁴ Mark Sidwell, “Progressive Illumination in Church History,” in Edward M. Panosian, et al., *The Providence of God in History* (Greenville, S.C.: Bob Jones University Press, 1996), 37–43.

⁵ A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1907), 1:175. An excellent example of tracing such development in the progress of the New Testament canon is Thomas Bernard, *The Progress of Doctrine in the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1864).

⁶ Note especially Christ’s statement that He comes to fulfill the law (Mt 5:17–18) and His use of the construction “Ye have heard ... but I say unto you” (Mt 5:21–22, 27–28, 31–32, 33–34, 38–39, 43–44).

“the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration whereby He enlightens ‘our minds in the knowledge of Christ’”⁷ or in connection with the “illumination theory” of inspiration.⁸ In the context of progressive illumination, the term *illumination* refers to the understanding of revelation given by the Holy Spirit to the believer.⁹ Perhaps the key passage relating to this teaching is 1 Corinthians 2, which speaks of the inability of the natural man to understand the wisdom of God, for this wisdom can be known only through the illumining work of the Holy Spirit. One should also consider Christ’s promise that the Spirit will “guide . . . into all truth” (Jn 16:13). At first, this promise would appear to apply only to the apostles whom He is addressing, and certainly there seems to be a reference to the guiding work of the Holy Spirit among the apostles to produce the inspired books of the New Testament (2 Pt 1:20–21). As Torrey notes, though, the apostle John later applies the promise to all believers (1 Jn 2:20, 27).¹⁰ This illumination of believers is progressive as well, not limited to the initial illumining provided at regeneration. Palmer argues, for instance, that Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians (Eph 1:18) is a plea for the Spirit to grant deeper understanding to those who are already believers.¹¹ What is true for individuals and local churches is true in the breadth of the church as well.

In short, the result of progressive illumination is a cumulative growth in the subjective understanding of God’s objective revelation throughout history. The Westminster Confession hints at some of the central concepts of the idea of progressive illumination, particularly the objective truth of Scripture but also the need for understanding and applying that word and the importance of divine illumination: “The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the word.”¹²

⁷ Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Belfast: Ambassador-Emerald International, 1998), 184. The quotation within the quotation is from the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

⁸ For a description and refutation of this view, see Strong, 1:204–08.

⁹ For discussions of this use of illumination, see Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 247–56; Edwin H. Palmer, *The Person and Ministry of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958, 1974), 53–61. Erickson traces the modern orthodox Protestant understanding of illumination to the influence of John Calvin; see *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), Book 1, Chapters 7 and 9. Ted Dorman has outlined a view of the Spirit’s work of illumination through history, which he finds expressed in the writings of New Testament scholar Oscar Cullman. See Ted Dorman, “Holy Spirit, History, Hermeneutics and Theology: Toward an Evangelical/Catholic Consensus,” *JETS* 41 (1998): 427–38. Much of Dorman’s discussion is helpful on this topic, but as I will show in my comments and notes, I must take exception to some of his conclusions, notably his ecumenical emphasis.

¹⁰ R. A. Torrey, *What the Bible Teaches* (New York: Revell, 1898), 255.

¹¹ Palmer, 61.

¹² Westminster Confession, 1.6.

Other Historical Strategies

One may better understand the nature of progressive illumination if one compares it to other strategies for explaining how, historically, the teaching of Scripture crosses the centuries to reach the modern believer. Two popular approaches among orthodox Protestants have been successionism and primitivism.

Successionism

Successionism is the idea that throughout history there has been a continuous series of groups that held to and thereby preserved true doctrine. In one sense, this is the claim of the Catholic Church, Orthodoxy, and the other ancient Eastern churches. One should properly limit the term *successionism*, however, to Protestant attempts to trace the true church through the Middle Ages back to the New Testament. Such Protestant successionism often gives a prominent place—at times an exclusive place—to the role of the Donatists, Paulicians, Waldensians, Albigensians, and other schismatic groups of church history in tracing the trail of the true faith. The pioneering work in successionist history emerged from the Lutheran Reformation in *Ecclesiastica Historia Novi Testamenti*, commonly called *Centuriae Magdeburgenses*, or “Magdeburg Centuries” (1559–74), compiled by scholars led by Matthias Flacius Illyricus. Named for its century-by-century scheme of organization, this work defended Luther and his followers from the charge of novelty by arguing for a succession of believers who preserved apostolic teaching through the period between the New Testament and the sixteenth century.¹³

Other Protestant writers picked up and adapted this idea. John Foxe probably did more to popularize this concept in the English-speaking world than any other person. His *Acts and Monuments* (first English edition 1563), best known in abridgments as *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*, profoundly shaped English and later American views of church history.¹⁴ A Baptist version of successionism arose in America. Known as Landmarkism, it traced a succession of “New Testament Baptist churches” back to John the Baptist.¹⁵ Because Landmarkists deny the existence of the universal church, asserting that

¹³ For a discussion of Protestant successionist views, see S. J. Barnett, “Where Was Your Church Before Luther? Claims for the Antiquity of Protestantism Examined,” *Church History* 68 (1999): 14–41. For a brief but perceptive overview of Protestant historiography during the Reformation and shortly thereafter, see Philip Schaff, *History of the Apostolic Church* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1864), 63–69. On the *Magdeburg Centuries* in particular, see Cyriac K. Pullapilly, *Caesar Baronius: Counter-Reformation Historian* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 49–53. John Headley contends that Luther himself, in contrast to the Centuriators, did not hold to a succession of witnesses; see Headley’s *Luther’s View of Church History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 101–05.

¹⁴ John Foxe, *The Acts and Monuments* (reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1965), 8 vols. The stress on martyrology in Foxe’s work results from his belief that persecution by the Antichrist is one of the marks of the true church; see *Acts and Monuments*, 1:88. On Foxe’s work, see J. F. Mozley, *John Foxe and His Book* (1940; reprint, New York: Octagon Books, 1970).

¹⁵ The work that has been most influential in popularizing the Landmarkist view of church history is probably J. M. Carroll, *The Trail of Blood* (Lexington, KY: Ashland Avenue Baptist Church, 1931), a widely distributed pamphlet. For a critical evaluation of Baptist successionism, see James McGoldrick, *Baptist Successionism: A Crucial Question in Baptist History* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1994).

only local congregations are true churches, they find the witnesses to their succession almost entirely outside the institutional church among the heretical and schismatic groups.

Historians and theologians have dealt many blows to successionism. Catholic writers, starting with Caesar Baronius, gladly highlighted the genuine shortcomings of the Magdeburg Centuriators, and critics attacked John Foxe almost from his first publication. The rise of “scientific history” with professional historians in the nineteenth century has left successionism with almost no historical standing. At least one writer, however, attempted to defend successionism in the light of modern scholarly research, E. H. Broadbent in *The Pilgrim Church* (1931).¹⁶ Broadbent, of the Plymouth Brethren, was careful in his research and moderate in his tone. Unlike most of the successionist historians, he had no denominational axe to grind, save a commitment to orthodox Protestantism, and treated his subject more evenhandedly. One may say that Broadbent states the successionist position as well as it can be stated and provides a counterbalance to modern historical approaches to the topic, but even he is not wholly convincing.

Primitivism

Primitivism, often called restorationism, is another strategy for explaining the connection between biblical teaching and the modern believer.¹⁷ Where successionism traces truth through the centuries, primitivists jump the centuries back to the truth, sometimes even ignoring history or dismissing it nearly altogether. In essence, primitivists wish to restore the true and biblical faith, as they see it, by a direct appeal to the Bible, most often the New Testament alone. Groups such as the Primitive Methodists and the Primitive Baptists by their very names testify to their claim to reach back to the days of the apostles to re-create the NT church. The restorationists claim to clear away the accretions of centuries to let God’s truth shine forth in purity, much as a restorer of paintings might clear away layers of dirt and varnish so that the colors of Leonardo da Vinci might blaze forth again in their original brilliance.

Many groups are associated with primitivism. As demonstrated by the references above, some segments of most Protestant denominations uphold the primitivist ideal.¹⁸ In addition, the Plymouth Brethren, Pentecostalism, Mormonism, and the various “Restoration churches” (Disciples of Christ, Churches of Christ, and Independent Christian Churches) all adhere to a form of primitivism and restoration. As the diversity of these groups indicate, primitivists are not agreed on an agenda of what the primitive faith entails and what precisely the restored church should look like.

¹⁶ E. H. Broadbent, *The Pilgrim Church* (1931; reprint, Basingstoke, England: Pickering and Inglis, 1985). This edition contains a foreword by F. F. Bruce on the value of the work.

¹⁷ A scholarly discussion of primitivism is Richard T. Hughes, ed., *The American Quest for the Primitive Church* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988). Among the essays are Hughes’s introduction (1–15) and Joel Carpenter’s on primitivist impulses in American Fundamentalism (99–119). An interesting study of primitivism in one denominational tradition is James Patrick Callahan, *Primitivist Piety: The Ecclesiology of the Early Plymouth Brethren* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1996).

¹⁸ Hughes, *The American Quest for the Primitive Church*, includes essays on primitivism among American Baptists, Methodists, and Episcopals (131–78).

Between the two approaches, primitivism seems to possess an advantage over successionism. The latter is essentially an unprovable theory of history. Lacking convincing historical evidence, successionism must hold that the Bible clearly teaches those doctrines asserted by the successionist and that the Bible teaches that an unbroken line of Christians will hold all those doctrines throughout history. Successionism is then, ultimately, a matter of faith, not historical proof, and it is suspect both historically and theologically. Primitivism, however, rests more firmly on the truths of illumination and the perspicuity of Scripture. In the primitivist scheme, regardless of whether there is any “trail of true churches” throughout church history, a Christian may still directly apprehend the teaching of Scripture through the Holy Spirit’s leading apart from any process of history. Such a view is radical in its implications but undeniably rests on biblical teachings.

The Fall of the Church

But even primitivism is not ahistorical; it cannot escape history any more than successionism. Bound up tightly with primitivism (and, to a lesser extent, successionism) is a belief in what has been called “the fall of the church.” Restorationists hold that there was a more or less pristine period in the past in which the faith was practiced in a purer form. Along the way, however, corruption entered, and the church “fell,” even apostatized completely in some schemes. The goal of the restorationist is to restore the primitive faith, now lost.

The concept of the fall of the church is widespread and not limited to restorationists. The Protestant Reformers, for example, saw the rise of the papacy as the fall of the church. Luther marked the fall when the Byzantine Emperor Phocas (602–10) granted a primacy of honor to Pope Boniface III (606–7). Calvin, although not as explicit, likewise noted this event as a prime example of the debilitating effects of the papacy.¹⁹ For Anabaptists and many modern Protestant groups, Constantine’s recognition of Christianity and the church-state alliance that resulted was the point of the fall.²⁰ Mormons represent the extreme, believing “that the Church of Jesus Christ was removed from the earth when direct communication between divinity and humanity ceased at the end of the apostolic age” and that this communication did not resume until God raised up Joseph Smith as a prophet in the 1820s.²¹

This diversity of dates for the fall of the church highlights two historical problems of primitivism. First, it must still resort to history in order to prove that the fall of the church occurred at some point in the past. Such a fall is the justification of the restoration agenda. But second, and more basic to its claims, is that primitivism tends to contend that a historical period provides the norm for faith and practice. Such a contention gives rise to a foundational question. Is the church of the New Testament era or the teaching of the Bible to be the norm? James Callahan has noted how the

¹⁹ On Luther’s view, see Headley, 156–61, 192–94. On Calvin, see *Institutes*, 4.7.17–18.

²⁰ See Franklin Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Starr King Press, 1958), 46–78, for a discussion of not only of the Anabaptist view but also of the origin and development of the concept of the fall of the church.

²¹ Jan Shipps, “The Reality of the Restoration and the Restoration Ideal in the Mormon Tradition,” in *The American Quest for the Primitive Church*, 182–83.

early Plymouth Brethren wrestled with this problem. Their solution, he says, was to divorce primitivism from restorationism. The church was to adhere to the standard of uncorrupted apostolic, or scriptural, teaching but was not to seek the restoration of the historical NT order. The Brethren rationale for this position was bound up in their strongly dispensationalist theology. The church had fallen completely into apostasy shortly after the close of the New Testament, they said, and the apostolic model will never be restored, because God never restores apostasy.²²

Yet one may argue that even this modification by early Brethren writers still misses one of the key objections to primitivism. The question is whether a “pristine period” ever existed in the church’s history or whether the church instead strives toward an ideal not realized in history. Consider again the parallel to personal sanctification. Is some form of Christian perfection to be achieved in this life or is sanctification a progressive process completed after death in final glorification? Nearly all orthodox Protestants regard the NT era as a time of great spiritual strength, fervor, and knowledge—an age probably unmatched by any other in church history. But even in the NT one reads of Paul confronting excess and disorder in Corinth and rebuking serious doctrinal aberration among the Galatians. Christ’s letters to the seven churches in Asia (Rv 2–3) detail errors and abuses that surprise even jaded modern Christians. In Acts, Luke records conflicts over the distribution to widows and over the relationship of Gentiles to the Mosaic law and even a sharp dispute between Paul and Barnabas. The NT era may indeed be superior to other ages in Christian history, but it is not transcendently different from those other ages. A historical period cannot be the Christian norm; Scripture must be the norm. To seek a pristine historical model is to seek a chimera.

The Idea of Doctrinal Development

One should view progressive illumination as an attempt to deal in an orthodox manner with the challenge of “the development of doctrine” (sometimes called “development of dogma”). The very concept of “doctrinal development” is understandably uncomfortable for orthodox Christians. They normally see *doctrine* as meaning what the Bible teaches on some point. The doctrine of the deity of Jesus Christ refers to the idea that Scripture teaches that He is fully God. In other words, *doctrine* equates with *truth*. Furthermore, the Bible is God’s revealed Word and therefore cannot be said to develop or change. As the source of all saving truth and all things necessary for the Christian life (2 Tm 3:14–17), Scripture is the only universally binding authority on the Christian’s life so that no one can devise “new truth” obligatory to believers. As a confessional Lutheran theologian comments, “There can be no development of the Christian doctrine, because the Christian doctrine given to the Church by the Apostles is a finished product, complete and perfect for all times.”²³

Admittedly, some theologians or historians of a liberal bent may view doctrine simply as the creation of the church, not an expression of God’s truth. They have little problem therefore with

²² Callahan, 90–95, 183–208. Callahan argues that this position was actually the dominant one among the earlier Brethren, as represented by John Nelson Darby. Later Brethren teachers modified this position to one more nearly approximating the standard primitivist/restorationist model, although the Darby view did not vanish.

²³ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1950), 1:129.

discussing the development of doctrine. A classic example is Adolf Harnack, whose *History of Dogma* was the culmination of nineteenth-century liberal approaches to doctrinal development. Harnack was willing to admit some original truth in the Christian message but argued that the development of dogma overlaid that truth with alien accretions rather than expressing that truth: “The claim of the Church that the dogmas are simply the exposition of the Christian revelation, because deduced from the Holy Scriptures, is not confirmed by historical investigation. On the contrary, it becomes clear that dogmatic Christianity (the dogmas) in its conception and in its construction was *the work of the Hellenic spirit upon the Gospel soil*. The intellectual medium by which in early times men sought to make the Gospel comprehensible and to establish it securely, became inseparably blended with the content of the same.” He calls it “an illusion” to think that the formulation of doctrine was “the *pure* exposition of the Gospel.”²⁴

In progressive illumination, however, one speaks of development in *understanding* doctrine or the development of how Christians express God’s truth. There have been many attempts to describe and reckon with this question of the development of doctrine. Three examples—one contemporary, one classic, and one conservative—will illustrate the range of approaches to doctrinal development.

Jaroslav Pelikan

Jaroslav Pelikan, long-time professor of history at Yale University, undoubtedly represents the outstanding contemporary attempt to delineate the development of doctrine. He laid out his vision for this theme in his lectures on the topic at Yale in 1965 and in his presidential address to the American Society of Church History given that same year.²⁵ These lectures and this address eventually evolved into *Development of Christian Doctrine: Some Historical Prolegomena* (1969). It was indeed “prolegomena,” for over the next twenty years Pelikan wrote and published his massive and authoritative five-volume *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (1971–89). He sums up his approach succinctly in his first sentence: “What the church of Jesus Christ believes, teaches, and confesses on the basis of the word of God: this is Christian doctrine.”²⁶ His definition of doctrine lays out at least the outlines of his theory of development. What is believed leads to what is taught. What is taught leads to what is confessed, that is, what is set forth as authoritative teaching through creeds, polemics and apologetics, and decrees.²⁷

²⁴ Adolf Harnack, *Outlines of the History of Dogma*, trans. Edwin Knox Mitchell (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1893), 5, original emphasis.

²⁵ Jaroslav Pelikan, “An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine,” *Church History* 35 (1966): 3–12.

²⁶ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*, vol. 1 of *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 4. For discussion of Pelikan’s historiography and view of development, see W. David Buschart, “Jaroslav Pelikan,” in *Historians of the Christian Tradition* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1995), 551–77; David W. Lotz, “The Achievement of Jaroslav Pelikan,” *First Things*, May 1992, 55–65. Buschart relates that Pelikan actually began the first sketches of his proposed study of doctrinal development while a graduate student at the University of Chicago in the 1940s (552).

Throughout his work Pelikan attempts to balance the crosscurrents of tradition and the historical process. These represent a tension between the static and dynamic. “Tradition without history has homogenized all the stages of development into statically defined truth; history without tradition has produced a historicism that relativized the development of Christian doctrine in such a way as to make the distinction between authentic growth and cancerous aberration seem completely arbitrary.”²⁸ He sought an approach that did justice to both the historical process and the Christian tradition. After completing the work, Pelikan told Mark Noll,

For those who believe that you don’t need tradition because you have the Bible, . . . *The Christian Tradition* has sought to say, “You are not entitled to the beliefs you cherish about such things as the Holy Trinity without a sense of what you owe to those who worked this out for you.” To circumvent Saint Athanasius on the assumption that if you put me alone in a room with the New Testament, I will come up with the doctrine of the Trinity, is naïve. So for these readers I have tried to provide a degree of historical sophistication, which is, I believe, compatible with an affirmation of the central doctrines of the Christian faith.²⁹

Considering his stress on tradition, it is not surprising, perhaps, that in 1998 Pelikan converted from Lutheranism to Orthodoxy.

What is lacking in Pelikan, for the conservative Christian, is a link of Scripture to doctrine. He says, “Viewing Christian doctrine as what the church believes, teaches, and confesses on the basis of the word of God, this history will not deal with the doctrinal content of the Old Testament and the New Testament in their own terms. . . . for our purposes the theology of the New Testament is not what Jesus and the apostles may have taught but what the church has understood them to have taught. This is an ongoing process rather than a given product.”³⁰ Without impugning Pelikan’s views as to the relationship between what Scripture teaches and what the church holds,³¹ he does not explicitly make a connection. Thus he does not attempt to settle the question of the relationship of the historical process to doctrinal truth.

John Henry Cardinal Newman

If Pelikan’s is the leading contemporary treatment on the development of doctrine, then the classic one is undoubtedly John Henry Newman’s *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. Pelikan calls this work “the almost inevitable starting point for an investigation of development of doctrine.”³² Newman wrote this work just before his conversion from Anglicanism to Catholicism and

²⁸ Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, 9.

²⁹ Mark Noll, “The Doctrine Doctor,” *Christianity Today*, September 10, 1990, 25.

³⁰ Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, 6.

³¹ Pelikan does not come across as clearly “liberal” or “conservative” in his five-volume opus. Buschart notes, “A reader who knows little if anything of Pelikan’s background will not readily identify his personal theological commitments” (565).

³² Jaroslav Pelikan, *Development of Christian Doctrine: Some Historical Prolegomena* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 3.

published it shortly thereafter in 1845. In 1878 he issued a revised version of the work that is considered the standard edition.³³

What led Newman into this subject, he said, was the Anglo-Catholic view of history. High church Anglicans, such as adherents of the Oxford movement to which Newman belonged, argued that they represented true, uncorrupted Christianity. If one returned to the early church, one would get beyond the corruptions introduced by Rome and find Anglo-Catholicism. They maintained that historical study would vindicate their position. But Newman was a historian, and his research did not validate this view. It seemed to him, in fact, that all historical roads led to Rome. When Newman's view of doctrinal development emerged, it favored Rome's Catholicism.

Newman could not, however, honestly argue that the contemporary Catholic Church was the preserved church of the early centuries, as traditional Catholic apologists had maintained. He therefore saw Catholicism as the legitimate development of apostolic Christianity, the making explicit what was implicit in the early church. Ian Ker quotes a private letter in which Newman says that "the Church does not know more than the Apostles knew."³⁴ The outward forms, though, could and did change. Regulating this development was "an infallible developing authority," which Newman considered a necessary corollary of the idea of development. This authority he found in "the doctrine of the infallibility of the Church."³⁵ In an unpublished paper on doctrinal development written in 1868 (between the first and second editions of his *Essay*) Newman said, "I wish to hold that there is nothing which the Church has defined or shall define but what an Apostle, if asked, would have been fully able to answer and would have answered, as the Church has answered, the one answering by inspiration, the other from the gift of infallibility."³⁶ Newman admits that his view is "at once shattered" if it can be shown that "the recognized organ of teaching, the Church herself, acting through Pope or Council as the oracle of heaven, has ever contradicted her own enunciations," but he contends that the evidence is against such a claim.³⁷

A key question for Newman was how to distinguish a valid development from a corruption. To answer this, he devised seven guidelines (called "tests" in the first edition and "notes" in the second) differentiating a development from a corruption. Characterizing a true development were preservation of type, continuity of principles, the power to assimilate other ideas, logical sequence, anticipation of its future (i.e., that signs of anticipation of the development are evident in earlier history), conservative

³³ John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay of the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1878; reprint, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989). One of the best discussions of Newman's theory is Owen Chadwick, *From Bossuet to Newman*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Chadwick discusses not only Newman's views but also the history of tension in Catholic thought between tradition and historical development. See also Ian Ker's foreword to the 1989 printing of the *Essay* for an overview of Newman's ideas. Peter Toon, *The Development of Doctrine in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 1–53, presents the views of Newman and Protestant responses to his work. See also Pelikan, *Christian Doctrine and Modern Culture (Since 1700)*, vol. 5 of *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 265–81.

³⁴ Ian Ker, "Foreword," *An Essay of the Development of Christian Doctrine*, xxiii.

³⁵ Newman, 78.

³⁶ Quoted by Ker, "Foreword," xxiv.

³⁷ Newman, 121.

action upon the past (i.e., that it does not overturn the past), and chronic vigor. Continuity within these guidelines marked a true development from a corruption.³⁸

Orthodox Protestants obviously see several problems with Newman's approach. Essentially, it is a vindication of Catholic development, not the whole question of doctrinal development. He also places great reliance on the role of reason. Regardless of whether he calls his guidelines "tests" or merely "notes," Newman appeals to reason to judge whether sufficient continuity exists to judge something a development or a corruption. Peter Toon cites the criticism of J. B. Mozley that Newman allowed no place for corruption by "excess and exaggeration," which would weaken Newman's appeal to continuity as a mark of truth.³⁹ Most disputed is his claim of the church instead of Scripture as the infallible interpreter. Ted Dorman notes that for Oscar Cullman "the results of grammatical-historical exegesis, as opposed to the teaching office of the Church, constitute the check that controls our interpretation of Scripture."⁴⁰ For the conservative Protestant, it is Scripture interpreted in this manner that controls the interpretation of history.

William Cunningham

Newman was not the only nineteenth-century writer to grapple with the question of historical development. Conservative Scottish theologian James Orr attempted to outline a philosophy for the development of dogma, partly in response to Newman, in a series of 1897 lectures at Western Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania.⁴¹ Independently of Newman, Philip Schaff, dean of American church historians, translated the ideas of contemporary German scholarship into his own view of development. Schaff outlined his ideas in *The Principle of Protestantism* (1845) and *What Is Church History?* (1846), where he tried to wed Hegelian concepts of progress and development with both evangelical Protestantism and Romantic concepts of organic growth.⁴² Even the Princeton theologians

³⁸ Newman lists and describes these guidelines on 169–206 and spends the bulk of the remainder of his book proving them.

³⁹ Toon, 20.

⁴⁰ Dorman, 430.

⁴¹ James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952). For a discussion of Orr's views, see Toon, 55–75.

⁴² Philip Schaff, *The Principle of Protestantism*, trans. John W. Nevin (1845; reprint, Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1964); *What Is Church History?* is anthologized in *Reformed and Catholic: Selected Historical and Theological Writings of Philip Schaff*, ed. Charles Yrigoyen and George M. Bricker (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press), 17–144. For discussion of Schaff's views, see the Editor's Preface to *The Principle of Protestantism*; James Hastings Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology: Nevin and Schaff at Mercersburg* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 107–39; George H. Shriver, *Philip Schaff: Christian Scholar and Ecumenical Prophet* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 21–25; *Philip Schaff: Historian and Ambassador of the Universal Church, Selected Writings*, ed. Klaus Penzel (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1991), 75–80, 123–50.

appreciated the importance of doctrinal development and touched on the question in their writings, but not systematically or thoroughly.⁴³

One approach to the question, however, stands out in demanding not only the immutability of truth, but specifically the immutability of scriptural revelation. This approach is found in the writings of William Cunningham, one of the leading theologians and church historians of the Free Church of Scotland in the nineteenth century.⁴⁴ Cunningham expresses his view of development most clearly in his review of Newman's *Essay*, but even there his focus is more on answering Catholicism than in outlining a contrary view of development.⁴⁵ He says in that review, however,

There is a subjective development of Christian doctrine both in individuals and in churches, whereby men grow in the knowledge of God's revealed will, and whereby theological science is extended and improved. But the result of this development is merely to enable individuals and churches to understand more fully and accurately, and to realize more thoroughly, *what is actually contained in, or deducible from, the statements of the written word, and can be shown to be so*. This, however, is essentially different from, nay, it is in a certain sense the reverse of, an objective development, which changes and enlarges or diminishes the external revelation, the standard or system of faith.⁴⁶

Cunningham demonstrates his determination to stay within the bounds of Calvinistic orthodoxy as he discusses development, as shown by his allusion to the Westminster Confession (the italicized portion of the quotation). The important contrast here for the present discussion is the distinction between subjective and objective development.

Another central element of Cunningham's view is his insistence on the normative and final nature of Scripture. Noting that Newman claims only to be offering an attempt to explain the facts of history, Cunningham allows this claim (in theory, not in Newman's actual execution) as long as it does not impugn "the doctrine of the sufficiency and perfection of the written word."⁴⁷ He remains unmoved with arguments that rely on history. Cunningham says that a Protestant could take Newman's seven tests or notes, turn the tables, and argue that Catholic teachings were not developments but corruptions. "But Protestants would reckon this little better than a waste of time," he writes, "as they believe the written word to be the only legitimate and really valid test,—as they will not be satisfied with mere presumptions and probabilities,—and think they can demonstrate, by a

⁴³ See Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (1871; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 1:116–20; and Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Idea of Systematic Theology," in *Studies in Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1932), especially 74–79.

⁴⁴ The best introduction to Cunningham's historiography is Joel Beeke, "William Cunningham," in *Historians of the Christian Tradition*, 209–26. For a more critical summary and appraisal of Cunningham's view of development, see Toon, 25–33; Toon calls Cunningham's view "static" (31) and "unsatisfactory" (33).

⁴⁵ William Cunningham, *Discussions of Church Principles: Popish, Erastian, and Presbyterian* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1863), 35–77.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 56. Italics in original.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

direct comparison of the two, that the Christianity of the Church of Rome is a corruption of the Christianity of the Bible.”⁴⁸

It is not always clear how Cunningham’s view of development works out in practice. Toon cites Cunningham’s view of the development of Reformed doctrine from Calvin to Beza, where the Scottish writer argues that far from distorting Calvin, Beza is legitimately developing and extending Calvin’s ideas.⁴⁹ Joel Beeke describes Cunningham’s view of Calvinistic development more fully: “first, the development of Calvin’s theology as an outgrowth of the theology of Augustine in general and Luther in particular; second, the development of Bezan theology as an outgrowth of Calvin’s exegetical and systematic theology; third, the development of the theology of the Westminster Assembly as an outgrowth of Reformation orthodoxy; and finally, the development of Francis Turretin’s theology as an outgrowth of Calvinism in its most soundly developed form.”⁵⁰

Cunningham is not a perfect model of progressive illumination. Toon and Beeke both maintain that he holds a more restorationist than developmental view of the Reformation,⁵¹ as Cunningham himself says, “Protestantism . . . was, to a large extent at least, a restoration of Christianity to its original purity.”⁵² Also he is sympathetic to traditional Protestant successionist views of a constant line, within and without the institutional church, that preserved the main tenets of Protestant orthodoxy, although he remains unconvinced of a constant line of visible witnesses outside the Roman or Orthodox Churches.⁵³ Where he does reflect the concept of progressive illumination as set forth in this paper is his stress on the objective/subjective dichotomy and his stress on the sufficiency of Scripture. Cunningham says “that it is by the Bible alone that we can certainly determine what is true and what is false in religion; and that there is not, and cannot be, any obligation to receive anything as apostolic, unless it be either contained in, or deducible from, the apostolic writings.”⁵⁴

Considerations and Qualifications

This paper proposes the concept of progressive illumination as an explanation of historical evidence. It is by no means the dogmatic assertion of a philosophy of history. Certainly, progressive illumination is not a law of inexorable progress. There is always the danger with any progressive scheme of history that it will take on a life of its own. Philip Schaff’s views, for instance, appear to set history on a course of deterministic progress. One can see hints of this danger even in the following quotation from a proponent of progressive illumination:

⁴⁸ Cunningham, 57–58.

⁴⁹ Toon, 32–33; see William Cunningham, “Calvin and Beza,” in *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1866), 345–412.

⁵⁰ Beeke, 216.

⁵¹ Toon, 32, 49; Beeke, 215.

⁵² Cunningham, *Discussions of Church Principles*, 47.

⁵³ William Cunningham, *Historical Theology* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1863), 1:439–58; note especially 442–43 and 451–53.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:440.

The Early Church settled on the canon, defined the Trinity, distinguished between the two natures and the one Person of the God-Man, and defended original sin and man's desperate need of divine grace. In the Middle Ages Anselm approached the true view of the Atonement by relating propitiation to the very nature of God. The Reformers emphasized justification by faith alone, the sole authority of the Scriptures, the universal invisible Body of Christ, the priesthood of believers, and laid the foundation for religious liberty. The Baptists gave the true position on the local church and the two ordinances and also convinced the world that religious liberty must be practiced. The Methodists, following the lead of John Wesley, stressed personal assurance and holiness. The Puritans brought out concept [*sic*] of progressive sanctification closer to perfection. And now, within the last hundred years, the Plymouth Brethren have given great stimulus to the 20th century's dispensational and premillennial approach to revealed truth.⁵⁵

Progressive illumination also should not become merely a justification or apologetic for one's own views. Both the quotation above and Cunningham's explanation of the development of Calvinism could degenerate into what Herbert Butterfield calls the "Whig view of history." He describes this approach to history as an attempt "to produce a story which is the ratification if not the glorification of the present."⁵⁶ He says, "The total result of this method is to impose a certain form upon the whole historical story, and to produce a scheme of general history which is bound to converge beautifully upon the present—all demonstrating throughout the ages the workings of an obvious principle of progress."⁵⁷ Rather than serving as an apologetical tool for the superiority of one's own position, progressive illumination merely deflects historical charges of novelty by arguing that the late appearance of a teaching in the history of the church does not immediately invalidate that teaching. It withdraws the discussion from a question of historical pedigree and throws it back into the court of scriptural debate, where all doctrinal questions ultimately belong.

Another warning to consider regards the very name "progressive illumination." Responding to an earlier version of this paper, Gerald Priest, then at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, raised the question of whether one may associate the doctrine of illumination—the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit—with teachers and theologians throughout history who themselves may have been unregenerate. Does not "illumination" require regeneration, the initial work of the Spirit in the Christian's life?⁵⁸ The point is well taken. Perhaps we might consider a name such as "progressive insight" that would describe the evident development of doctrine, as tested by Scripture, without delving into an inscrutable mystery concerning the spiritual status of those whose works reveal this progress. With "insight" one could still recognize providential guidance in history without having to grapple with the precise application of the term "illumination." The value of the word "illumination" lies in its focus on God's role when weighing the idea of development in history.

⁵⁵ Walter Allan Yoho, *The Only Book God Ever Wrote* (Hollidaysburg, PA: Manahath Press, 1983), 71. The author immediately follows this statement, however, with an appeal for charity in nonessentials, and it is worth noting the wide credit he gives to various groups.

⁵⁶ Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig View of History* (1931; reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1978), v.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁸ Gerald Priest, Response to "Dwarves on the Shoulders of Giants: Progressive Illumination in History," Bible Faculty Leadership Summit, Central Baptist Seminary, Plymouth, MN, August 5–7, 1999.

As one may conclude from these warnings, progressive illumination is not a call to change. John T. Noonan, defending Cardinal Newman on this point, says that one response to the idea of development “is to exclaim, ‘All this has changed; therefore any change is possible.’ Once stated, this position is pushed further. The existence of past change is said to prove the desirability of future change.” He replies that this is “a gross misperception of an organic enterprise. The argument that because certain changes have occurred other changes should take place is [a] . . . gross fallacy.”⁵⁹ One must emphasize that progressive illumination is the Holy Spirit’s work, not the work of the Christian or even (*contra* Newman) of the church. The Christian recognizes the work of the Spirit in history; he does not try to do the Spirit’s work for Him. One understands progressive illumination best as one looks back, not as one forecasts the future. To put it another way, progressive illumination is a tool for historical study, not a rationale for prophecy.⁶⁰

Progressive illumination clearly differs from the idea of inevitable progress in recognizing the need to reckon with the reality of corruption in the history of doctrine. The presence of progress does not negate the presence of corruption, nor does it guarantee the dominance of progress over corruption. Regardless of whether one sees a fall of the church in history, virtually no one will deny that corrupting influences have touched the visible church. This fact is one of the problems with relying on Vincent of Lérins’ famous canon of Christian truth being “what is believed everywhere, always, and by everyone” (*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*). Dorman suggests that, subordinate to grammatical-historical exegesis, one can use the Vincentian canon in a “tradition-friendly approach” to biblical interpretation.⁶¹ Such a position does not consider how corruption may invalidate the testimony of some segments of the church. The call for universality gives a corrupted church a “veto power” over the acceptance of sound doctrine. One must hasten to add that interpreters such as Dorman are most interested in finding a basis for agreement, not in excluding distinctive doctrines.⁶² But when one realizes that some of the ancient eastern churches do not accept even the formula of the Council of Chalcedon, it becomes evident that an enumeration of teachings accepted “everywhere, always, and by everyone” would be a remarkably short list.

Progressive illumination does not have the ecumenical flavor that characterizes most views of development, as in the case of Pelikan or Schaff. It may create some understanding of the nature of other positions and perhaps foster genuine Christian unity; one certainly hopes that it can create a

⁵⁹ John T. Noonan Jr., “On the Development of Doctrine,” *America*, April 3, 1999, 8.

⁶⁰ This question of whether the fact of change justifies further change has been raised in the debates over progressive dispensationalism. Note Craig A. Blaising, “Doctrinal Development in Orthodoxy,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (1988): 133–40, and “Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalists,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (1988): 254–80. On the one hand Blaising appears to argue only that past developments in dispensationalist teaching mean that one cannot dismiss out of hand modifications by progressive dispensationalists. Nonetheless, there is a sense in the argument here that the past refinement of the dispensationalist system naturally leads to further development.

⁶¹ Dorman, 431.

⁶² He does say, however, that “where consensus does not exist in the Church universal, the Spirit almost certainly has more light to be revealed from God’s Word” (436). The problem is not with the principle here but with the exact limits of “the Church universal.” For some segments of the visible church, the Spirit’s ministry is not so much to provide more light as to issue a call to repentance.

sense of perspective. But an advocate of progressive illumination argues that one cannot ignore the progress in Christian understanding in order to build ecumenical ties. One may not sacrifice the progress reflected in Reformation teachings, to cite a current example, in order to accommodate reunion efforts with Roman Catholicism. It is here that the difference becomes evident between progressive illumination and ideas of organic growth toward reconciliation, as with Schaff. What the Bible teaches, not how history is allegedly moving, is the basis of unity.

As to the process, the idea of “challenge and response” can characterize the progress in such illumination, but only in part. Such a model works well in the history of ecumenical creeds, as such confessions refuted Trinitarian and Christological errors. Even Cardinal Newman, from his particular viewpoint, says, “Few but will grant that Luther’s view of justification had never been stated in words before his time: that his phraseology and his positions were novel, whether called for by circumstances or not. It is equally certain that the doctrine of justification defined at Trent was, in some sense, also new. The refutation and remedy of errors cannot precede their rise; and thus the fact of false developments or corruptions involves the correspondent manifestation of true ones.”⁶³ In fact, the history of theological controversy indicates how such debates even fuel progressive illumination as they motivate the church to examine the Scripture to see what has been there all along. But a scheme of challenge and response does not work universally. “Some doctrines do originate in controversy and some grow through speculation, but others certainly originate and grow within the Church in other ways.”⁶⁴

Ultimately, the Christian must go always back to the Bible. History is a reconstruction in which the believer has no promise of illumination in interpretation. If something is to be binding, it must be biblical, for history can lead the Christian astray. Cardinal Newman said, “To be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant.”⁶⁵ The Bible-believer replies, “To be deep in Scripture is to cease to be a Roman Catholic.” The Protestant has the surer base. A priest in Rome once asked English diplomat Sir Henry Wotton (1568–1639), “Where was your religion to be found before Luther?” Wotton replied, “My religion was to be found then, where yours is not to be found now, in the written Word of God.”⁶⁶

Yet one must also remember that history affects how the modern believer views the Scripture. One must keep this fact in mind so that one may be ever alert in interpretation to reduce distortions and to maintain humility. At the same time, Christians need not surrender to a historicism which, as Pelikan warns, relativizes all interpretations to their cultural/historical situation. Recognizing the fact

⁶³ Newman, 58.

⁶⁴ Pelikan, *Development of Christian Doctrine*, 49.

⁶⁵ Newman, 8.

⁶⁶ Izaak Walton, “The Life of Sir Henry Wotton” in *The Lives of Dr. John Donne; Sir Henry Wotton; Mr. Richard Hooker; Mr. George Herbert; and Dr. Robert Sanderson* (York: Wilson, Spence, and Mawman, 1796), 165–66, accessed March 10, 2021, <https://archive.org/stream/izaakwaltonslive00walt#page/n7/mode/2up>. As one modern writer put it, for Protestants weighing such Catholic challenges the “answer was, of course—in the Acts of the Apostles,” in “the most primitive churches as established by Christ and the Apostles.” David Daniell, “Tyndale and Foxe” in David Loades, ed., *John Foxe: An Historical Perspective* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1999), 24. See also Chadwick, 1–2.

of historicism, Christians take it into account in their interpretation of Scripture and adjust for it. Furthermore, the teachings of the Bible's perspicuity and the Spirit's illumination equip Christians to deal with the limitations of human understanding. One may not escape history but one need not be ruled by it either.

Rather than try to escape history, the Bible-believer should use history. Progressive illumination disarms the charge of novelty against any teaching otherwise shown to be scripturally valid. The concept reckons with the evidence of history without diminishing the Bible's authority. It does so without falling prey, on the one hand, to Catholic or Orthodox arguments of historical continuity or, on the other hand, to illegitimate schemes of successionism or primitivism. It relies on the Bible both for its theological basis and its standard of doctrinal evaluation. Finally, the idea of progressive illumination, by helping the modern Christian see that he or she does indeed stand on the shoulders of giants, equips the believer to use history in interpretation with perspective and with profit.