

## ARTICLE II.

THE PROGRESS OF DOCTRINE IN THE NEW  
TESTAMENT.

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THE classic on this subject which has never been surpassed or even approached, to my knowledge, is the Bampton Lectures of Thomas Dehany Bernard, a fellow of Oxford, and an English rector. To the edition of 1867, Dr. Hovey, President of Newton Theological Seminary, supplied a short preface in which he said that these lectures "are as nearly perfect both in substance and in form as any human production can well be made." An essay on this subject, therefore, must necessarily derive most of its matter from this masterly work; and if this essay should impel those who read it to go for themselves to the volume of which it can give only a most meager idea, it will have served its best purpose. After such an acknowledgment, however, it is only justice to myself to add that I have done some thinking for myself along these lines, and this essay is not a mere collection of extracts, since Bernard's contributions to it have had to pass, for better or worse, through the medium of my own mind.

By *doctrine* Bernard meant *divine teaching*, and the *progress* which he ascribes is the order in which divine communications of truth, not obtainable from human sources, are found in the New Testament. This is not at all the chronological order in which the books of the New Testament first

became known to the church, but the order in which they have been arranged in the Canon. At first, and for a long time, they were a heterogeneous collection of independent writings prepared by authors far from each other in time and space, and having no conception of any plan in which their productions were to have their appropriate places. But when all were ready and were generally known to the church, they proved to be adaptations to a plan in which each had its proper place, and all together constituted a perfect whole. As the different parts of the Tabernacle, made at different times by persons who had no knowledge of each other's work, when brought together were found capable of adjustment into a perfect tent. Or as the stones cut for Solomon's Temple by isolated workmen in various quarries, when brought to Jerusalem, were built into a magnificent structure in which no part, however peculiar its form, was wanting. That this could be done with the books of the New Testament, that it actually was done by the Christians of the first centuries, and that we can now recognize the fitness of part to part, and of each part to the whole, proves that each writer wrought unconsciously according to a plan in the mind of God, and that the early Christians were providentially guided in the discovery of that plan, and divinely influenced in arranging the documents in the order of their places, according to the progress of doctrine from beginning to completion. The New Testament is not, like the Koran, a mass of unrelated accretions, but an organized whole, in which the whole body is "fitly joined together, and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part."

The broad outlines and general course of the progress of doctrine in the New Testament are easily seen. It begins, in

the Gospels, with the fact of the Incarnation, the circumstances attending it, the witnesses to it, and what our Lord said and did while still in the flesh. He is presented to us as the very *source* of doctrine and also the *subject* of doctrine, inasmuch as it is *himself* that he makes the center and circumference of revealed truth. His teaching is at once complete and incomplete; complete because it is germinal and inclusive of all that is to come after; incomplete as it is proverbial, parabolical, paradoxical, symbolical, needing amplification and explanation by coming events and inspired interpreters.

The Acts of the Apostles is the bridge across which we pass intelligently from the teaching and ministry of our Lord on earth to his teaching and ministry in Heaven, by means of the human agents whom he chose and qualified for such service. Without the Book of Acts we should open the Epistles in bewilderment as to both the churches to which they are written and the writer of the most of them. But in the Acts we have the beginning of that dispensation of the Spirit by which the church was founded, a new and great apostle provided, the mission to heathen nations instituted, and the question of the relation of Christianity to Judaism settled.

The Epistles contain a theological education for the early churches, and so for the churches and Christians of all time. They are an inspired commentary on the words and acts of the Lord Jesus which were necessarily so insufficiently comprehended by his disciples while he remained on earth. They are the fulfillment of his promise that after his death the Spirit of truth would take the things of Christ and show them unto his apostles, and lead them into all truth. They lay open to human apprehension the meaning, the immense importance, and the universe-wide range of application of

the great facts of the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of our Saviour. They furnish a divine code of duty and sublime suggestions of privilege and opportunity for the Christians of all time. The development of doctrine from Gospels to Epistles is great indeed.

But it is not the end. There yet remains to be fulfilled that great promise to the apostles — “He shall show you things to come.” And so the New Testament ends with the Book of Revelation. In this we are permitted to read the future history of Christianity to the end of time. It is told, as it must be, in the language of symbols, which are even harder for the Occidental than for the Oriental, to understand, but the glorious prospect, as God sees it, is visible to the common mind, if not in minute detail, at any rate in its broad outlines. Step by step the obstacles to the progress of the gospel are to be overcome, the moral and spiritual darkness of mankind is to be banished by the growing illumination furnished by the Sun of Righteousness and the stars and candlesticks of the churches; the works of darkness done by the creatures of darkness, such as the wild beasts of civil governments and the false churches which have so long misrepresented Christianity, will become impossible, and the kingdom of Jesus will have come in great and glad reality. This is the message which Jesus himself sends to his servants to cheer them in despondency, and to hearten them for fresh efforts, so that whatever may be the present state of the conflict they may labor in hope and struggle with the prestige of victory. Such a message may appropriately close the inspired volume, for its words of encouragement are the last conceivably necessary portion of a revelation from God to man.

Such are the main stages of the progress of doctrine in the

New Testament, but progress in each of these stages is easily discernible. That Matthew should be the first of the Gospels follows from its being the gospel to the Jews, the chosen people of the Old Testament. The close connection of Matthew with Malachi was said by Dr. William R. Williams, in his lectures on John the Baptist, to resemble that between the two copies of an ancient contract which were both written on the same parchment and then cut apart along an irregular line so that the genuineness of each copy could be proved by the exact fitting of its jagged end into the equally jagged end of the other. Thus Matthew, more than any other Gospel, shows the fulfillments of promises and prophecies made to the Jews, and the realization of Old Testament hopes and expectations.

That Mark should follow with his Gospel to the Romans, and Luke with his to the Greeks of the civilized world, is just the order in which these races might be expected to be approached in the spread of the glad tidings. And that John should come last of all with his deeper insight and his profounder interpretations, and such added facts as the memory of the beloved disciple alone could supply, is but to place him where for every good reason he belongs.

And here may be seen the explanation of that twenty-first chapter of John's Gospel, which he adds, as a seeming afterthought, when he has already apparently finished his work. It is a fitting introduction to the Book of Acts, one of those links, as Bernard calls them, which preserve the continuity of the New Testament and bind its separate parts into a complete unity. It foreshadows the change of which the Book of Acts is the history from the dispensation of the present Christ to the dispensation of the Spirit. The number of the Epistles is seven, the symbol of the entire number of

Christ's servants to the end of time; the symbolic draught of fishes is repeated, but Jesus, instead of being in the boat, is dimly seen on the shore, and the divine commission to feed Christ's lambs and sheep is thrice repeated as solemnly given by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. What immediately follows, in the Book of Acts, is the beginning of the interpretation of this impressive scene, a beginning which the history of the Church perpetually continues.

Coming to the Epistles, it is a matter of course that Romans should take the first place. For in this the Holy Spirit has made use of the splendid intellect of Paul to open to human apprehension the first things of Christian experience, the cardinal facts of sin, atonement, justification, sanctification, and their consequences in the Christian life.

In doing this the apostle has to correct the errors of the Jews regarding the meaning and true significance of the *Law* they have received. The Epistles to the Corinthians share with Romans this *corrective* and *decisive* character, dealing with the false philosophies and heathen immoralities by which the Greek disciples were in danger of being corrupted. And Galatians follows to rebuke the reactionary tendencies of those wavering disciples whose earlier and false habits of thought return upon them to rob them of their Christian freedom.

In the next three Epistles, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, we miss the controversial tone. We are sitting "in heavenly places in Christ Jesus," meditating upon lofty themes and Christian amenities, surveying the universe from the exalted viewpoint of oneness with Christ in nature, character, and destiny. Then follows Thessalonians, the last of the seven, containing the eschatology of Paul, teaching Christian believers to look forward with wise discrimination be-

tween the fanciful notions of fanaticism and the reasonable expectations of simple faith in God's Word.

The limits of this paper forbid further detail in tracing the natural and logical succession of the rest of Paul's Epistles, and that to the Hebrews, which we may safely accept as his also. To this remarkable body of inspired teaching which was given us by the great apostle we may regard the addition of the Epistles of James, Peter, John, and Jude as intended chiefly for confirmation. Since the task of expounding the meanings and application of Christianity was devolved upon a special apostle, not one of the original twelve, it was fitting and necessary that the leaders of that company should give their endorsement to what he had done. This they have done by a sufficient exhibition of their own views to show that theirs are identical with Paul's, and in Peter's case, to furnish the express assurance that the work of his fellow apostles is to be classed with the Holy Scriptures of the Old Testament. Thus have we seen that the books of the New Testament are not to be considered as unrelated documents, thrown together at random, or arranged according to merely human ideas of their proper places, but *divinely prepared compositions divinely placed in a canon to meet the needs of a Christian education.*