

An Emerging Understanding of Orthodox

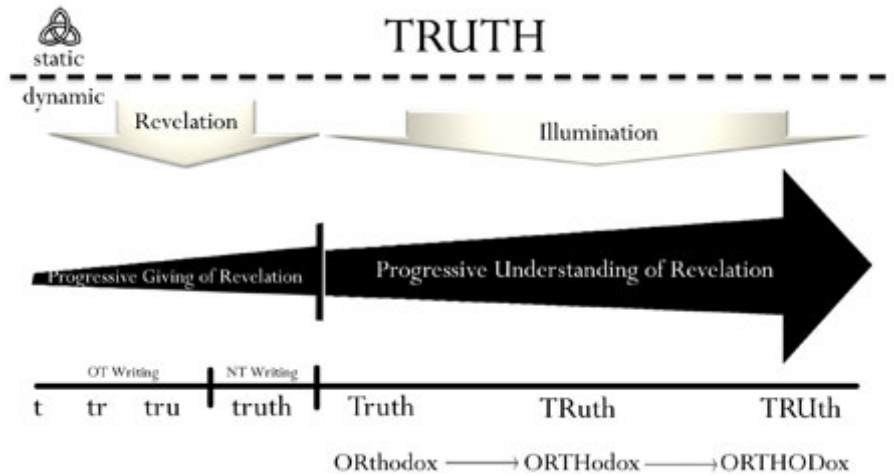
by C. Michael Patton

I am thoroughly orthodox. No, not Eastern with a capital "O", but orthodox meaning that I believe all the right things. Well . . . at least /think I am. But, really, it depends on how one defines "orthodox." What does it mean to be orthodox?

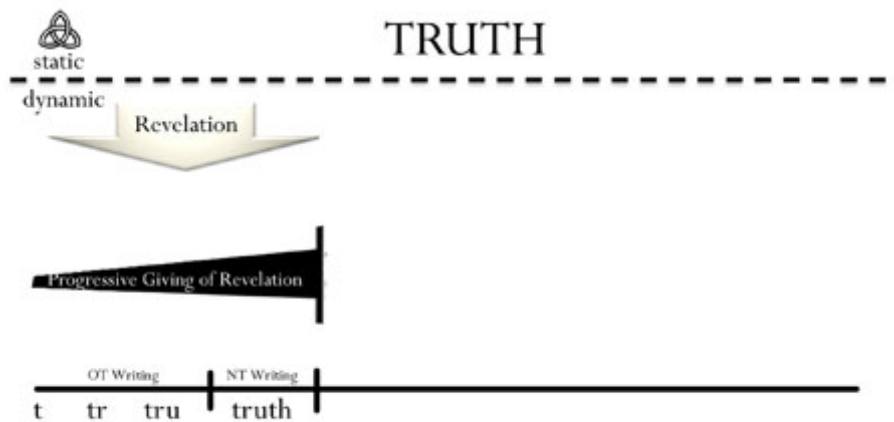
It would seem that this question is taking center stage in the current theological landscape. I have heard rumors that some prominent leaders in the emerging church are going to be writing on this issue, challenging the traditional thought concerning what it means to be "orthodox"---even more than they have already done. Some in the Emergent church, such as Tony Jones and Brian McLaren, are saying that there may not be such a thing as "orthodox." Others, like [Andrew Jones](#), seem to suggest that orthodoxy simply should be thought of as "right worship" rather than right teaching. Some of our more fundamentalistic brothers and sisters believe that orthodox means you agree with everything in their particular tradition or denomination. *Some Christians even say that "orthodoxy" is a representation of a dynamic confession that has developed throughout church history.* Well . . . ahem . . . that would be me.

With this in mind, I have written a short series on this subject. I am going to try to argue that there is such a thing as orthodoxy and it means first and foremost "right teaching" or "right belief." I am also going to propose that orthodoxy is a *progressive representation* of truth as it has been revealed and understood throughout history.

Here is the chart that I will use to serve as a visual aid. We will break it down and add to it throughout this series.



Let me start at the beginning.

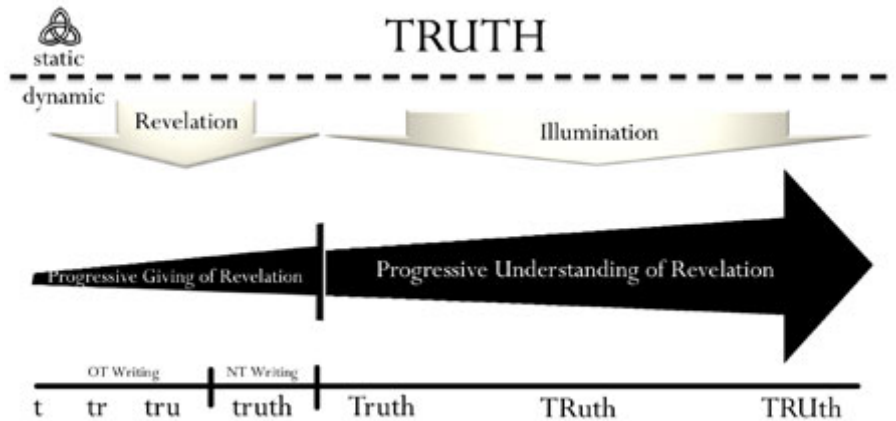


Notice the dotted line. This represents the division between God's eternal existence which is static (above the line) and man's time bound existence which is dynamic (below the line).

God gave man revelation in a progressive fashion. This is often referred to as "progressive revelation." This simply means that when Adam and Eve were in the Garden, God did not give them a completed Scripture. For example, Abraham did not know as much as Moses about redemption. He had some basic components, but very few details. The same can be said of David. While he knew more than both Abraham and Moses, he did not know as much as Isaiah, and so on.

The canon itself is a dynamic and progressive revealing of truth as God brings about his redemptive purpose with man. The small "t" represents the first installment, if you will, to truth. The "tr" shows how this revelation of truth was progressive through time. As you can see, revelation is completed in the New Testament when the complete truth of God's revelation has been finalized in the coming of Christ and the writings of the Apostles.

But notice something important. "Truth" is all in lower case below the dotted line, while above the dotted line it is in upper case. This refers to the *revelation* of truth in contrast to the *understanding* of truth. While God's revelation was completed, I believe, at the completion of the New Testament, the understanding of this truth in a canonical whole had just begun. I have more to say about this, but I don't think it would be beneficial at this point. Just keep this in mind as it serves as an important presumption of my thoughts.



Notice here that while revelation has ceased, our understanding of this revelation is developing. Both Catholics and Protestants hold to a theory called "doctrinal development." While the details of how doctrine develops is much different, the basic confession is the same: doctrine develops from one stage to another. This is because truth itself is better understood as time affords.

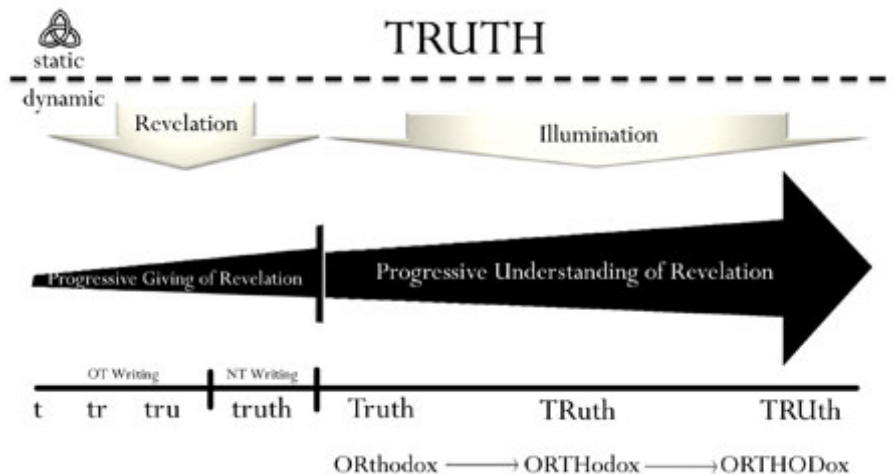
If you can think of a seed developing into a tree. Or even better, a baby developing into an adult. The same basic components (DNA) are in the adult as was in the baby, yet the adult has matured through time. The adult has learned and developed into a more articulate and distinct looking human. The same can be said about doctrine. Our understanding, pushed forward through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, has grown.

It is not the "one deposit of faith that was once for all handed over to the saints" that has changed, but it is our understanding of it that has matured.

The capital letters in "truth" begin to arise. Again, this is not because truth itself is *changing*, but because our understanding of truth is *maturing*. For example, while the early church believed in the deity of Christ in some sense, they did

not know how to articulate this understanding in relation to the Father and the Holy Spirit. As controversies arose, the contrast that the controversies provided helped the church to develop their understanding to a more mature form. This maturation eventually gave forth in the articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity in Nicea (325) and Constantinople (381). That is why we have a capital "T" while the rest remains lower case. As time goes on, the church is forced to wrestle with their understanding concerning many more issues.

The capital letters are not meant to convey that we understand truth to the degree that God understands truth, but that we have come to, what we believe, is a maturation of the faith. Can it mature more, possibly, but this maturation will seldom be antithetical to that which has gone before. In other words, the capital "T" will not change to a "D" or an "N." I will have to defend this more as we continue our study, but hopefully this is a helpful start.



Finally we have this chart which illustrate how our understanding of "orthodox" is in development along with our illumination to the truth.

The primary argument here is that while our orthodoxy may not be perfect this side of heaven, it, nevertheless, can be an accurate understanding of TRUTH. As Dr. John Hannah would say, "We cannot know God fully, but we can know him truly." I would say the same for orthodoxy.

I was at a meeting where Brian McLaren said that he believes truth itself is dynamic, changing, and evolving. I am not sure if he still believes this or would continue to articulate it in such a way, but, at least at the time, I was very uncomfortable with his proposition (yes, it was a proposition). Truth does not change.

I am also uncomfortable with the idea that orthodoxy changes. Use the words develop, dynamic, and even evolve, but the word "change" is too strong. It implies an antithetical development of orthodoxy that I don't think a proper view of history need allow.

Part 2: Six Views of Orthodoxy

Christians have different presuppositions that they bring to their theology. This does not make it right or wrong, but we must understand that the unexamined presupposition is not worth having. Our view of history is no different. It is a presupposition that we bring when asking the question What does it mean to be "orthodox"?

There are really six primary views that I find represented in the church today. I am going to try to explain these views using both established and original terminology. I have tried to stay away from certain terms such as "neo-orthodox" and "emerging orthodox" so as not to skew perspectives and stack the deck for or against anyone.

1. aOrthodoxy. Belief that there is no such thing as orthodoxy as a set of "right beliefs" or, at the very least, Christianity should not be defined by our beliefs except in a very minimalistic way. This view of orthodoxy takes a very pessimistic view of the Church's need and ability to define truth, believing that orthopraxy ("right practice") is the only thing that should be in focus. This pessimistic approach is influenced by the belief that defining the "boundaries" of Christianity according to *beliefs* has brought nothing but shame and divisiveness to Christianity. This is illustrated most in the bloodshed of the inquisition, Crusades, and wars among Christians. To be labeled "orthodox" or "unorthodox" to the aOrthodox is an arrogant power play that is oppressive to the cause of Christ. Orthodoxy, therefore, is a contextualized subjective "moving target" that cannot be defined.

Primary Adherents:

Emergent Church (to be distinguished as a subset of the Emerging Church)

Strengths:

- Sees the importance of orthopraxy.
- Understands the difficulty of defining Christian orthodoxy.

Weaknesses:

- Christianity loses any distinction.
- Follows a self-defeating premise by establishing a new minimalistic orthodoxy of its own.
- Unjustifiably follows a "guilt by association" premise. Just because others killed in the name of orthodoxy does not mean that those who seek to define orthodoxy will do the same. In fact, most have not.

2. Scriptural Orthodoxy. This is the belief that Scripture *alone* sets the bounds of orthodoxy without any aid from the historic body of Christ. This should not be mistaken for *sola Scriptura*---the belief that the Scripture is our final and only infallible authority in matters of faith and practice---but as a radical rejection of any other sources of authority such as the church, tradition, natural revelation, etc. It is often referred to as *solo Scriptura* or *nuda Scriptura*. Here, there would not be any authority derived from the body of Christ, historic or contemporary, as an interpretive community that either fallibly or infallibly has

the ability to define orthodoxy. Adherents would often be found saying, "No creed but the Bible."

Primary Adherents:

Fundamentalist Protestants

Strengths:

- Understands that the Bible is the only infallible source.
- Causes people to go back to the source (*ad fontes*).

Weaknesses:

- Discounts the historic Church as a Spirit illuminated interpreter of the Scriptures that must be respected as a voice (albeit fallible) of God.
- Creates their own orthodoxy based upon their subjective interpretation. This way there will be many orthodoxies.
- Often results in cults who deny essential elements of Christian theology that have been held throughout church history.
- Fails to see that we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us.

3. Paleo-Orthodoxy. This is the belief that the Christian faith can be found in the early church---namely in the consensual beliefs of the early church. This is a form of "consensual orthodoxy" (*consensus fidelium*). This search for consensus follows the dictum of Saint Vincent of Lrins: *quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus*, "that which was believed everywhere, always."

Normally, according to Thomas Oden, who coined the term "paleo-orthodoxy," this consensual faith can be found in the first five centuries of the Christian church (Oden, *Requiem: A Lament in Three Movements*), before the "speculative scholasticism" of western Catholicism. The idea of theological progression is normally thought by strict adherents of Paleo-Orthodoxy as a post-enlightenment influenced methodology that should not be followed.

Primary Adherents:

Eastern Orthodoxy, some Evangelicals, and many Emerging Christians (not Emergent as I have defined it in my writings)

Strengths:

- Looks to the historic body of Christ for orthodoxy.
- Understands that God's providential concern for the Church would have established the most important truths early.

Weaknesses:

- Can elevate the authority of the early church above that of Scripture.
- Hard to find justifiable reasons to believe that theology cannot develop or mature beyond the first five centuries.

4. Dynamic Orthodoxy. This view of orthodoxy would be highly influenced by a dialectical approach to theological development, believing that orthodoxy is not in any sense static, but dynamically changing as new discoveries are being made. Early views of orthodoxy might be *completely* overshadowed by new

discoveries. This approach has characterized the more liberal theologians, especially in the early twentieth century. Theology, according to dynamic orthodoxy, can change radically in an antithetical way once new discoveries are made through the advancements of human knowledge.

Primary Adherents:

Liberal Christianity

Strengths:

Open to change and advancement.

Weaknesses:

- *Too* open to change and advancement.
- Christianity loses any roots.
- Often values the credibility of human progress above the credibility of Scripture.

5. Developmental Orthodoxy. This view of orthodoxy is unique to Roman Catholicism, therefore, it must be understood according to the Catholic view of authority. Developmental Orthodoxy sees the fullness of Christian orthodoxy contained in the one deposit of faith given by Christ to the apostles. These Apostles handed this deposit over in two forms of tradition, written and spoken. The written tradition is found in the Scriptures, the spoken is primarily contained in the early church. This tradition is interpreted by the infallible magisterial authorities in the Roman Catholic church. Orthodoxy itself is

defined progressively by this authority as situations develop throughout time. According to this theory, it is not as if orthodoxy develops *ex nihilo*, but only as the situations make necessary. Once orthodoxy has been defined, then Christians are responsible to believe it, even if it was previously obscure or non-existent (e.g. acceptance of the Apocrypha, assumption of Mary, rejection of birth control).

Primary Adherents:

Roman Catholics

Strengths:

- Can be more definitive about a definition of orthodoxy.
- Ability to contextualize orthodoxy.
- Sees value in church history.

Weaknesses:

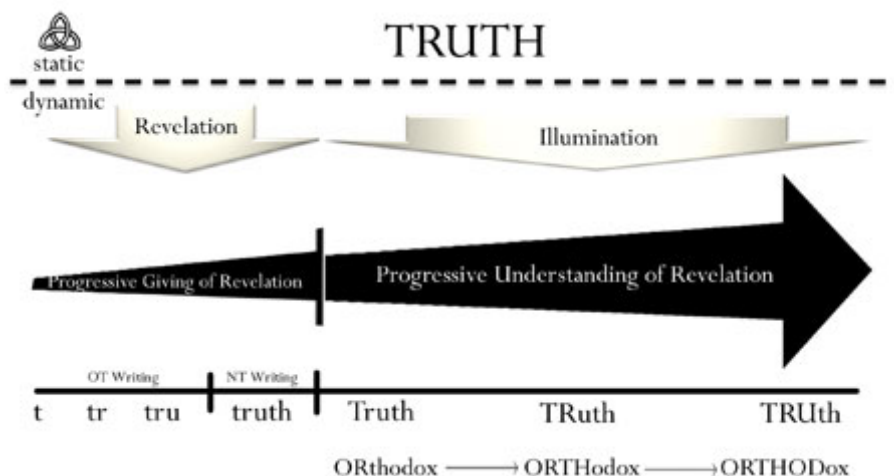
- No regulation for abuse in the Magisterium.
- No justification for an authoritative system of infallibility beyond pragmatism.
- Elements of newly established orthodoxy that cannot be found in church history is hard to justify.
- Does not take a consensual approach to orthodoxy which, in the end, positions most members of the Christian faith, living and dead, as unorthodox *according to their current definition*.

6. Progressive Orthodoxy. This is the belief that the ultimate authority for the Christian faith is found only in the Scriptures (*sola Scriptura*) and that orthodoxy is a progressive development of the Church's understanding of the Scriptures. Like paleo-orthodoxy, progressive orthodoxy seeks the consensus of the Church throughout time for the *core essential* theological issues, finding most of these in the early church expressed in the ecumenical councils. But it also believes that our understanding of these issues *can* and *may* mature both through articulation and added perspective. This "maturing" does not amount to any *essential* change, but only progressive development as theological issues are brought to the table of church history through controversy and exegetical discovery. In other words, once orthodoxy has been established, its antithetical opposite cannot be entertained. Orthodoxy can only be advanced.

Adherents:

Most Evangelicals, Protestant Reformers, some emergers.

Here is the chart that illustrates this view:



Weaknesses:

- Often hard to define what is the difference is between maturity and change.
- Who defines when a doctrine has "matured"?

Strengths:

- It is anchored in the Bible while having a great respect for tradition.
- Leaves the door open for the Holy Spirit to mature the church's understanding.
- Seeks first to define orthodoxy in a consensual way.
- Leaves room to distinguish between essential elements of orthodoxy and non-essential.

Of the options given above, in my opinion the two that are the most credible are Paleo-Orthodoxy and Progressive Orthodoxy. Both are rooted in the ultimate authority of Scripture and both have a high view of God's providential care throughout Church history. I appreciate the consensual approach which I think must be present to some degree if one is to have a proper defense of the history of the Church.

In the end, however, I do lean in the direction of the Progressive Orthodox view. I believe that all the essential doctrines of Christianity were established in the early Church, but that their maturation came throughout church history. Some, such as the doctrine of the Trinity, matured earlier than others. Because of this, we find that these enjoy a greater Christian consensus. I put a higher priority on

these. Yet I also believe that we need to take seriously others which matured later, even if they do not enjoy the same consensus (i.e. *sola fide*---which I believe existed in seed form in the early church, but did not develop more fully until the controversy of the sixteenth century.)

The distinction between the orthodoxy established in the early church and the later developing *tradition based* orthodoxy must be made and reflected upon.

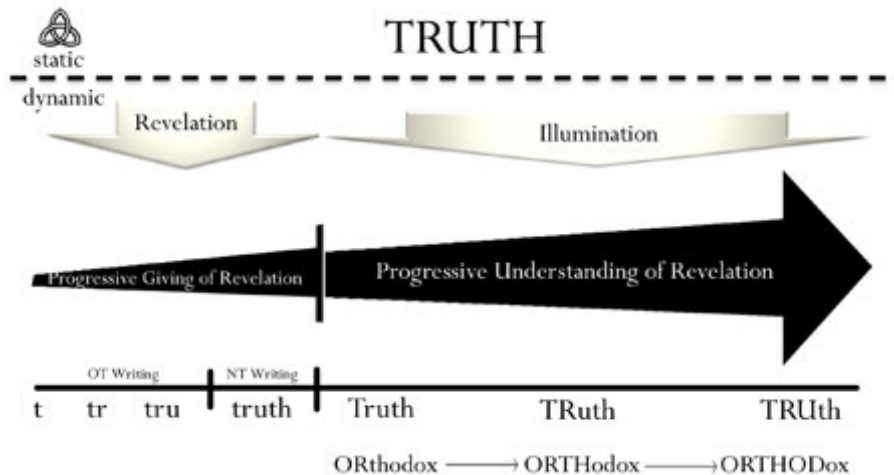
quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus

Part 3: The Maturing of Orthodoxy

My view of what I call "progressive orthodoxy" allows for maturation and development in our understanding of orthodoxy. I will now further explain this position. First, let me restate the definition:

Progressive Orthodoxy: The belief that the ultimate authority for the Christian faith is found only in the Scriptures (*sola Scriptura*) and that orthodoxy is a progressive development of the Church's understanding of the Scriptures. Progressive orthodoxy, like paleo-orthodoxy, seeks the consensus of the Church throughout time for the *core essential* theological issues, finding most of these in the early church expressed in the ecumenical councils. But it also believes that our understanding of these issues *can* and *may* mature both through articulation and added perspective. This "maturing" does not amount to any *essential* change, but only progressive development as theological issues are brought to the table of church history through controversy and exegetical discovery.

Here is how it looks so far:



The question are many at this point. Here are some of them:

- How does this "maturing" process take place? This is not an easy question to answer for every tradition will claim that their maturation is the correct one.
- Once a doctrine as "matured" does this mean that it's mature form is the "new" orthodoxy?
- What if someone rejects the maturation in favor of its immatured form? Are they still "orthodox" in an immature sense?
- What if some person, tradition, or institution favors a form that has matured slightly differently? Are they "unorthodox"?

Let me give you some examples:

I believe in doctrine of salvation by faith alone (*sole fide*). This means that the sole instrumental cause of justification, from a human standpoint, is faith without the addition of *any* works, including baptism. But this doctrine, as such, was not *fully* articulated until the time of the Reformation. It was not until then,

due to the controversy that arose, that the church was forced to mature in this particular aspect of soteriology (salvation). But I have a problem. The church, until this time, *generally* accepted some form of works-based justification, whether it be through baptismal regeneration, or the addition of some other good work or participation in the sacraments.

The same thing can be said about my view of the atonement. I believe in what is called the vicarious substitutionary view of the atonement. This means that I believe that Christ served as the substitute for man (or the redeemed), taking their punishment and making it his own while on the cross. Yet this doctrine only existed in seed form until the time of Anselm. Anselm, in the 11th century, introduced the church to the "satisfaction" theory of the atonement. This was more fully developed later by John Calvin. It now goes by the name "substitutionary" or "penal" atonement. What of those who did not believe such before Anselm or Calvin?

For both of these (and others), I have a few options:

1. I could say that before these doctrines were understood and articulated according to my current Protestant understanding, no one was truly saved or, at the very least, orthodox. (Radical Restorationism)
2. I could say that these doctrines *did* exist before, just in unarticulated form. (Thomas Oden)
3. I could say that these doctrines did exist in the earliest church, but the church became corrupted and lost them to some degree. (Reformers)

4. I could say that their immature state was sufficient for the time, but is now insufficient. (Conservative Progressives)

5. I could say that these developments, while true, don't really matter with regards to defining orthodoxy. (Emerging)

I am torn by some of these. The only one that I reject outright is #1. I also have *some* problems with #4. The rest may contain truth. In fact, the answer may lie in a combination of 2–5. It depends on the issue at hand. In other words, I don't think any one of these comprehensively explains the maturation of orthodoxy *for all issues*. Some beliefs I believe were held by the early church and later corrupted (e.g. *sola Scriptura*). Some were just assumed without question and the lack of questioning amounted to their immaturity (e.g. baptismal regeneration). Some, once questioned, did reveal orthodoxy as it *should* be understood by all (*sola fide*). Some came into later maturation, but should not have any bearing on *historic* Christian orthodoxy (Calvinism, dispensationalism, rapture, etc.).

Next, I will try to chart out (you know how I love charts!) the way this would look with respect to Protestant, Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox orthodoxy.

Part 4: Are Catholics Orthodox

Is the Roman Catholic Church unorthodox?

From the perspective of a Protestant understanding of "orthodoxy," relations to other traditions can vary. Protestants can be found who believe that any deviation from the developments and articulations found in the Reformation, particularly with regard to justification by faith alone, amounts to abandoning the Gospel *completely*.

The question is this: Does a denial of *sola fide* (justification by faith alone) amount to the production of a different Gospel and to what degree?

If a denial of *sola fide* produces a different Gospel in an absolute sense, then it is, by definition, unorthodox in the most severe way. However, if it deviates from the Gospel causing a distortion of the Gospel, but not a destruction of the Gospel, can it be said to be unorthodox to the degree that the Catholic church is a heretical institution?

Please understand, the question is not whether someone can deny *sola fide* and be saved. Most Evangelicals would (should?) agree that we are saved by faith alone, not necessarily by our belief or confession in salvation by faith alone.

The question is Can the true Gospel be proclaimed when *sola fide* is denied or ignored? Is *sola fide* so central to the Gospel that its neglect or denial amounts to a heterodox Gospel?

Those who answer in the affirmative are going to have to recognize the difficulties with such a stand. If the absence of *sola fide* from the Gospel represents an absolute destruction of the Gospel, what of the church before the Reformation that had yet to articulate salvation in such a way? I know that Thomas Oden has done much to show that the early church did hold to an unarticulated view of *sola fide*, and I think he has done a good job of showing that this problem is not as severe as some people make it out to be (see Oden, *The Justification Reader*). Yet, at the same time, it is hard for me to read through the early church and see this without definite qualifications. We need to recognize that the pre-reformation church, even the pre-*Roman* Catholic church, did hold to beliefs that would be outside of the orthodoxy produced by a Reformed view of *sola fide*. For example, the early church held to a primitive belief in baptismal regeneration. As well, we often find the blurring of the lines between justification and sanctification.

Therefore, if we were to say that the Reformation's restoration, development, and articulation of justification by faith alone was a restoration of that which was completely corrupt beforehand, we will have some issues.

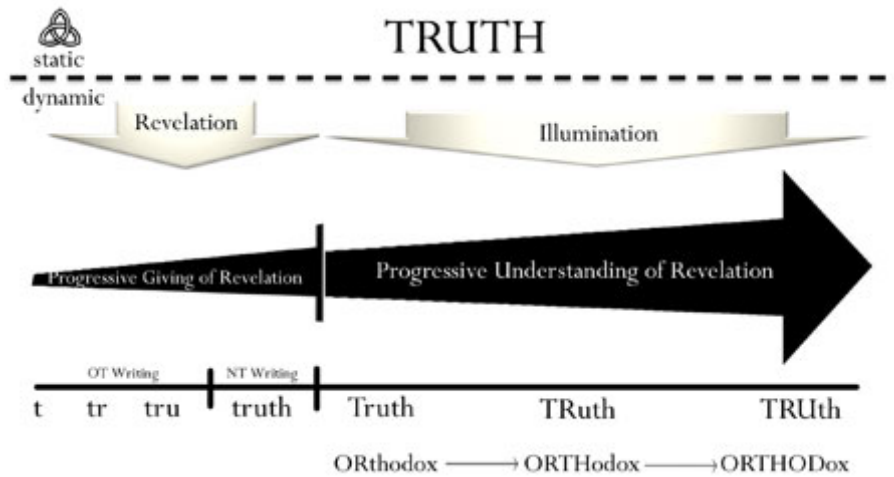
Was the Gospel proclaimed in the sixteenth century for the first time?

Did true and full orthodoxy begin in the mind of Luther and the other magisterial reformers?

I think that there is a more reasonable option here. This option follows the idea of progressive orthodoxy that we have talked about earlier. It allows for

corruption of orthodoxy, to some degree, as corruption is a vital part of its evolution to maturity.

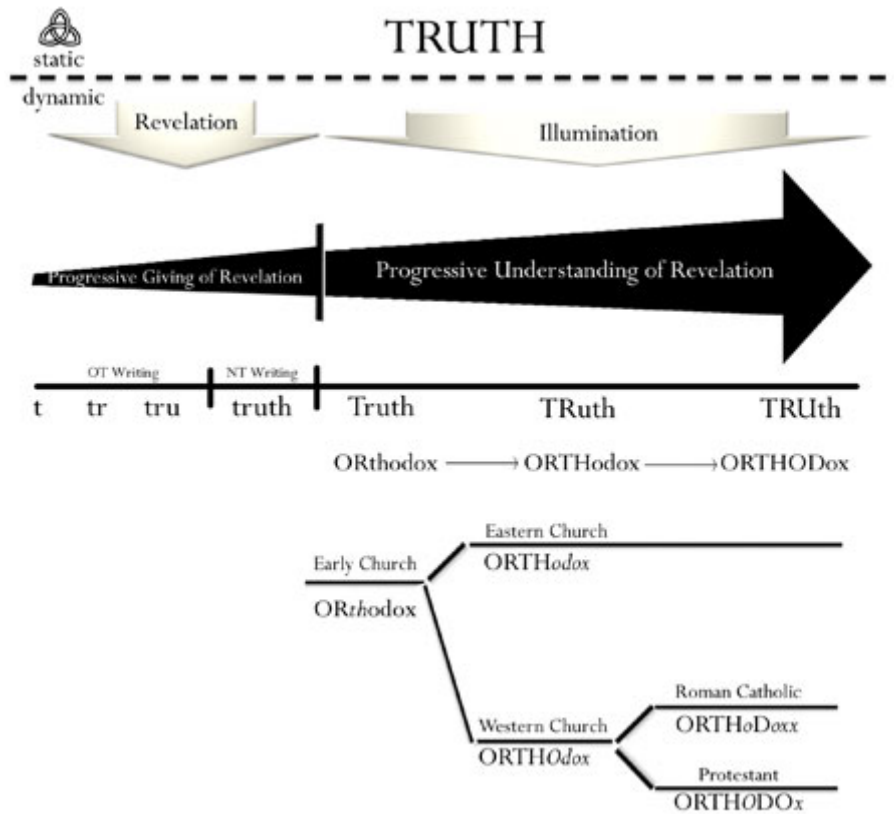
Here is the chart from the last post:



Let me now advance my thesis a bit.

With regards to the Roman Catholic understanding of justification, I would see the orthodoxy produced as a distorted orthodoxy. This distortion, while serious, does not amount to an absolute departure from Christianity. In other words, the Gospel can still be found in Roman Catholic orthodoxy, even if the "fullness of the Gospel" is lacking.

Their development (along with that of the Eastern Church) may look like this (please don't try to dissect all the letters and such; that would be over-analyzing my intentions):



Notice a few things:

Early Church: The early church was orthodox. Some doctrines were developed, matured, and articulated more than others. This is the difference in the capital letters and lower case. Capital represents maturity (e.g. the work of Christ). Lower case represents an orthodox belief, even if it remained immature. The italics represents distorted orthodoxy. In other words, there were certain beliefs in the early church that had the essence of truth, but, because of immaturity, could often misrepresent its later matured form (e.g. the atonement as a ransom to Satan).

Eastern Church: Here, I primarily mean the Eastern Orthodox church. Notice that they are also orthodox. The further developments represented by the "TH"

show the progress and maturing of certain doctrines (e.g. person of Christ and the Trinity). The lower case show an undeveloped doctrine (e.g. salvation) and the italics show a distorted understanding (e.g. atonement).

Roman Catholic: Notice here, the difference. Now we have a misspelling of "orthodox." This represents the additions that the Roman Catholic church brought to the table that, from a Protestant perspective, distorts the Gospel in a more severe way. These additions might include the infallibility of the Pope, Marian dogmas, additions of "mortal" sins, and, a definite articulation of process justification along with an absolute denial of *sola fide*. The distortions would include sacerdotalism, depository of grace, the institutionalized church, and the like. But, as you can see, much of Christian orthodoxy remains intact in Roman Catholicism. So much, in fact, that from my perspective, it would be wrong to call them "unorthodox" in an absolute sense. They just have a distorted orthodoxy that, when read, can still be seen as orthodox.

Reformed Protestantism: Obviously you will see I believe that Protestantism has the best articulation of orthodoxy, even if it remains imperfect. There are definitely some distortions (possibly ecclesiology) and some areas that need development (we must always leave room for such). But in the end, I believe that this represents the *fullest* representation of orthodoxy and, hence, the Gospel message.

Back to the question: Does a denial of *sola fide* (justification by faith alone) amount to the production of a different Gospel and to what degree?

The answer is yes and no. "Yes" in that it amounts to the production of a distorted or undeveloped Gospel, and, in this sense, it is different from the fullness of the Gospel (like that of the Galatian Judizers). "No" in the sense that its denial does not *completely* destroy the Gospel beyond recognition. For example, I believe that the Mormons have a different Gospel to the degree that orthodoxy is destroyed beyond recognition. If they were on the chart, their orthodoxy would look something like this: "XXoM OXY." It may have some of the same elements, but it is too different and too distorted to find the truth Gospel (primarily because of the absence of the God-man). The same could be said for the Jehovah's Witnesses. Catholics are different. I don't believe that Catholics are orthodox to the degree that Protestants or Eastern Orthodox are, but, nonetheless, orthodoxy can be found in their Gospel. They do have the God-man and this means a lot.

Once again, you must remember, this is looking at these things from an Evangelical Protestant perspective. I am an Evangelical Protestant. So don't give me any cries of "Arrogance!" I don't believe Evangelicals are perfect, but I do believe we have the fullest articulation of the Gospel. If I did not, then I would go to the tradition that did!

At least, this is where I am at today.

Hopefully, you can now see how my understanding of how progressive orthodoxy can account for the development of doctrine in the face of many difficulties.