

Theology 101: Revelation  
Sunday, February 27, 2022  
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In God we trust  
For Sewage Only!

How do we know what we know about God?

Which comes first, faith or revelation? Do we need faith to perceive revelation as such, or do we need revelation in order to have faith?

Is knowing God, as distinct from knowledge about God, necessary to the Christian life?

Is prayer, rather than preaching & sacraments, the best way to know God? Does it involve revelation?

Revelation (*revelatio / apocalypsis*), encounter, epiphany (*epiphaneia*), experience, gift

Apart from God's self-revelation, there would be no knowledge of God and no Christian faith. Revelation is both an action and the content of that action.

God is revealed to us as personal. Nothing else can reveal itself the way a person can; persons can be known only through self-disclosure.

Revelation vs knowledge gathering: Revelation involves not objectivity, but requires engagement and personal response. Ordinary knowledge by itself does not create community and may isolate, but the aim of knowledge through revelation is to create community with God and neighbor.

### **Ellen**

Reveals herself to another person through words and acts that express her character, attitudes, loves, hopes, plans, etc.

Self-disclosure takes place through encounters with another person

### **Owen**

Must be open to Ellen's self-disclosure to receive it, trusting it to be authentic

Can only know Ellen if Ellen freely chooses to open herself up

Cannot coerce Ellen into revealing herself

Can learn lots about Ellen against her will or without her cooperation; can investigate and analyze according to physics, biology, chemistry, history, etc.

Even after such analysis, Owen couldn't say in the fullest personal sense "I know her."

Even if Ellen reveals herself fully, there will be depths of her that remain mysterious to Owen and to herself.

### **God**

Reveals the divine reality to us by words and acts that express the divine nature, attitudes, plans, loves.

Revelation constituted through encounters in history, esp history of Israel

### **You or I**

Must be open to God's self-disclosure and receive it in trust and faith

Come to know God only as God freely chooses to reveal God's self to us.

Empirical investigation may allow us to learn something about God, but it is not personal knowledge of God.

Even if God is self-revealed to us, there will be depths of God's being that remain mysterious to us

Revelation (until 19<sup>th</sup> century) based on a traditional view of the Bible: given in detail by the Holy Spirit, verbally inspired, unaffected by human limitations/cultural context, trustworthy as God. The Bible was seen as a sourcebook of divine truths that could not otherwise be attained by unaided human reason.

In the Middle Ages, there develops a distinction between *natural* and *revealed* theology, elaborated most fully by Thomas Aquinas.

*Natural theology* consists of truths about God, God's existence, and certain divine attributes, attainable by the unaided reason of any person (Christian or otherwise).

*Revealed theology* consists of truths about God that, while not contrary to reason, cannot be attained by human reason alone; they can only be known through divine revelation in the Bible (incarnation, the Trinity).

The distinction is based on a primitive view on the nature and use of Scripture (verbal inspiration), and the area of natural theology still presumed a Christian worldview so the distinction was muddy.

Polemics of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation less concerned with distinctions between natural and revealed theology, and more so with the role of tradition accompanying Scripture as divine revelation. (Vatican II – there is only one source of Scripture & tradition, Christ)

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, application of literary and historical criticism to the Bible and changing views on human nature as dynamic and culturally/historically affected (rather than static) contribute to the move toward the *liberal view* of revelation:

In the *liberal view*, revelation is essentially the human discovery of universal religious truth, accessible to all people but discovered most fully by the great religious geniuses (Buddha, Confucius, Mohammed, Socrates, prophets of Israel, Jesus). Christianity is seen as the highest manifestation that has yet appeared of the universal religious consciousness of humankind.

This falls away with Karl Barth, post World War I. Some of the flaws:

Revelation is pictured in the Bible not as human discovery but as God seeking people out.

What is discovered or revealed is not universal religious truth but the living God.

(I am the way, the truth, and the life...)

20<sup>th</sup> century theology seeks to do justice to the Bible, to acknowledge and account for knowledge of God apart from the biblical revelation, and to explore the uniqueness of Christian revelation. The concepts of general and special revelation emerge.

*General revelation*: God's self-disclosure in the creation, in the moral consciousness of humanity, in history, and in human reason. Studying the works of the artist.

*Special revelation*: God's self-disclosure in the events recorded and interpreted in the Bible. Meeting the artist in person.

Premises: Creation itself is a self-disclosure of God, bearing the will, purpose, and nature of the Creator. Human reflection on spiritual and moral elements in experience reflects our being made in the image of God. If God is the Lord of history, who carries out divine purposes in history, then history to some extent is a self-disclosure of God. Religious and moral ideas are the result of general revelation, not conclusions of unaided human reason

### *General revelation*

- Universal covenant with all humanity made in the Noah episode; later covenants (Abraham and Moses) are thus made with people already in covenant with God. The prophets see all people in relationship to God, though Israel as God's chosen people constitutes a special relationship.
- Faith in God as creator; God's nature manifested in creation. This is the basis for Paul's critique of Gentile religion as idolatry. This is a complex issue with regard to the theology of church mission, which must start at a presupposition about all people's relationship to God.
- Limited, non-historical, impersonal; the order and harmony of nature are of note, but not ultimately very revealing of God. Can't find Jesus in a rainbow.

### *Special revelation*

- God's self-disclosure in the history of Israel, events recorded and interpreted in the Bible, the coming of Christ, and the promised world to come.
- Personal, taking place in human history. Why Israel's particular role in revelation, rather than other nations? A mystery of divine choosing.
- "The coincidence of divinely guided events and minds divinely illuminated to interpret those events" (William Temple)
- In the OT, these are the acts and words of God seen, heard, and interpreted by the prophets and recorded by the biblical authors. Hand of God seen in all events of their history and aspects of the lives
- In the NT, union of word and act in Jesus, and in his being received and followed by those who see him as the bearer of salvation. Jesus is the union of the word of God and the act of God: the speaker and the content of the message are the same. God is made known in Israel's present, thereby bringing understanding of God as creator and the Lord of the goal of history
- Revelation is received by faith, which is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Faith is receiving God's self-revelation and the relationship to God that this revelation establishes.
- Imagination and symbol have a role in the revelatory process, in the reception, interpretation, and response to divine revelation. We are meaning makers as well as receivers.

*Dependent revelation:* the idea that one cannot become a Christian today (that is, receive God's special revelation) apart from some event, preaching, teaching, conversation, or reading that ultimately depends on the Bible. New generations and cultural contexts will bring new assumptions, challenges, strengths, etc., to the original special revelation and thus enlarge the church's understanding of it.

For us, the external aspect of revelation is reading the Bible, hearing a sermon, participating in a sacrament, hearing a testimony, but the internal aspect is the same as for Christ's first followers—received by faith and the inner testimony of the Spirit.

*Final revelation:* through a glass darkly...face to face

Christ the Son of God as the self-revelation of God:

General (Christ the agent of creation)

Special (Christ the culmination of Biblical witness)

Dependent (Christ to whom testimony of the church is given)

Final (Christ's eschatological return)

*Return to our questions...*

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Notes compiled and adapted from:

Owen Thomas and Ellen K. Wondra, "Revelation" in *Introduction to Theology, Third Ed.*

David A. S. Ferguson, "Revelation" in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*

Natural world, Scripture, life experiences, sermons, Bible study, conversations, vestry meetings, marriage, spiritual direction, General Convention, grief, parenthood, discernment, starry skies