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Revelation and the Authority of Scripture

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Chapter 2: Revelation and the Authority of Scripture¹

Bryan Ball

Revelation may be defined as the self-disclosure of God to humankind. Any knowledge that human beings may have of God, therefore, is not the result of their own diligent enquiry but is the outcome of God's gracious initiative and of his will to be known. Without revelation, God would remain hidden and incomprehensible. G.S. Hendry says, "Knowledge of God must be given by God himself".² That which is thus revealed is the foundation of all Christian understanding of the present and the future, of God and of mankind. The significance of such revelation to Christianity and to Christian belief and witness can hardly be overstated. Paul Helm correctly observes, "Revelation is central to Christianity, and it is hard to see how Christianity could proceed without appealing to it".³

Until relatively recently most theologians have in general agreed with this historic view of revelation. Many also accept the proposition that revelation is "the ultimate question" underlying many contemporary issues in society and in the Church.⁴ For example, Edward Heppenstall suggests that revelation is the "crucial question" for theology today, making the important point that the Bible's primary claim is not simply to inspiration, but to revelation.⁵ Raoul Dederen has related the issue to the whole church stating, "Few issues are of more crucial significance for Christians than the nature and purpose of God's self-revelation".⁶ In his study of revelation and in-

1 An earlier version of this chapter first published in *In the Beginning: Science and Scripture Confirm Creation*, Pacific Press, Nampa, ID, 2012.

2 G. S. Hendry, 'Reveal (and) Revelation', in Alan Richardson, ed., *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* (London: SCM, 1957), 196.

3 Paul Helm, *The Divine Revelation* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1982), xi.

4 Leon Morris, *I Believe in Revelation* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), 11.

5 Edward Heppenstall, 'The Nature of Revelation' (Centre for Adventist Research, Andrews University, 1960s, ref. 001419), 1.

6 R. F. Dederen, 'The Revelation-Inspiration Phenomenon According to the Bible Writers', in Frank Holbrook and Leo Van Dolson, eds., *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration*, vol. 1 (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 1992), 9.

spiration Fernando Canale even argues the importance of the topic because “Christian theology is in crisis”.⁷

This high view of revelation underlies the defining claim of Christianity to be a revealed religion. That the Judaeo-Christian God is a God who actively seeks humankind is Christianity’s distinguishing characteristic. This seeking God is known through his self-revelation, principally in Christ but also in Scripture. This historic understanding of God and revelation has in recent years come under attack, and we do well to heed Leon Morris’s warning, “We can no longer take the traditional idea of revelation for granted”.⁸ The debate continues to simmer and is not likely to go away. The evangelical theologian J. I. Packer said of revelation, “The real subject under discussion is the essential nature of Christianity”.⁹ The significance of that observation should not escape us, particularly at the present time.

These matters give rise to a series of related questions: What is revelation? Can it be understood? Has it actually occurred? Does the Bible itself have anything to say on the matter? Is the Bible the result of divine revelation? If it is, then what is an appropriate response? Not least are questions relating to revelation and reason, whether or not revelation occurs in propositional form, that is to say through words, or if God’s self-revelation is just that – a disclosure of himself and not also of information about him. Within the confines of this chapter we shall attempt to answer some of these questions in the hope that we can determine whether or not Scripture should continue to have authority in the life of the Church, in the formulation of belief, and in the lives of individual believers, as it has done for the best part of two millennia.¹⁰

7 F. Canale, *The Cognitive Principle of Christian Theology: A Hermeneutical Study of the Revelation and Inspiration of the Bible* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Lithotec, 2005), 22.

8 Morris, *Revelation*, 9. That the issue has also impinged on Adventist thinking is evidenced in the Adventist Theological Society’s publication, edited by Frank Holbrook and Leo Van Dolson, *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration* (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society, 1992), a response to Alden Thompson’s book *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1991).

9 J. I. Packer, ‘Contemporary Views of Revelation’, in C. F. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1976), 89.

10 The related question of inspiration lies beyond the parameters of this essay, except to note that it is a critical aspect of the revelatory process that has resulted in a book that is both human and divine. The divine-human nature of Scripture makes careful interpretation essential. Interpretation, inerrancy and illumination are also not considered due to limitations of space.

Revelation Historically Understood

An adequate understanding of revelation and the issues surrounding it is best obtained in the context of the historical background and the continuing debate over revelation that has developed through the centuries.

The Early Church. It is clear from the New Testament that the first Christians accepted totally that God had revealed himself in Christ and also through Scripture. For them Scripture was the corpus of Old Testament writings which Christ himself had frequently cited and to which he appealed to authenticate his own identity and mission (Luke 24: 25-27, 44-47). That God had come to earth in the person of Christ and that Jesus was the fulfilment of Old Testament Messianic prophecy was undoubtedly the keynote of apostolic proclamation, as is apparent from even the most cursory reading of Acts. But the emphasis on Scripture as witness to the facts concerning Christ and as being revelatory and with redemptive purpose itself, is equally clear (e.g., Acts 13: 32-34; 17: 1-3; 18:28).

When Paul wrote to Timothy, c. A.D. 64, concerning “Scripture”, noting that Timothy had known from childhood “the sacred writings”¹¹ and claiming “All Scripture is breathed out by God”(2 Tim 3:16),¹² he wrote initially to Timothy himself without thought of those in centuries to come. Similarly, when Peter, c. A.D. 67/68, declared that in “Scripture . . . men spoke from God” (2 Pet 1: 20-21) he was addressing first-century Christians. Peter’s recognition of Paul’s epistles as “Scripture” (2 Pet 3:16) endorses both Paul’s writings and the status of Scripture itself. Paul’s final evangelistic endeavours in Rome focused on Jesus and the “kingdom of God” and were based on frequent appeal to “the Law of Moses and the Prophets”, and his quotation from Isaiah (Acts 28: 23-28) is incontrovertible evidence of his respect for the Old Testament Scriptures as a revelation of the divine purpose. Christianity spread rapidly across the first-century Roman world primarily as a result of the proclamation of both Christ and of Scripture’s witness to Christ. It seems incontrovertible that early Christianity maintained a high view of Scripture for several centuries.

The Mediaeval Church. That major changes in Christian thinking occurred from the third century onward is widely recognised. Many of these changes related to beliefs about Christ, the virgin Mary, apostolic authority and therefore about Scripture itself. As the mediaeval period developed, the view came to prevail that Scripture of itself was insufficient, especially for ordinary people, and that it needed to be interpreted and authenticated by the church. Tradition came to assume an ever-increasing role in the life and

11 Or ‘Holy Scriptures’, NKJV; *hiera*, ‘sacred’, is in the Greek.

12 Biblical quotations are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

teachings of the Church.

Tradition includes customs and practices that arose in various places and which were later accepted as norms of Christian belief and practice, often formally endorsed by the Church. During the mediaeval period the chief source of tradition became conciliar pronouncements and church decretals – *ecclesia docens*, Church teaching – that assumed the same, or even a superior, authority to that of Scripture. In the view of the mediaeval Church itself “unwritten traditions formed a second, independent, original, authentic source of information and doctrine alongside Scripture”, a position that was always unacceptable to historic orthodoxy.¹³ The original revelation in Scripture had become perceived as insufficient and consequently devalued.

The Reformation. The sixteenth-century European Reformation was in essence a reaction against tradition and the subsequent errors and abuses that crept into the Church as the mediaeval era unfolded. The defining call of the Reformation became *Sola Scriptura*, the Bible only, reaffirming the foundation of authentic Christian belief. Diarmaid MacCulloch says of that era, “Authority was to be respected . . . This was particularly the case with the greatest authoritative text of all, the Christian Bible”.¹⁴ One of the enduring achievements of the Reformation was the translation and printing of the Bible in the vernacular languages of Europe. Luther’s German Bible and Tyndale’s English New Testament shaped the language and cultures of their peoples, ensuring that Reformation principles continued to prevail for centuries.

A significant outcome of the Reformation emphasis on the Word of God was recovery of the notion concerning the “sufficiency of Scripture” – the conviction that man’s knowledge of God and everything necessary for salvation should be derived from the Bible. Packer says that as a result of this rediscovery, “The Bible was set up, according to its own demand, as judge of those traditions which previously had been supposed to supplant it”.¹⁵ The Reformation cannot be understood fully unless the desire to return to apostolic Christianity with its fundamental convictions about Scripture and divine revelation is grasped. Protestantism was thus born and from it the Nonconformist Churches later emerged with their uncompromising insist-

13 R. P. C. Hanson, ‘Tradition’ in Alan Richardson, *A Dictionary of Christian Theology* (London: SCM, 1969), 342. Burn-Murdoch included the dogma of the immaculate conception, substitution of the Lord’s Day for the Sabbath, and baptism by affusion as examples of tradition that have superseded the teaching of Scripture, H. Burn-Murdoch, *The Development of the Papacy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), 378-379.

14 Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe’s House Divided 1490-1700* (London: Penguin, 2004), 71.

15 Packer in *Revelation and the Bible*, 91.

ence on Scripture as the normative guide for all religious belief and practice.

The Enlightenment. For three hundred years or more the Reformation view of Scripture dominated Protestantism and much of the civilised world. Alister McGrath states that the Bible was “central to the life of Western European society in a way that we cannot begin to imagine today”.¹⁶ It was, in fact, the single most formative influence in the final development of Western civilisation. But that was to change dramatically in the eighteenth century with the coming of the Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason, resulting in the secularisation of Western European thought.¹⁷

Under the influence of the Enlightenment principles of rationalism, individualism and subjectivism, many thinkers of the time, like Voltaire and Hume, came to believe that they had been emancipated from the “tyranny” of the Church and Scripture. Intellectual objections were raised against Christianity and the Bible. Louis Berkhof speaks of the “chill winds of Rationalism” that swept over Europe, under which “Man became intoxicated with a sense of his own ability and goodness, refused to listen and submit to the voice of authority that spoke to him in Scripture, and reposed complete trust in the ability of human reason to lead him”.¹⁸

This humanistic attitude led to rejection of the biblical revelation as traditionally understood and reflects an unjustified confidence in the unaided human mind and its ability to discover religious truth for itself. The Bible became devalued and was to be interpreted just as any other book. Divine revelation and biblical authority were replaced by human wisdom and personal judgement. History has repeatedly demonstrated the persistent attraction of this viewpoint and its devastating consequences for the individual and for society.

The Contemporary Scene. Much could be said of the prevailing eclectic scene with its divergent and often conflicting views of revelation,¹⁹ but space restricts us to only two observations.

We note firstly the continuing influence of Enlightenment thinking, especially in academic circles where in many institutions it prevails across

16 Alister McGrath, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible* (London, Sydney and Auckland: Hodder and Stoughton, 2001), 2.

17 Enlightenment thinking began to appear in Europe from the mid-seventeenth century onwards, reaching its high point during the early decades of the eighteenth century.

18 L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London: Banner of Truth, 1963), 38.

19 ‘Contemporary’ is a relative term, here used mainly of the twentieth century and up until the present time. The complexity of contemporary views of revelation is illustrated in publications such as Paul Helm, *Divine Revelation: The Basic Issues* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1982) and Colin Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995).

most disciplines, including theology and biblical studies. Here it first led to a radically critical view of the Bible, resulting in the reinterpretation of Scripture according to Enlightenment principles.²⁰ The so-called Documentary Hypothesis, according to which the Pentateuch is a late compilation (c. sixth century B.C.) from several different sources rather than the work of one author or compiler, Moses, is a classic example. The New Testament has also been radically reinterpreted. Much of the life and teachings of Jesus have been rejected as myth, especially his miracles and the resurrection, and Jesus himself widely regarded, not as the Son of God as historically understood, but as an itinerant peasant preacher or a social revolutionary intent on undermining Roman authority in Palestine.²¹

Secondly, revelation itself has been redefined. It is now widely held that revelation is not a phenomenon that occurs through words *about* God, that is, in the Bible, but that it is a disclosure of God *himself*, an encounter of the human with the divine. Martin Buber, an Austrian Jewish philosopher (1868-1965), encapsulated encounter theology with his now-famous dictum “I-Thou” that succinctly represents this point of view – revelation principally as encounter. It has to be said that there is an important truth here. If the purpose of revelation is redemptive, then it must ultimately lead to some kind of interaction between God and humans at a personal level. But is it only this Buberian-type of encounter that is the authentic revelation of God? Or does revelation also occur at another level? Do words, spoken or written, play any part in the revelatory process of bringing about personal contact between God and human beings? The remainder of this chapter will attempt to answer this most fundamental question.

The Biblical Witness to Revelation

It has been asserted that the Bible itself has relatively little to say about revelation, indeed that revelation is a concept imposed on Scripture, and that what it does say, particularly in the New Testament, refers mainly to the revelation of Christ at the last day.²² We must, therefore, allow the Bible to speak for itself to determine if such claims are sustainable.

The Old Testament. Consideration of the Old Testament text at many points tells us explicitly that revelation occurred at various times throughout Old Testament history and that it is a basic idea in Old Testament the-

20 Michael Green states, “It is one of the three basic assumptions of the modern critical method that the Bible is in all respects to be treated exactly like any other ancient book”, in Morris, *Revelation*, 8.

21 See e.g., the views referenced in Bryan W. Ball and William Johnson, eds., *The Essential Jesus* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 2002), 12-14.

22 See, e.g., Richardson, ed., *Dictionary of Christian Theology*, 294.

ology. Such texts confirm our basic understanding of what revelation is – disclosure of that which otherwise would be known only to God: “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever” (Deut 29:29). The experience of the prophet Samuel further affirms revelation and recognises the fact that it occurs through the words of the Lord, and at a time of God’s choosing: “The Lord revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the Lord” (1 Sam 3:21). David claimed that he had been the recipient of divine revelation, “For you, O Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, have made this revelation to your servant, saying, ‘I will build you a house’” (2 Sam 7:27). Centuries later the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged that Daniel’s God was a “revealer of secrets” (Dan 2:19, 22, 28-30, 47, NKJV; *cf.* 10:1). The repeated emphasis on revelation throughout this entire passage is impossible to ignore. Amos 3:7 reaffirms that revelation undergirds God’s communication with the prophets, “The Lord God does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets”. On the basis of these texts alone it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that revelation occurred throughout the Old Testament era, and that it was so recognised, and that it frequently involved communication by word.

Many scholars recognise that the God of the Old Testament is portrayed consistently as “active” and as “speaking” and that these two characteristics are definitive of the Judaeo-Christian God. This understanding is confirmed by the text of Genesis 1 and 2, seminal chapters of the Bible by any criteria. The Creation account in Genesis 1 and 2 testifies to the “active” God of the Old Testament by the use of several verbs denoting action, including ‘created’, ‘made’, ‘separated’, ‘formed’, ‘blessed’, ‘breathed’, ‘planted’, ‘caused’ and so on. Beyond the various activities ascribed to God by these verbs, they also imply intention, planning, oversight and, not least, sovereignty. This early representation of the “active God” in the opening chapters of the Bible is foundational to a correct understanding of God and is frequently reiterated throughout the Old Testament.

But God also appears in Genesis 1 as the “speaking” God, who uses words to explain himself and to bring about his purpose. The repeated use of the phrase ‘God said’ in the Creation account not only indicates the manner in which Creation took place, thereby providing the Psalmist with the basis for his assertion “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made . . . For he spoke and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm” (Psa 33: 6, 9), but also fittingly introduces us to the God who will continue to speak throughout the Old Testament. The verbs ‘to say’ and ‘to speak’ appear more than any other verbs in the Old Testament text, most frequently with reference to God. They repeatedly underline the fundamental nature of

the Old Testament God as a God who makes known his will and his wishes in verbal form.

It is often claimed by those who are attracted to the idea of encounter revelation that God's principal method of revelation in Old Testament times was through various acts at specific points in history and in his encounters with specific individuals at times of crisis in their lives. "The central feature of the biblical revelation is that it was given in real history, among real men in the crises of their national and individual lives".²³ While revelation is undoubtedly communicated within the context of history and indeed includes God's acts in history, many would question that this personal dimension was its "central" feature.

Ned Stonehouse draws an important conclusion from the role of Moses during the Exodus and in the wilderness experience of Israel. Noting the "greatness" of Moses in biblical and Israelite history, his "distinctive place in the history of revelation" and "the historical character of the Old Testament revelation", Stonehouse remarks:

The word of the Lord which came by Moses could be and was, because of its historical character, handed down to the people from generation to generation. It is obvious that in the transmission of this special revelation the fact of its being so largely committed to writing was highly significant. The fact of its inscription assuredly did nothing to modify its essential character as revelation.²⁴

The resultant writings were incorporated in the Pentateuch, and the word thus written then became God's revelation of his past dealings with his people for succeeding generations.

Morris cites several Old Testament prophetic passages, all of which refer specifically to the word of the Lord as it came to the prophets, including "The Lord said to me" (Isa 8:1); "The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord" (Jer 7:1); "I heard the voice of one speaking" (Ezek 1:28). Morris argues convincingly against the view that revelation does not occur through the words of the prophets, for time after time that is precisely what the prophets themselves claim, and in view of the repeated use of such terms it is difficult to reach any other conclusion:

I cannot see why men should write in this way if what they wanted to tell us was that they had given the matter thought and were now prepared to let us have their considered conclusions. If words mean anything they are reporting disclosures. They are saying that God spoke to them, revealed himself to them, if you like.²⁵

²³ *Ibid.*, 295.

²⁴ Ned B. Stonehouse, 'Special Revelation as Scriptural', in Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible*, 77-78.

²⁵ Morris, *Revelation*, 21.

So when we allow the Old Testament writers to speak for themselves, we find that they insist that they are communicating what God first communicated to them. “They may not use our term, but they are recording what we call revelation”.²⁶

The New Testament. The New Testament Greek words that are translated “reveal” and “revelation” in English versions are the verb *apokalupto*, to unveil or uncover, and the related noun *apokalupsis*, an uncovering, or an unveiling. That which is “unveiled” already exists prior to any *apokalupsis* and without being unveiled would remain hidden. This, as we have seen, is precisely what the basic Christian concepts of God and revelation contain. But it is more than God himself who is unveiled through the revelatory process. Knowledge and facts relative to God’s redemptive purposes are also revealed.

The verb *apokalupto* is attributed to Jesus twice in Matthew 11: 25-27, once of his Father and once of himself, thereby claiming for him an equal authority to reveal what is normally hidden. Elsewhere, while the Old Testament continually uses phrases like “Thus says the Lord” (e.g., Jer 31:2,7,15,23,35,37), the New Testament records the repeated declarations of Jesus, “I say to you” (e.g., Matt 5:18,22,28; John 5:19, 24-25). Here, surely, is the reason why his words elicited such astonishment, “For his word possessed authority” (Luke 4:32). It was the authority of divine revelation, equal to the authority of the Old Testament prophets. Jesus further asserts that “knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven” had been given to the disciples, indicating that revelation imparts understanding (Matt 13:11, NIV). And in response to Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Christ, he said to Peter, “This was not revealed to you by man, but by Father in heaven” (Matt 16:17, NIV).

Similarly, the Pauline epistles demonstrate the crucial significance of revelation in Paul’s thinking and experience. Romans 1:16-17, 1 Corinthians 2:20, Galatians 1:12, Ephesians 1:17-18; 3:3-5, Philipians 3:15 and Colossians 1:26-27 all require careful consideration since they testify explicitly to revelation and since none of them refers to the revelation of Christ at the end of the age. Most of them relate specifically to Paul’s own experience. Space restricts extended discussion of these texts, but Galatians 1:11-12 deserves mention on account of its unambiguous witness to revelation in Paul’s own experience. Paul says that the Gospel he preached was not a human message, “For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation [*apokalupsis*] of Jesus Christ”. These

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

texts alone confirm that revelation was a defining factor in Paul's life and therefore in the development of the Christian message.

In addition to these specific references there are numerous passages in which revelation is clearly assumed or implied, both in the Pauline writings and in other New Testament passages, for example, 1 Corinthians 11:23; 15:3; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; 1 Thessalonians 2:13-14; Acts 26:12-18 and so on. How, in the face of all this textual evidence, it is possible to doubt that revelation is a fact in the New Testament record, completely unrelated to the revelation of Christ at the *parousia* is almost beyond comprehension.

We are thus confronted with a mass of evidence from both Old and New Testaments to the reality of revelation, to its immense significance in the divine purpose and to the fact that it is more than simply 'encounter', important though that is. Moreover, it frequently includes words that signify the impartation of knowledge and understanding and that necessarily have revelatory significance themselves. Morris summarises the import of the biblical witness to revelation rather neatly when, having argued at some length that revelation occurs through the words of the prophets, he says, "I do not see how it is possible for a Christian to reject the idea that God has disclosed at least something of himself and still be authentically Christian".²⁷

General and Special Revelation

The significance of revelation as a key concept for understanding the Bible and even for the survival of Christianity in an ever-increasingly secular culture has been recognised for some time. The terms "general revelation" and "special revelation" have been used in the attempt to explain and clarify the concept of revelation and it is necessary to consider these terms and their implications more carefully.

General Revelation. General revelation is the more recent term for what in the mediaeval period was usually called "natural revelation". It refers to the fact that there are evidences in nature and within human experience that testify to God's existence and that are evident for all to see. These evidences are generally held to include the cosmos that surrounds us, certain aspects of the natural world in which we live and the innate sense of right and wrong that exists in all human beings. Kant's memorable phrase "the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me"²⁸ is still a useful summary of the

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁸ From the conclusion to his *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788).

scope of general revelation.

The Old Testament, for example in Psalm 19:1-6, and the New Testament, in Romans 1:18-20, bear witness to the fact that God has revealed something of himself in nature. Paul seems to be quite clear on this, saying that God's power and his divinity "have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made" (Rom 1:20). Such revelation, however, has generally been held to be limited, perhaps awakening the conscience, an awareness of God and a desire to know more of him, but inadequate for a full understanding of either God or humanity and hence for salvation.²⁹ Gordon Clark says, "The planets above and the plants below show some of the wisdom and power of God", but argues that the cosmos and the creation do not reveal the full wisdom and power of God and that neither omnipotence nor righteousness are necessarily conclusions to be drawn from the stars.³⁰

Special Revelation. Special revelation refers to God's self-disclosures in Christ and in Scripture, both necessitated by humanity's natural alienation from God, the result of fallen human sinfulness with its "ignorance" and "darkened understanding" (Eph 4:18; Col 1:20). The symbiotic relationship between Christ and Scripture is so close as to be in some respects virtually inseparable. Both are expressions of the divine "Word", the very *logos* of God,³¹ Christ the incarnate Word and the Bible the inscripturated Word, each bearing witness to the other, Christ testifying repeatedly to the role of the written Word³² and the written Word clearly and consistently bearing witness to the incarnate Word.³³ We are concerned here particularly with the function of Scripture, the written Word, as God's special revelation.

While it is undeniable that natural human alienation from God is the fundamental reason for all revelation, it is also true that special revelation is necessary on account of human finitude as well as fallenness. Revelation akin to what we now term special revelation began in Eden before the writing of the Old Testament commenced and before human sin. Clark argues that the necessity of special revelation became apparent as soon as humans

29 Some are reluctant to concede that "general revelation" amounts to revelation at all. John Macquarrie prefers to think of it as providing "a general possibility of revelation", *Principles of Christian Theology* (London, SCM, 1966), 51.

30 Gordon Clark, 'Special Divine Revelation as Rational' in Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible*, 28.

31 On the depth of meaning inherent in *Logos*, the 'Word' of God, as an appropriate word to communicate the idea of revelation, see ch.15, p..5.

32 See, e.g., the chapter by Pierre Marcel, 'Our Lord's Use of Scripture' in Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible*.

33 This is not to overlook the distinctions between the two or the supremacy of the incarnate Word, as set forth for example in Hebrews 1:1-3.

were created, in other words on account of their creatureliness as well as, and before, their sinfulness:

When Adam was created and placed in the Garden of Eden, he did not know what to do. Nor would a study of the Garden have led to any necessary conclusion. His duty was imposed upon him by a special divine revelation. God told him to be fruitful and multiply, to subdue nature, to make use of animals, to eat of the fruit of the trees, with one fateful exception. Thus moral norms, commands and prohibitions were established by a special . . . revelation. Only so could man know God's requirements . . .³⁴

There is therefore a twofold necessity for special revelation: human ignorance and human sinfulness. That this Edenic revelation to the first humans occurred through verbal communication is clear. The record states, "God said to them, 'be fruitful and multiply' and 'God commanded'" (Gen 1:26; 2:16). Here is the speaking God in verbal communication with the first man and woman.

From then on, as Old Testament history unfolded and as its text shows, God revealed himself through a succession of remarkable acts. But it is equally clear that he also revealed himself through the written account of those mighty acts. How else could succeeding generations know about those deeds and their significance? It is so obvious from a thorough reading of the Bible, especially in the case of the Old Testament, that one wonders why it has ever been disputed. Morris criticises the artificial distinction between the deeds of God and his words, the more recent view that revelation occurred in the acts of God but not in verbal form or through the written record. His comments are worth noting:

We have no access to the deeds except through the record. If the record is unreliable then we do not know what God did and accordingly we do not know how he revealed himself. We have lost the revelation . . . It is impossible to be rid of the words if we are to find revelation in the deeds. It is the words and the deeds together which make up the revelation.³⁵

With reference to the New Testament, Stonehouse declares that by its very nature this new revelation, "no less surely than the old, was virtually crying out for inscripturation in order that the Church might be provided with assured knowledge of the fulfilment of the divine purpose of redemption".³⁶

Concerning special revelation Morris speaks of "the scandal of particularity that we cannot evade".³⁷ It is a protest against those who dislike the

34 Clark in Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible*, 29.

35 Morris, *Revelation*, 44.

36 Stonehouse in Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible*, 84.

37 Morris, *Revelation*, 47.

idea of special revelation or who deny it altogether. Enlightenment thinking, still very much evident today, rebels against the view that mankind needs assistance to discover truth, let alone to counter the effects of fallenness and sin and the consequent need for salvation. The “scandal of particularity” is a reflection, perhaps an extension, of Paul’s “scandal of the cross” – “we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling-block [Greek *skandalon*, an offense] and to the Greeks foolishness” (1 Cor 1:23). To the Jews the idea that the death of a common criminal crucified under Roman law could have any religious significance was abhorrent. To the Greeks the idea that the death of any man for the salvation of others was irrational foolishness, “so much silliness”, as Lenski puts it.³⁸ The scandal of the cross was universally offensive in the pagan Greco-Roman first-century world, as it and the record that bears witness to it still are to many.

Part of that offense, that “scandal”, lies in its particularity. Caiaphas thought it was “expedient” for one man to die for the people (John 18:14). In the divine purpose it was essential: “By one man’s obedience, many will be made righteous” (Rom 5:19). Special revelation was necessary to explain the meaning of that astonishing act of grace and to make it universally known. Humans could not have discovered it or understood it without such assistance. But in our time, under the baneful influence of radical Enlightenment thinking pushed to its limits, both the act and the explanation are offensive. The scandal of the cross has become the scandal of particularity in our time. One special man, the one of God’s own choosing, and the special revelation that testifies to the meaning of his life, death and resurrection are equally offensive to the “Greeks” of our day.

Morris argues that this scandal of particularity cannot be avoided because particularity was in the divine purpose from the beginning:

It is what God has done in Israel that matters, not what he did in the nations generally, what he did in Jesus that is important, not his action in men in general. It is in the death of Jesus that the atonement for men’s sins was wrought out not in the deaths of martyrs who through the ages have lived and died for the truth.³⁹

Authentic Christians can never deny the uniqueness of Christ or his atoning death, for they are integral to the Christian proclamation. Neither can they deny the uniqueness of the special revelation through which the record and the meaning of that life and that death have been made available, the “particularity” of Scripture. The Bible *is* a reality, and it *is* unique. It holds a special place in the literature of the world because it is the product of divine

38 R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of I and II Corinthians* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1963), 67.

39 Morris, *Revelation*, 47.

revelation. Nothing ever written is comparable with it. It is incontrovertibly special. Morris is undeniably correct when he says, “We do not do justice to the facts . . . unless we see the Bible as unique”.⁴⁰

Special Revelation as Rational Proposition

We must now address two crucial aspects of the revelatory process, particularly as they relate to special revelation: the extent to which reason is involved, and whether or not special revelation is at any time propositional, that is to say, occurs through words and statements.

Revelation and Reason. The centuries-old debate concerning revelation and reason has generally resulted in acknowledgment that reason is an important factor in human response to revelation. In other words, revelation would be pointless if those for whom it occurred did not know about it or understand it. In recent discussions of revelation the emphasis on revelation as ‘encounter’ has been seen by many as unbalanced, misleading and contrary to the biblical revelation itself. Archbishop William Temple spoke for many, as his words still do, when he stated, “Revelation can, and in the long run must, on pain of becoming manifest as superstition, vindicate its claim by satisfying reason”.⁴¹ More recently John Macquarrie has argued strongly in defence of reason as being necessary to understanding the revelatory process, declaring that he “must part company with the many theologians who in recent times have claimed that the content of revelation is a personal encounter”.⁴²

The importance of reason appears in the Old Testament through the repeated claims that the prophets declared “the word of the Lord” in texts such as Isaiah 1:18, with God’s invitation to fallen man to “reason together”, and the many references to understanding and knowledge throughout the Old Testament text. It is, however, in the New Testament, notably (although not exclusively) in the epistles, that the mind and reason are most stressed, perhaps in view of the prevailing emphasis on reason and rational discourse in the Graeco-Roman world, which early Christianity sought to reach with the Gospel. Frequent use of such words as mind (*nous*), understanding (*sunesis* and *nous*), knowledge (*gnosis* and *epignosis*), to make known (*gnorizo*) and to consider (*katanoeo*, literally meaning to perceive thoroughly) is sufficient to make it abundantly evident that reason is an essential element in the human response to revelation.

The New Testament evidence is particularly impressive. In Colossians 2

40 *Ibid.*

41 William Temple, *Nature, Man and God* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1934), 396.

42 Macquarrie, *Christian Theology*, 96.

Paul's hope that believers may have "full assurance of understanding" and "knowledge of God's mystery" (v. 2) follows the revelation already made of that mystery, Christ and the Gospel (1:25-27). In Ephesians 1 the "spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him [Christ]" and the 'enlightenment' of the believers at Ephesus (1:17-18) is contrasted with the "darkened understanding", "futile minds" and "ignorance" of the as yet unenlightened Gentiles (4:17-19). Paul's plea that Christians offer "reasonable"⁴³ service and be transformed by the "renewing" of their "minds" (Rom 12:1-2), his own testimony to serving God with his mind (Rom 7:25) and his exhortation that Christians should be "fully convinced" in their minds (Rom 14:5) illustrate just how crucial reason is in the experience of New Testament Christians. It seems indisputable that God's revelation in Scripture is cognitive, addressed to the mind and leading to knowledge and understanding that otherwise would not be attainable.

Reason itself requires objective consideration of all relevant data, and while space does not permit further investigation of this defining human faculty and its role in the revelatory process enough has been said to underline its critical significance. Centuries of theological reflection on the biblical witness and on normal human experience strongly indicate that revelation comes to human beings through words that convey knowledge, that impart understanding and that ultimately lead to self-knowledge and a radical life-changing 'encounter' with God. It may be claimed, therefore, that reason, among other things, is necessary to

- Understand what revelation is
- Perceive how it takes place
- Determine whether or not it has occurred
- Interpret what it means
- Communicate to others its content and consequences

It is impossible to conceive of any meaningful self-disclosure of God to humans that bypasses the mind and the understanding. Through the special revelation in Scripture, "God stoops to make himself known in ways we can grasp and understand. He comes to us in categories of thought and action which make sense to us".⁴⁴

The more recent understanding of revelation as 'encounter', a nebulous, mystical concept, is the outcome of post-Enlightenment existentialism, itself an unbalanced and unbiblical reaction to reactionary Enlightenment

43 The rare Greek word *logikon* translated 'reasonable' in many English versions signifies rationality; see A. Souter, *A Pocket Lexicon to the Greek New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), 147; cf. the marginal notes in ESV and NKJV.

44 Clark Pinnock, 'Revelation' in S. B. Ferguson and D. F. Wright, eds., *New Dictionary of Theology* (Leicester, UK and Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1996), 587.

rationalism. Ironically, the revelation to which Scripture and reason bear witness and which conveys knowledge and understanding also leads to a personal, inner experience that far surpasses the mystical, ill-defined ‘encounter’ of existential theology. It asserts “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col 1:27) and “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20) and “the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you” (Rom 8:11). We note that Joseph Scriven wrote the immensely popular hymn “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” under the influence of the strongly biblical preaching of the Second Great Awakening in North America some seventy years before Buber published *Ich und Du*. The biblical revelation is rational, cognitive and informative; it is also redemptive and ultimately relational.

*Revelation as Propositional.*⁴⁵ For at least the past hundred years the belief that revelation occurred through words and statements has come under sustained attack. Due largely to the influence of ‘encounter’ theology, the concept of propositional revelation became widely regarded as out-dated and even misleading. Paul Helm notes that in the twentieth century the idea was “fiercelycontroverted”, even though it had been regarded as “common-place” in the earlier centuries of Christianity.⁴⁶ While the attack has abated more recently, the underlying antipathy to it lingers in certain quarters, evident for example in the suspicion with which doctrine is regarded, even rejected, by some and also in the tendency to be selective with regard to which words of the biblical revelation to accept.

Bernard Ramm regarded the phrase “propositional revelation” as “inept”⁴⁷ – we might at least agree that it is insufficient – yet the idea it is intended to convey is unequivocally fundamental to the divine-human dialogue. Simply stated – and at risk of being repetitious - it is that God has revealed himself and his purposes through words. We have already seen substantial evidence of the fact that from the beginning God has addressed human beings verbally, firstly through the spoken word and subsequently through the written word. We here make the point that propositional revelation, correctly understood, is a consequence both of the “speaking God” of history and Scripture and the “hearing man” of God’s own creation. It is necessary both on account of God’s own determination to use words in the revelatory process and on account of man’s singular ability to reason,

45 Proposition in the sense in which it is generally used in discussions of revelation means, of course, more than ‘assertion’ or ‘proposal’ but ‘words’ in the broader sense. Thus Scripture, while a verbal revelation, is more than bald theological assertions.

46 Helm, *Divine Revelation*, 21-22.

47 B. Ramm, *Special Revelation and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 154.

an inherent and defining rationality. Noting the “spiritual importance of the word”, Morris states that “rational intercourse depends on the use of words” concluding that it is “not easy to see” how propositional revelation “can be resisted”.⁴⁸

G. E. Ladd asserts that both God’s deeds and his words constitute revelation, but argues that the deeds require the words in order to become of revelatory significance to future generations. “God did not act in history in such a way that historical events were eloquent in and of themselves”, he says. “The historical events are revelatory *only when they are accompanied by the revelatory word*”.⁴⁹ The prime example is God’s supreme self-revelation in the death of Christ. That Christ died is a simple historical fact. But propositional revelation informs us why he died, emphasising in so doing the love of God. Ladd explains:

The cross by itself did not speak of love and forgiveness. Proof of this may be found in the experience of those who watched Jesus die. Were any of these witnesses overwhelmed with a sense of the love of God, conscious that he [or she] was beholding the awesome spectacle of atonement being made for [human] sins? Did John, or Mary, or the centurion, or the High Priest throw himself in choking joy upon the earth before the cross with the cry, ‘I never knew how much God loved me’?⁵⁰

Ladd then states: “It was only after the interpretive word was given to the disciples that they came to understand that the death of Christ was revelatory of the love of God”.⁵¹ The event required explanatory words, propositional statements, indeed a whole series of propositional statements. These statements were incorporated into the New Testament, which became the substance of divine revelation for generations to come. Without them, the greatest single revelatory act of God in history would have been lost in antiquity and Christianity would probably not have survived.

Propositional revelation is a logical and necessary consequence of the fact that God has spoken to mankind. It is also an inevitable consequence of inherent human rationality and the use of words in normal discourse. Far from being out-dated, misleading and irrelevant, propositional revelation demonstrates the shallowness of the ill-defined ‘encounter’ concept, the Enlightenment alternative to the historical reality. Revelation through word and speech, propositional revelation as traditionally understood, is also the necessary corollary to God’s will to be known by rational human beings. Morris concludes, “We need not, accordingly, be surprised at the

⁴⁸ Morris, *Revelation*, 117-118.

⁴⁹ G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Guildford and London: Lutterworth, 1974), 30-31, emphasis in the original.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

place words occupy in revelation. They are God's way of making his truth known to people" and again, "It is only in the measure that we can trust the record that we can apprehend the revelation".⁵²

Revelation and Authority

It remains to consider briefly the ultimate question, that of authority. Should God's revelation in Scripture, the "Word of God" as traditionally understood, still be regarded as authoritative, particularly in the areas it specifically addresses?

Historically, the answer is clear and unequivocally affirmative. The phrase "Word of God" arises from the Bible's own testimony about itself and ever since the Reformation, Protestant creeds and confessions of faith have affirmed the authority of the Word in the life and belief of the Church and in the lives of individual believers. Two such documents that have articulated Protestant belief in the English-speaking world are the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion (1562) and the Presbyterian Westminster Confession of Faith (1643). The former refers to the authority of Holy Scripture, the "canonical books of the Old and New Testament" that "contain all things necessary to salvation".⁵³ Article 1 of the Westminster Confession specifies "the divine authority" of Holy Scripture, to which "the Church is finally to appeal".⁵⁴ These two documents alone have shaped Protestantism around the world and reflect the deep conviction of millions of Christians throughout the centuries as well as the nature of historic Protestantism itself. Only the most liberal of liberal theologians would deny any authority to Scripture, although many appear to have come perilously close to doing so in our time.

Of more immediate relevance, however, is that reason requires a similar conclusion. If the Bible is a special divine revelation, to be received therefore as the Word of God, it would be irrational to deny it the authoritative status it has been accorded throughout Christian history. If God has spoken, rational man must listen. Morris insists that since revelation has occurred in and through the Bible, "it is a book which has authority".⁵⁵ There is no logical way of avoiding this conclusion. To think otherwise would be contrary to reason. The attribution of authority to Scripture "follows from the fact" that the Bible provides evidence of its status as divine revelation.⁵⁶ Packer refers to "the normative authority of Scripture", explaining that unless "we

⁵² Morris, *Revelation*, 118.

⁵³ E. Cardwell, *Synodalia* (Oxford: OUP, 1842, reprinted 1966), 56.

⁵⁴ H. Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church* (Oxford: OUP, 1963), 245.

⁵⁵ Morris, *Revelation*, 138, 136.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 136.

have direct access to revelation normatively presented, by which we may test and correct our own fallible notions”, we are left “to drift on a sea of speculations and doubts”.⁵⁷

An insidious challenge to the notion of biblical authority arises from the prevailing contemporary mind-set. It is not merely rejection of biblical authority that concerns us, although in the context of the present discussion this is clearly the major issue, but the rejection of authority *per se*. Colin Gunton identifies “the heart of the modern offence with revelation”. It is, he says, “rooted in the problem of authority and the way it appears to violate human autonomy”.⁵⁸ It is, in short, the pervasive influence of humanistic, Enlightenment thinking, the authority of Scripture being its most notable casualty, certainly from a Christian standpoint. The enthronement of “reason only” over revelation has led to a significantly unreasonable conclusion. In her justly acclaimed analysis of the global battle over God, truth and power in modern society, *The World Turned Upside Down*, Melanie Phillips concludes that the present decline of Western culture results from the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment assault on the authority of the Judaeo-Christian Scriptures. “The attack on Western civilisation at its most profound level is an attack on the creed that lies at the very heart of that civilisation”.⁵⁹

Nor is Phillips a lone voice crying in a modern wilderness. Half a century ago Harry Blamires began his perceptive analysis of contemporary Christian thought, *The Christian Mind*, an acknowledgement that Western civilisation was already in deep trouble by the mid-twentieth century, with the startling assertion, “There is no longer a Christian mind”, arguing that contemporary Christianity had “succumbed to secularisation”.⁶⁰ The heart of Blamire’s argument is that the true Christian mind is defined by its orientation to the supernatural, its conception of truth and its acceptance of authority.⁶¹ “Our age”, he declared, “is in revolt against the very notions that are crucial to Christian thinking and acting”.⁶² Contemporary secularism, he argued,

... heavily biased as it is towards individualism, subjectivism and atomistic intellectualism, is quickly eroding what remains of the Christian mind, ... oriented towards a truth revealed, demanding, and divinely guaranteed, whose objective certitude and authoritativeness are alike distasteful to a secularism deeply committed to self-culture as opposed

57 Packer in Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible*, 96,99.

58 Gunton, *Theology of Revelation*, 32.

59 Melanie Phillips, *The World Turned Upside Down* (New York and London: Encounter, 2010), 316.

60 H. Blamires, *The Christian Mind: How Should a Christian Think?* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1963), 3.

61 He also includes its awareness of evil and its concern for the person.

62 Blamires, *Christian Mind*, 132.

to self-discipline, and to a destiny of mastery as opposed to rigorous service.⁶³

In explaining that the Christian mind is defined by its acceptance of the authority of revelation, Blamires further wrote,

One cannot seriously contemplate the first elementary truths of Christianity – the doctrine of the divine creation of man and his world, the doctrine of redemption, and the doctrine of the church, without realising that here is something which is either authoritative and binding or false, deserving of submission or of total neglect.⁶⁴

More recently David Wells has reminded us that churches with roots in the Protestant Reformation accept that truth is revealed in the Word of God. “There is unanimous agreement”, he says, “that this authoritative truth lies at the heart of Christian life and practice, for this is what it means to live under the authority of Scripture”.⁶⁵ Such is the very essence of Protestant identity. All this, and much more, underlines the binding claims of this special revelation that tells us so clearly of the eternal Christ, the creative Word and the redeeming Saviour, and explains what it means to believe in him and to be his disciple. It is an authority that cannot be avoided or evaded for those who claim discipleship. As Blamires so poignantly puts it, “It is either the bowed head or the turned back”.⁶⁶

The claims of biblical authority apply at every level of Church life and to each individual Christian. Indeed, Christian authenticity is determined, in part at least, by the response to God’s authoritative revelation in Scripture. Christian leaders, Christian professionals, doctors, teachers, lawyers, writers, pastors and preachers, academics in all disciplines, tradesmen, business executives, parents and students – indeed every professing member of the body of Christ – are all, by virtue of their claim to be Christian, inescapably subject to the authority of Scripture. It is as inevitable and consequential as a citizen being subject to the law of the land. Difficult as it may be at times, the constant eroding pressure of secular, humanistic, culture must be recognised for what it is and resisted in the name of authentic Christianity.

At a time when the challenge to biblical authority was becoming increasingly obvious in the Protestant world, the influential Dutch theologian G. C. Berkouwer pointed out that the authority of the Bible was threatened not only from without, but also from within, by those who “really do not subject themselves to this authority and do not manifest the reality of their confes-

63 *Ibid.*, 130.

64 *Ibid.*, 132. See also David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth, or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1993), *passim* but especially 99-106, 279-282.

65 Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 99.

66 Blamires, *Christian Mind*, 132.

sion in their daily lives".⁶⁷ It is a sobering call to reflection and reaffirmation. Recognition and re-emphasis of the twin concepts of revelation and biblical authority in the life of the Church may be the single most pressing challenge of our time, to recapture and re-establish them in areas where the insidious infiltration of humanism and liberalism have eroded them in the name of progress and enlightenment. The sure consequences of reaffirmed biblical authority are certainty, hope and motivation. Such commitment is essential for a healthy and vibrant church.

⁶⁷ G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 35.

