



Revelation: Part 1

In this chapter, we are going to begin to define ‘revelation.’ We will first offer a working definition, and then explore two ways in which the Bible speaks of revelation. Theologians have termed these two ways ‘general’ (or ‘natural’) revelation and ‘special’ revelation. These studies in definition will prepare us to think carefully about the nature and character of the Bible.

What Is Revelation?

The core of the idea of revelation is ‘disclosure.’ The English word, ‘reveal,’ derives from a Latin verb meaning ‘to pull back the veil.’¹ Revelation enables access to that which is otherwise inaccessible. Christianity is predicated upon the self-revelation of God.² The concept of revelation,

1. The English verb ‘reveal’ is derived from the Latin verb *revelare*, which, in turn, is composed of two Latin words, the prefix *re-* and the noun *velum*, *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (2 vols.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971). The Latin noun *velum* denotes ‘a cloth, covering, awning, curtain, [or] veil,’ Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1879).

2. The last three centuries in particular have witnessed considerable philosophical and theological attention to the idea of revelation, much of it hostile to classical Christianity. For helpful surveys of these discussions, see Warfield, ‘The Idea of Revelation and Theories of Revelation,’ in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* (10 vols.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1932), 1:37-48; H. D. McDonald, *Theories of Revelation: An Historical Study, 1700-1960* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979); J. I. Packer, ‘Contemporary Views of Revelation,’ in *Honouring the Written Word of God: The Collected Shorter Writings of J. I. Packer, Volume 3* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999), 65-80; Ronald H. Nash, *The Word of God and The Mind of Man* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1982); and John M. Frame, *The Doctrine*

however, is not unique to Christianity. As Herman Bavinck observed in the early twentieth century, ‘the history of religions is proof that the concept of revelation is not only integral to Christianity and occurs in Holy Scripture but is a necessary correlate of all religion.’³ Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are all founded upon claims to divine, verbal revelation. Many religions throughout human history, however, are not founded upon sacred texts thought to disclose the divine mind. Yet these religions rest, at some level, upon what is thought to be divine revelation. The scholar of ancient Roman religion, John Scheid, insists that ancient Roman religion ‘was a religion without revelation, without revealed books, without dogma and without orthodoxy.’ Rather, its ‘central requirement was ... “orthopraxis,” the correct performance of prescribed rituals.’⁴ But these elaborate rituals, Scheid observes, were oriented towards the gods whom the Romans regarded as ‘liv[ing] in the world alongside men and [striving] with them, in a civic context, to bring about the common good.’⁵ These rituals admitted of multiple purposes, but all rituals were undertaken out of a conviction that they would be acceptable or pleasing to the venerated god. In other words, these rituals reflect the practitioners’ belief that they are acting in accordance with the mind of the deity.⁶ Even religions of orthopraxy, then, require some measure of divine revelation for their functioning and maintenance.

of the Word of God (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010), 13-43. Helpful Reformed treatments of the subject include Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), and Paul Helm, *The Divine Revelation* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1982). Two influential recent Roman Catholic surveys are those of Avery Cardinal Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992) and *Revelation Theology: A History* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969).

3. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend; 4 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 1:284. In the section that follows this statement, Bavinck offers support for this claim from the information about world religions available to him, 1:284-7. As Bavinck elsewhere observes, ‘humanity as a whole has been at all times supernaturalistic to the core,’ *The Philosophy of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 1. Compare Turretin, ‘no nation has ever been found so barbarous as not to have its hierophants engaged in gaining the knowledge of and in teaching divine things,’ *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (3 vols.; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992-7), 1:3 (=1.2.1).

4. John Scheid, *An Introduction to Roman Religion* (trans. Janet Lloyd; Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), 18.

5. *ibid.*, 147.

6. This is not necessarily to say, of course, that such beliefs are either accessible in writing to outsiders or consciously informing the ritual actions of the practitioners.

The idea of revelation, then, is not unique to Christianity. Some understanding of revelation persistently informs human religious endeavor. Even so, it would be misguided to construct either a definition or doctrine of revelation by compiling the results of an empirical survey of human religions. This becomes evident when we reflect upon the necessary conditions for revelation. Revelation requires a revealer, recipients of revelation, and something revealed. Christianity makes distinct claims about each of these three dimensions of revelation. The *revealer* is the God whom we encounter both in the world that He has made and upon the pages of Scripture. This God is ‘a personal God, possessing the attributes of power, intelligence, and moral excellence.’ He is, ‘in relation to the universe, ... at once immanent in, and transcendent to, the universe.’ God’s ‘moral government over mankind and other intelligent creatures rewards and punishes them according to their moral character.’⁷ The *recipients of revelation* are the intelligent, moral creatures whom this God has made for His own glory, particularly, human beings (Gen. 1:26-7, Rom. 11:36).⁸ Specifically, people are said to be made after God’s own ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ (Gen. 1:26, cf. 1:27). Since God is represented in Scripture as a God who speaks, the image must include the capacity to reason.

Man ... is not dumb and uncomprehending, but is endowed with a mental faculty that enables him to use language for the rational expression and communication of his thoughts and wishes, to pursue intellectual studies, to investigate the connection between things, and to appreciate the rationality of God’s creation, of which he himself is a part. And man is not dumb because God is not dumb. God is a God who speaks, and his speaking is the declaration of his mind and his will ... Being exclusively formed in the divine image, man alone of earth’s creatures is endowed with the faculty of rationality which enables him, as a reflector of the Creator’s rationality, to think and to plan and to speak.⁹

It is not simply that human beings happen to receive the revelation that God makes to them. It is that human beings are intentionally created with the capacity to understand and to respond to the God who made them.

7. Thomas C. Johnson, ‘Synopsis of Lectures on Inspiration,’ n.p., n.d., 3.

8. For purposes of this discussion, we set aside consideration of another category of intelligent, moral creatures, namely, the angels.

9. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 57.

But the Bible says more about the recipients of revelation than that they are made after the image of God. Human beings are in a state of alienation from and rebellion against God. All human beings have sinned and, therefore, fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). That is to say, they, through sin, have failed to answer the purpose for which they were made – to glorify the God who made them.¹⁰ Sin has affected even the workings of the human mind. Humans have become ‘futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened’ (Rom. 1:21). They are ‘darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart’ (Eph. 4:18). Human beings are by nature, therefore, unwilling recipients of God’s speech. They have no interest in what God has to say to them. Rather, ‘by their unrighteousness [they] suppress the truth’ (Rom. 1:18).

This reality, in turn, brings us to the third dimension of Christianity’s claims about divine revelation, namely, *that which is revealed*. Whatever God chooses to reveal about Himself is addressed to natively hostile recipients. In other words, the content of God’s speech cannot but reflect the antipathy that unrenewed sinners have towards God. His self-revelation is adapted to their condition and state as sinners. But even as God’s self-revelation reflects the condition of its recipients, it is still God’s *self*-revelation. As Francis Turretin has observed, ‘the nature and goodness of God who, since he is the best, is most communicative of himself. He cannot communicate himself more suitably to a rational creature and in a manner more fitting to human nature than by the knowledge and love of himself.’¹¹ Revelation is not a fundamentally vindictive enterprise. Its most basic end is not to seal the condemnation of sinful recipients. At bottom, revelation is the benevolent expression of a God who is love (1 John 4:9). In revelation, God communicates Himself to His image-bearers.

In saying that God reveals Himself to human beings, we are defining revelation as a fundamentally personal enterprise. This is not to say that revelation is not propositional in nature.¹² On the contrary, revelation

10. Douglas Moo, *Romans 1-8* (WEC; Chicago: Moody, 1991), 226-7.

11. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (3 vols.; Phillisburg, NJ: P&R, 1992-7), 1:3 (=1.2.1).

12. One leading theologian of the twentieth century, Karl Barth, understands revelation as personal but distances revelation from propositional truth. Revelation, he argues, takes place in the interpersonal encounter between God and the individual who responds to God in faith.

is both personal *and* propositional.¹³ Proponents of personal-not-propositional revelation erect a false antithesis between ‘personal’ and ‘proposition.’ As Frame has noted, ‘there is no reason why someone cannot reveal himself through revealing information about himself. In fact, we regularly do that. It’s almost impossible to imagine revealing yourself to someone without at the same time revealing information about yourself. And whenever we reveal information about ourselves, we are to some extent (not exhaustively, to be sure) revealing ourselves.’¹⁴ Furthermore, the word group ‘reveal’ in the New Testament, as Frame observes, ‘present[s] revelation as God’s communicating information.’¹⁵ The New Testament writers, following the Old Testament, uniformly understand revelation in propositional terms. God has come to man, but He has come to man along the avenue of speech.¹⁶ Human beings know God, but that knowledge can never be less than propositional in nature.¹⁷

In summary, to speak of revelation is to speak of the self-disclosure of the living, personal God who has made all things for Himself. Because

It is a mistake, according to Barth, to identify the Bible with the Word of God. The Bible bears witness to the Word of God, but is not itself the Word of God *simpliciter*. It is the occasion of revelation but not revelation itself. For a fuller discussion of Barth’s doctrine of revelation and the Bible, see Chapter 7. See also the summary of Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 84-97.

13. Nash notes that the theological antithesis between person and proposition frequently posits the conviction that ‘cognitive knowledge about God is unattainable. Because God is totally transcendent, because He is unlike anything else in human experience, human language is an unfit instrument to capture ideas or express truths about God. Nor are human rational faculties adequate for knowledge about the transcendent,’ *The Word of God and The Mind of Man*, 47. The Bible, however, understands neither divine transcendence nor the mind of divine image-bearers along such lines.

14. Frame, *Doctrine of the Word of God*, 41.

15. *ibid.* See Frame’s helpful discussion of the way in which the New Testament’s designation of Christ as ‘Word’ in no way diminishes the authority of Jesus’ words, *Doctrine of the Word of God*, 42-3. On the contrary, Frame observes, ‘in God’s personal words, Christ himself comes to engage our belief and obedience,’ 43.

16. To anticipate our discussion below, we are not saying that God, in natural revelation, audibly and verbally speaks to human beings through the things that are made. General revelation is ‘unwritten,’ Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (3 vols., 1894; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 1:62. We are saying, however, that human beings inexorably know God through the creation, and that knowledge is irreducibly propositional in nature. For a recent effort to conceive natural revelation in terms of ‘personal-word revelation,’ see Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 78.

17. For a defense of the proposition that human words are capable of being ‘words of God, conveying to us the Word – that is, the message – of God,’ see Packer, ‘The Adequacy of Human Language,’ in *Honouring the Written Word of God*, 23-49.