

*"Our initial point is that God himself wills to reveal himself. He himself wills to attest his revelation. He himself — not we — has done this and wills to do it."*¹

We will now study the subject of God revealing Himself to humanity—the doctrine of revelation. Revelation can be defined as "God's supernatural disclosure to human beings of truth they would not otherwise know and are incapable of discovering on their own." This communication may be either oral or written. Revelation is usually understood as God's written communication to humankind.

The term "revelation" comes from the Greek word *apokalupsis*, which means "a disclosure" or "an unveiling." The word was used in other contexts to describe the unveiling of a statute upon its completion. It has the idea of disclosing something that was previously unknown.

Revelation is the opposite of scientific research or human reasoning. The knowledge that God has revealed about Himself to humankind could never be attained through any type of scientific experiment or logical reasoning. It is entirely a supernatural disclosure from God.

Only God reveals the truths of revelation. He alone is the source of knowledge about Himself and His plan. Revelation is, therefore, an act of God. Jesus said:

"All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matthew 11:27).

Therefore divine revelation is a work of God alone.²

General Revelation

Also known as Universal revelation, general revelation deals with how God can be understood through his creation. More specifically, this can be manifest in physical nature, human nature, and history. General revelation does not impart truths that are necessary for salvation (e.g. sinfulness of humanity, the atonement, etc...), however, it is argued that God's existence, transcendence, immanence, self-sufficiency, eternity, power, goodness, and hate for evil can be comprehended and seen through his creation.³

Physical nature

The book of Psalms says that, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands" (Psalm 19:1). Later on it says that, "The heavens proclaim his righteousness, and all the peoples see his glory (Psalm 97:6). Paul told men that God had given testimony of Himself in that he has shown kindness by giving them rain from heaven, crops in their seasons and even provides them with their food (Acts 15:15-17). A clearer passage states that, "What may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse" (Romans 1:19-20).

Human nature

Because humans are made in God's image (Genesis 1:27), something about God can be learned from the study of human nature. Most evident is the moral and spiritual qualities found within humankind that reflect the character of God. Paul says that even the law is written on the hearts of people who do not have the specially revealed law (Romans 2:11-16).

History

Some theologians note that history is His - story. The Bible clearly indicates in numerous places that God is moving the course of history and is controlling the destinies of nations (Job 12:23; Psalm 47:7-8, 66:7; Isaiah 10:5-13; Daniel 2:21; Acts 17:26). It should then be possible to sense God at work within history.

¹ Barth, Karl - *Homiletics* p. 50.

² Don Stewart <http://www.blueletterbible.org/faq/nbi/368.html>

³ Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 1,019; cf. *Romans 1*

A careful analysis of the history of the nation of Israel should provide more evidence than is needed.

Special Revelation

Special revelation is distinguished from general revelation in that it is direct revelation from God. Examples include God’s direct speech to various people (e.g., prophets; cf. 2 Peter 1:20-21), the incarnation (cf. Hebrews 1:1-2), and the Bible. Such revelation is sufficient to communicate the gospel, unlike general revelation, and thus salvation is possible only through special revelation.

3-Fold Method of Divine Revelation

The Doctrine of Revelation must embrace the whole process of God revealing himself to us. The role of the Scriptures is foundational, but they are not the whole of the process. It is, of course, possible for God to reveal himself completely outside of the Bible, as he did to Abraham. But without having the Scriptures to validate one’s experience with God one can never be sure that one is appropriating the knowledge of God. So the Bible has a part, but to read the Bible without the other ingredients is to read mere human words, devoid of any possibility of achieving the Knowledge of God. John Calvin summarized it this way—one needed the “spectacles of faith” and the Holy Spirit to read the Bible properly.



For the purposes of study, theologians have divided the doctrine of Revelation into a process characterized by three stages: Manifestation, Inspiration, and Illumination. The figure above gives a simplified overview but other factors, such as preaching, mission, and evangelism also play a part in appropriating the Word of God. Before discussing these phases, however, it is necessary to present an important caveat:

God is always in control of the process of revelation. He remains hidden from attempts by science or philosophy to probe Him (Eccl. 8:17). God also reserves his “secret things” (Deut. 29:29). So the doctrine of Revelation acknowledges God’s sovereignty in how and when He reveals himself. That is, God chooses to reveal himself, and is always the initiator in that process. Karl Barth, once said that, were God to do otherwise, He would lose His freedom and would no longer be God. God must be free to reveal or not reveal at His own pleasure. God’s revelation always glorifies God, not some human scientist, theologian, or philosopher.⁴

1. Manifestation

God initiates the process of revealing himself by some form of act. This stage is so named because God “manifests” himself in a way that impacts history and which is witnessed by one or more human observers.

The following are the ways upon which God manifested Himself in the Bible

1. Direct voice

- Genesis 2:16-17, to Adam
- Genesis 6:13, to Noah
- Gen. 12:1, to Abram
- Genesis 26:2, to Isaac
- Genesis 35:1, to Jacob
- Exodus 3:4-10, to Moses

2. Apparition - Exodus 33:11

3. Direct writing - Exodus 31:18

4. Dreams - Genesis 40, Numbers 12:6, Daniel 1:17

5. Visions - Acts 10

6. Salvation History - It is the history of God’s redemptive work with His chosen community of faith. Genesis-Esther; Matthew 1:16-17; Hebrews 11:39-40

1. Inspiration

⁴ <http://www.hccentral.com/drev.html>

The biblical writer witnessing a manifestation of God then writes down that which has been seen and/or heard. This is done in the writer's own words and necessarily within the context of that person's culture and experience. This step of the revelatory process is not a purely human activity, however. The writer functions under the influence of the Holy Spirit, which enables the written text to have the intended interpretation of the manifestation. Any observer at the crucifixion might be able to write "Jesus died." But an inspired writer will be able to say "Jesus died for our sins." The Holy Spirit, operating through inspiration, enables the writer to interpret the event the way God intends it to be understood.

Inspiration properly embraces a larger process than just writing down the right words. The words may be placed in an oral tradition that is later written down, or the work of writing may fall to a protégé. It also includes the process that leads to the adoption of the text in the canon of Scripture. The Holy Spirit should be seen as guiding this entire process in order that the biblical text that is passed along to us is exactly as God intends it. Therefore inspiration functions as a means for God to produce a written record of His manifestation to the ancients.

- Amos 3:7
- Ephesians 3:3-5
- 2 Tim 3:16-17

1. Illumination

This final stage takes place in "real time," as the contemporary reader scans the Bible and attempts to appropriate it as the Word of God. The Holy Spirit guides the reading and contemplation of the text. This is absolutely essential for the Christian life, as one needs the Word of God, not just the ancient, inspired words. The Holy Spirit guides the reader "into all truth" (Jn. 16:13). That is, the doctrine of Illumination converts the inspired Scripture into words that enable the contemporary believer to interpret contemporary events and formulate contemporary responses as he or she co-operates with God. It is only at this point that the Bible becomes the "sword" of Heb. 4:12.

- Luke 24:32
- 1 Cor. 2:12
- Acts 8

God's ultimate revelation in Christ

Christ is the centerpiece of God's revelation whereupon He Himself is the Immanuel. God in flesh, God walking among us God revealed physically and is the way to be in fellowship with the God who revealed Himself to the ancients as testified to in Scripture.

God has chosen more than one method to reveal Himself to humankind. The writer to the Hebrews said.

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe (Hebrews 1:1,2).

According to the New Testament, divine revelation also consists of revealing secrets that had been hidden for long ages that are now disclosed. Paul wrote.

Now to the One who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith (Romans 16:25,26).

Paul also wrote.

The mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory (Colossians 1:26,27).

Conclusion:

When God reveals to humanity truth that we would not otherwise know it is called "revelation." Human reason or intuition could never know these truths – they can only be revealed by God Himself. The

purpose for our existence, and the plan of God for our salvation, can only be known through divine revelation.

To bring this Word to humankind, the Lord chose a group of people to be the ones through whom He would speak. They were known as the prophets. The prophets revealed God's truth to humanity over a long period of time in a number of different ways. The revelation given in Scripture tells humanity everything that it needs to know about God and his plan. God's Word to humankind is therefore both sufficient and complete.

Resources

Peter Jensen, *The Revelation of God, Contours of Christian Theology* (InterVarsity Press, 2002)

Paul Helm, *The Divine Revelation: The Basic Issues* (Crossway, 1982)

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J.I. Packer, *God Has Spoken: Revelation and the Bible* (Hodder & Stoughton, rev. ed., 1993)

B.B. Warfield, *Revelation and Inspiration* (Oxford, 1927)

Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks*