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# THE WORD AS LAMP: A STUDY IN REVELATION

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Empiricist, rationalist and idealist philosophies in the post-enlightenment west have subjected Scripture to intense criticism. Evolutionary science has questioned its reliability. In the church and academy controversies abound regarding the doctrines of Scripture such as inerrancy, infallibility and inspiration. Much, if not all of what has been predicated of God's word has been disputed and in the minds of many the integrity of Scripture has been left in tatters. Peter Jensen comments, 'the task of rehabilitating that position [that Scripture is the word of God] in a post-enlightenment world is truly formidable.'<sup>1</sup>

When we think of the doctrine of revelation, questions come to mind such as, 'How has God made himself known?' 'Where has God made himself known?' 'What has God made known about himself?' We are concerned here with a fundamental matter in theology—the communication of the knowledge of God to creation, and in particular to humanity—and so it is appropriate that we consider revelation and the word of God with respect to theological principles.

## I. PRINCIPLES OF REVELATION

Principles are decisive for theological formulation because they shape theological viewpoints. There are two principles of knowledge: the *principium essendi* (the principle of being or essential ground) and *principium cognoscendi* (the principle of knowing or cognitive foundation).<sup>2</sup> In natural science it has been commonplace to view the *principium essendi* as the world while the *principium cognoscendi* is reason; the world is studied without recourse to supernatural revelation. Theology holds that God is the objective ground of knowledge; he is the *principium essendi*. As the uncreated creator, he is prior to and distinguished from all things. He is the ground of all knowledge concerning himself. God is also the *principium cognoscendi*. He reveals himself, indeed all truth concerning God is truth that he has revealed. The contentious issue is how, or through which means, he does this. How does God make himself known to humanity?

<sup>1</sup> P. Jensen, *The Revelation of God* (Leicester: IVP, 2002), p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> Definitions from R. A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), p. 246.

God's revelation has external and internal aspects. The external is objective to us, while the internal is subjective. Hence the question of how God reveals himself to us is studied with respect to the *principium cognoscendi externum* (the external means, or principle of knowing God) and the *principium cognoscendi internum* (the internal means, or principle of knowing God).

Various answers have been offered as to the *principium cognoscendi externum*. Roman Catholicism argues that God is known by way of Scripture and the Church. Mysticism views the revelation of God as immediate—the way we know God is through our experience. Deism contends that God is known by the light of nature. In liberal theology human nature is the means by which we know God.<sup>3</sup> Reformed theology holds that God reveals knowledge of himself by way of Scripture (*sola scriptura*).

The *principium cognoscendi externum* is of enormous significance. Difference in commitment here explains some of the major ecclesiastical divisions. The reformation is an example. Philip Schaff identifies the doctrine of justification as the material cause of the reformation; the formal cause was *sola scriptura*.<sup>4</sup> The formal cause in other words was the *principium cognoscendi externum*—the means by which we know God's will. The reformers did not recognise the decrees of the church as an equal authority with Scripture and the implications were so far-reaching that schism was deemed necessary.

Why does reformed theology hold that Scripture alone is the *principium cognoscendi externum*? It is not a matter of choice, but rather a view Scripture compels. The authority of Scripture is not given by man, but by God.<sup>5</sup> Scripture is the means by which we arrive at knowledge of God. Therefore the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture is the final authority in all matters of religion.<sup>6</sup>

The external revelation must be matched with an internal principle—the *principium cognoscendi internum*—in order to be accepted. It has been variously identified as: reason, human understanding, feeling, reason and moral consciousness.<sup>7</sup> Scripture however warns against rely-

<sup>3</sup> L. Berkhof, *Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), pp. 118-19.

<sup>4</sup> P. Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom* (3 vols.; New York: Harper and Row, 1931; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 1, p. 206.

<sup>5</sup> See *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (WCF) 1:4.

<sup>6</sup> See WCF 1.10. Section 'c' of the UCCF doctrinal formulation, adopted by SETS, states, 'The Bible, as originally given, is the inspired and infallible Word of God. It is the supreme authority in all matters of belief and behaviour.'

<sup>7</sup> See Berkhof, *Introduction*, pp. 170-80.

ing upon these. It teaches the corruption of the natural mind (Psalm 82:5; Romans 1:21; Ephesians 4:18), the searing of the conscience (1 Timothy 4:2) and the deceitfulness of the heart above all things (Jeremiah 17:9). It directs us not to trust upon our fallen abilities (Proverbs 3:5-6). Indeed these are often used *against* the knowledge of God (2 Corinthians 10:4-5).

There are differences of view among the reformed as to a precise identification of the *principium cognoscendi internum*. Louis Berkhof identifies it as faith<sup>8</sup> while Herman Bavinck states it is illumination of the mind by the Spirit.<sup>9</sup> Common to both these views is the work of regeneration by the Holy Spirit. This is in line with 1 Corinthians 2:14 where the difference between receiving the revealed truth of God and rejecting it is found in the distinction between the natural and spiritual—what belongs to the flesh and what belongs to the Spirit. The enabling factor for knowing God is the Holy Spirit—he is the *principium cognoscendi internum*. Consequently, reason, experience and tradition function in service to the *principium cognoscendi internum*.

The doctrine of revelation is as significant for the study of humanity as it is for the study of God. Revelation is not only required for knowledge of God, it is also necessary for true knowledge of self. Thus Calvin comments, ‘it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God’s face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself’.<sup>10</sup> This ‘clear knowledge’ of self requires knowledge of God. Genesis 1:26 is one example of revelation that has vital bearing on the study of humanity. This text speaks of our creation and constitution. The *imago dei* is a revealed truth that is necessary to accept for a true understanding of human nature.

In summary, God is the foundational principle in theology and he reveals himself to humanity. A variety of views exist concerning his revelation which in turn explain difference in theological views. The position of reformed theologians is that God reveals himself to humanity by his word and Spirit. Therefore when we speak of *sola scriptura* it is in the theological setting of the Spirit’s work. Knowledge of God is communicated by the Spirit-written word and accepted by the Spirit-born person.

We have identified Scripture in reformed theology in particular as the *principium cognoscendi externum*. Yet within reformed theology Scripture is not the only source of revelation, there is also the revelation of God

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>9</sup> H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (gen. ed. J. Bolt; trans. J. Vriend; 4 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–8), 1, p. 213.

<sup>10</sup> J. Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. J. T. McNeill; trans. F. L. Battles; 2 vols.; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), I.i.2.

in nature. So why emphasise Scripture in particular? We must consider more closely the different modes of God's revelation.

## II. THE NATURE OF REVELATION

Due to the varied means and content of God's revelation it has been customary in reformed theology to distinguish between general and special revelation. General revelation concerns God's revelation of himself in nature, i.e. the created order. The heavens declare the glory of God, the sky proclaims his handiwork, the day pours out speech and the night reveals knowledge (Psalm 19:1-2). His mercies are new each morning (Lamentations 3:22-23), his common grace is made known to all in the rising of the sun and sending of the rains (Matthew 5:45) and his wrath is revealed from heaven (Romans 1:18). He is known in the way he governs his creation.

Romans 1 and 2 are particularly informative for the doctrine of general revelation. Paul says God's invisible attributes namely his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly perceived ever since the beginning of creation (1:19). While general revelation does not reveal God's plan of redemption, it does have bearing upon it, for general revelation leaves humanity with no excuse (1:20). God's revelation of himself in nature entails that fallen humanity has moral responsibility for refusing to acknowledge God and turning from him (1:21-25). God continues to reveal himself in the created order after the fall, but the truth of God has been exchanged for a lie. The world has responded to God's revelation by worshipping the created order instead of him. Although general revelation does not redeem, it reveals the need for redemption. General revelation does not leave mankind in a neutral relation to God for in creation he universally grants mediated knowledge of himself to a fallen world.

The doctrine of general revelation has implications for all people. It undermines ground for unbelief and informs Christian evangelism. God reveals himself to those who disbelieve or disregard him; God is known and is clearly perceived in his creation, 'what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them' (1:19). Although no person is saved by general revelation, salvation is in not in a revelatory vacuum. Ultimately, agnosticism and atheism are inadequate worldviews. Wisdom has been exchanged for folly, and the glory of the immortal God for images (1:21-22). The reality is not that God fails to provide enough evidence for his existence (as Bertrand Russell argued), but rather that fallen humanity suppresses the truth in unrighteousness (1:18).

For Calvin, the understanding has been darkened to such a degree by sin, that for all people, Christian or not, Scripture is needed to see general

revelation aright. Colin Gunton comments: 'Calvin's view [is] that without the Bible as a pair of spectacles, we are unlikely to be able to recognise even general revelation for what it is.'<sup>11</sup> Scripture provides the authoritative teaching concerning his general revelation.

General revelation is a constant revelation from God to humanity, but it does not have saving efficacy. Instead it condemns (1:28-2:5). It thereby reveals the need for salvation and for God's will concerning salvation we must turn to the special revelation that he has provided in the Scriptures. Calvin comments,

Despite this [revelation of God in creation], it is needful that another and better help be added to direct us aright to the very Creator of the universe. It was not in vain, then, that he added the light of his Word by which to become known unto salvation; and he regarded as worthy of this privilege those whom he pleased to gather more closely and intimately to himself.<sup>12</sup>

God's special revelation has great diversity. He reveals himself and his will in theophanies, miracles, prophecies, and the giving of the law. God spoke 'at many times and in many ways' (Hebrews 1:1). He breathes out his Scripture—his writing (*graphē*) (2 Timothy 3:16). The pinnacle of God's self-revelation is his Son, Jesus Christ. For he is 'the exact imprint of his nature' (Hebrews 1:3).

God's revelation is heightened and brightest in his Son for he is the perfect revelation of God. We must be wary of mishandling Scripture; it leads us to Christ, but must not be set aside like Wittgenstein's ladder.<sup>13</sup> Christ came to fulfill the law not abolish it (Matthew 5:17). His revelation does not make the word less precious to us, but more, for the word not only leads us to the Son, it is *his* word. Scripture, accompanied by the Spirit, is the way by which Christ communicates his will to the church today. Since the special revelation of Christ is communicated to us by Scripture, the *principium cognoscendi externum*, taking into account God's general and special revelation, is *sola scriptura*. Meanwhile for God's revelation to be truly apprehended it must be received with Spirit-born faith in Christ.

Now that we have viewed the relationship between Scripture and revelation we can consider what is involved in the communication of God's

<sup>11</sup> C. E. Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2005), p. 61.

<sup>12</sup> Calvin, *Inst.*, I.vi.1.

<sup>13</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that his book *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1922) was as a ladder that must be climbed to see the world aright. In order to achieve this final goal the ladder must be discarded. The book's propositions must be transcended.

revelation to the world. Preaching is especially significant. Christ was sent to preach the good news (Luke 4:43) and commanded the apostles to do the same (Acts 10:42) for God uses the preaching of the word to draw people to himself (Romans 10:4). We must attend further to what is involved in proclaiming this word.

### III. PROCLAIMING GOD'S REVELATION

Ecclesiastes 12:9-14 develops the responsibilities of the preacher and provides instruction regarding Scripture and revelation. Here we learn of what the preacher must do as he proclaims God's word to the world.

the Preacher... taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth. (vv. 9-10)

For the preacher, teaching knowledge is teaching God's revelation. It is communicating knowledge of God that has been communicated by God. The word which imparts knowledge is written by the Spirit (2 Peter 1:21) and its teaching is brought home by the Spirit. Conviction of God's truth is from first to last a work of the Spirit. 1 Corinthians 2:6-16 is a particularly important text in this regard as it teaches that the Spirit is required to interpret spiritual truths aright. He is the teacher who provides understanding. The Spirit is necessary for 'interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual' (v. 13) but the natural person does not accept the truth of God's Spirit (v. 14). The word is only accepted by one whom the Spirit has regenerated.

Peter Jensen observes that we are in 'a culture that deliberately and pervasively exalts human autonomy and dismisses God, as demonstrated in the privatization of religion and conventional morality'.<sup>14</sup> Secular confidence in human intellect and reason is misplaced because our faculties have been affected by the fall. We do not begin our study of God or the world from an independent or neutral position. We are either submitting to the truth, or suppressing it. The proper use of reason is in service to revelation and when reason is restored to this right relationship it may be used (though yet imperfectly) in a way that honours God as we study him and the world.

The preacher must weigh and arrange the texts of Scripture to form his message. He compares the Scriptures with one another and seeks the truthful interpretation, he increases in knowledge and understanding of the Scriptures, discerns wise sayings concerning Scripture, and faithfully

<sup>14</sup> Jensen, *Revelation*, p. 147.

applies the word to the contemporary context. William Cunningham comments:

he is the greatest and best theologian who has most accurately apprehended the meaning of the statements of Scripture,—who, by comparing and combining them, has most fully and correctly brought out the whole mind of God on all the topics on which the Scriptures give us information,—who classifies and digests the truths of Scripture in the way best fitted to commend them to the apprehension and acceptance of men,—and who can most clearly and forcibly bring out their scriptural evidence, and most skilfully and effectively defend them against the assaults of adversaries.<sup>15</sup>

Cunningham recognises that the task of the theologian is not only to understand the word for himself, but also to communicate it in a way that appeals to the audience. As a theologian, the speaker in the assembly has this task too. He finds words that bring delight to the audience for his message must have the design of eliciting increased devotion to God among his hearers.

The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd. My son, beware of anything beyond these. (vv. 11-12)

Scripture attests to its completion and perfection. This revelation of Jesus Christ is complete, and so no word is to be added or taken away from it (Revelation 22:18-19, cf. 1:1). Scripture cannot be broken (John 10:35) and Christ's word is fixed (Matthew 24:35). It is given by one Shepherd.

Scripture has one divine author and various human authors. Several New Testament texts teach us that authors of the New Testament were conscious of writing Scripture. John seems to be aware of his writing Scripture, for he often refers to Scripture as what is 'written' (John 2:17; 6:31, 45; 8:17; 10:34; 12:14, 16; 15:25) and concludes his letter by saying 'these things are written' (John 20:31). Peter refers to Paul's writings as Scripture (2 Peter 3:16) and Paul refers to Luke as having written Scripture in 1 Timothy 5:18, 'For the Scripture says.... "The labourer deserves his wages."' He quotes Luke 10:7.

Various texts in the New Testament attribute Scripture to God which at first may appear to originate from the human author. In Matthew 19:5 Christ attributes Genesis 2:24 to God even though those words are not attributed to him directly in Genesis 2. Several examples can also be

<sup>15</sup> W. Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (2d ed.; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1866), p. 296.

found in Hebrews, many of which are quotations from the Psalms.<sup>16</sup> It would be implausible to argue that the verses cited from the Psalms are isolated incidents of inspiration in the Psalms. The texts are referenced in Hebrews because they are the inspired verses relevant for the letter's argument. The implication of the author's use of the Psalter is that further portions are inspired. The writer to the Hebrews does not state the extent of inspiration in Scripture, but it is stated in 2 Timothy 3:16, *all* Scripture is God-breathed. Indeed the letter to the Hebrews implies this. The author's view of inspiration concerning the Psalms is replicated with respect a text from the law (Hebrews 1:6, cf. Deuteronomy 32:43 LXX) and also in what he says of the prophets (Hebrews 1:1). His understanding is that God has inspired all of the Old Testament Scripture (the Law, the Prophets and the Writings). Therefore all of Scripture is available to him as God's word in the course of writing his letter.

Hebrews 4:7, quoting Psalm 95:7-8, is especially relevant to our discussion. It describes this psalm as God's saying 'in or 'through' David. We learn more of the process of the one Shepherd communicating 'through' the human authors of Scripture in 2 Peter 1:21, 'For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.' This text preserves the unique quality of Scripture as inspired, for Peter is speaking about Scripture (cf. v20) and *rules out* the notion that any part of Scripture has its origin in mankind. The prophetic word that was produced, or carried, by the Holy Spirit *was not produced* by the will of man (the verb, *pherō* is used twice in this verse—to contrast the work of man and Spirit in Scripture). Scripture finds its origin in God. Paul Wells comments,

Negatively, the prophetic word does not arise from a personal initiative and its content is not made up of human ideas. Scripture does not come out of 'someone's own interpretation'. Positively, the prophecy of Scripture exists because of the initiative of the Holy Spirit. The source of Scripture is in God himself—the prophets are God's servants—and it comes to us through the instrumentality of the Spirit.... They were not just guided or led as they wrote. The precise sense of the word 'carried along' indicates they were picked up, transported and brought to their destination by the lifting power of the Spirit.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Heb. 1:6 cites Deut. 32:43 LXX; Heb. 1:7 cites Ps. 104:4; Heb. 1:8-9 cites Ps. 45:6-7; Heb. 1:10-12 cites Ps. 102:25-27; Heb. 3:7-11; 4:5, 7 cite (from) Ps. 95:7-11.

<sup>17</sup> P. Wells, *Taking the Bible at Its Word* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2013), pp. 107-8.

2 Peter 1:21 informs us concerning the writing of the word of God and inspiration. Inspiration is accomplished through a variety of means for God has spoken in diverse ways (Hebrews 1:1). Inspiration—the carrying by the Spirit—is achieved diversely, it can be by speaking through a servant, or by dictation (cf. Jeremiah 36:27-31), or through the research of his chosen gospel author (cf. Luke 1:3). There are various ways in which God inspires his word.

Divine authorship means Scripture has a unique quality that binds it together as one and sets it apart from all other literature. At the same time it is a collection of books with various human authors. When we think of the production of Scripture, divine authorship takes theological precedence ahead of its human authorship. For the decision to write Scripture does not originate in humanity, but in God. The primacy of divine authorship and its implications for Scripture has fallen out of view today and urgently needs to be recovered.<sup>18</sup>

The use of the shepherd motif in Ecclesiastes implies God's authority and the hearer's responsibility to submit to it (cf. Psalm 23:1-4). There is a cost that follows disobedience, 'for the words of the wise are like goads'. Christ used a similar expression when he confronted Paul on the road to Damascus. Paul was living against Christ and consequently 'against the goads' (Acts 26:14). Submission to Christ is not without pain but the outcome is glorious—the believer shares in the life of Christ (Romans 8:13; 2 Corinthians 4:11).

The preacher must be aware of the boundaries of revelation, the limits of what God has revealed. Instruction is given to 'beware of anything beyond these'. J. I. Packer follows Calvin and refers to God's revelation as a light. The task of the theologian is to study all that the light reveals. But to venture outside of light is to speculate, and 'Speculation corrupts—

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<sup>18</sup> One instance is a recent paper by Steve Chalke. He argues the unifying principle of Scripture is not God, but human limitation, fallibility and life-changing experience or encounter of God. Hence he thinks it is 'misleading to think of the Bible as a book... it is more accurately a collection of texts' and he rejects the doctrines of infallibility and inerrancy. His view is that the Bible is inspired, but this seems to be in the sense of divine influence upon the writers of Scripture rather than an act of God by which he commits his word to writing through human authors. This amounts to the view that Scripture should be taken seriously and treated respectfully, but he does not hold that it is the authority in matters concerning faith and practice. See S. Chalke, 'Restoring Confidence in the Bible' (privately published, 2014; <<https://www.oasisuk.org/theology-resources>>), pp. 5-6, p. 10 fn. 9 and p. 12 fn. 15.

every time'.<sup>19</sup> Paul's concern for the church in Corinth is, 'that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written' (1 Corinthians 4:6). He is not denying the use or value of other literature. Instead he is affirming that the Scriptures stand alone as the authoritative written word of God. These writings are from God, and therefore must be considered for what they are, [*ta*] *hiera grammata*, 'the holy Scriptures' (2 Timothy 3:15).

The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil. (vv. 13-14)

The way to live is in accordance with the word. The whole duty of man is to fear God and keep his commandments. How may we know God and his commands, that we may fulfil our duty? We read in Psalm 119:105 'Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.' The word provides us with direction to Christ for salvation. It does so because its light is Christ; it is his word. The sheep hear the voice of the shepherd speaking, and follow him (John 10:27). Therefore he gives his word for faithful proclamation and practice.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion we have found that God is the essential principle of all knowledge concerning himself. We have seen that knowledge of God requires God's self-revelation. It is diversely received in general revelation and special revelation. For clarity concerning both general and special revelation we must turn to Scripture, which provides us with the knowledge of God. The word of God must be accompanied with the inward work of the Spirit of God to be accepted. The word is reliable as God's revelation, because it is his word; he has breathed it out. Consequently it cannot be turned aside upon faith in Christ. For it is not only the means by which we come to know Christ, but it is also the means by which Christ makes himself known to us.

<sup>19</sup> J. I. Packer, 'Doctrine of God: Revelation and Reason', Lecture at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, 1986; available from <<http://www.wts.edu/resources/media.html>>.