

FAITH SEEKING UNDERSTANDING

An Introduction to Christian Theology

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SECOND EDITION

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CHAPTER 2

The Meaning of Revelation

Christian theology has to offer some account of the basis of the church's affirmations about God. It has to answer the question of the source of the knowledge believers claim to have of God and of all creatures in relation to God. Questions of this sort are not ordinarily addressed in the hymns, prayers, and creeds of the church. These primary expressions of faith do not attempt to give a reasoned account of the truth claims that they make. The most familiar and the most widely used of Christian creeds — the Apostles' and the Nicene — simply begin with the words, "I (or We) believe. . . ." Theological reflection on such confessions, however, is compelled to ask how the community of faith has come to know these things. What is the source of this knowledge of God? What kind of knowledge is it? What place do Scripture, the witness of the church, and human reason, experience, and imagination have in the knowledge of God? Such questions have usually been discussed in theology, especially in the modern period, under the topic of revelation.¹

What Is Revelation?

Revelation literally means an "unveiling," "uncovering," or "disclosure" of something previously hidden. The word is used, of course, in many different contexts, some trivial, as when a new line of apparel is "revealed," others more serious, as when new knowledge suddenly comes to light in a scientific field or in a personal relationship and is called a "revelation" because it seems less a hard-won achievement than a surprising gift. A revelation of this sort may

1. See *Divine Revelation*, ed. Paul Avis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

humble or elate us, disturb or even shock us. The effect of such revelatory experiences may be dramatic, possibly changing the way we think about the world or the way we live our lives.²

Flannery O'Connor depicts an event of "revelation" in a way that points to the deeper theological meaning of the term. She tells the story of Mrs. Turpin, a hard-working, upright, church-going farmer's wife, who is unexpectedly accosted by a mentally disturbed teenage girl in a doctor's office. After bearing Mrs. Turpin's superior attitude and demeaning remarks about white trash and blacks as long as she can, the girl suddenly throws a heavy book at Mrs. Turpin, begins to strangle her, and calls her a "wart hog from hell." When Mrs. Turpin returns to her farm, she cannot get the girl's words out of her mind. Standing beside her pigpen, she is outraged by being called a wart hog. She knows she is a good person, certainly far superior to white trash and blacks. She reminds God of that, as well as of all the work she does for the church. "What did you send me a message like that for?" she angrily asks God. But as she stares into the pig pen, she has a glimpse of "the very heart of mystery," and begins to absorb some "abysmal life-giving knowledge." She has a vision of a parade of souls marching to heaven, with white trash, blacks, lunatics, and other social outcasts up front, and respectable people like herself at the rear of the procession, the shocked expressions on their faces showing that all their virtues are being burned away. Mrs. Turpin returns to her house with the shouts of hallelujah from the heaven-bound saints in her ears.³

As O'Connor's story suggests, revelation is not something that confirms what we already know. Basically, it has to do with a knowledge of God and ourselves that is utterly surprising and disturbing. It is an event that shakes us to the core. Although it comes as a gift, offering us a glimpse of "the very heart of mystery," it is resisted because it is so threatening and frightening. The knowledge it conveys is an "abysmal life-giving knowledge," but it also demands a kind of death because it turns upside down the lives of people who receive it. Revelation compels momentous decisions about who God is and how we are to understand the world and ourselves.

Scripture is filled with accounts of the revelation of God breaking into human life as a surprising gift and an unsettling commission. Moses hears the voice of God from a burning bush instructing him to lead the people of Israel out of bondage in Egypt (Exod. 3); David becomes aware of the sin he has

2. See John Baillie, *The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), 19ff.; and John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 2d ed. (New York: Scribner's, 1977), 84ff.

3. Flannery O'Connor, "Revelation," in *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965), 191-218.

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committed when Nathan tells him the story of a rich man who robs and kills a poor man's only lamb (2 Sam. 12); Isaiah has a vision in which God summons him to service (Isa. 6:1-8); Paul experiences a revelation of Jesus Christ that changes him from a persecutor of the church to an apostle of the gospel to the Gentiles (Gal. 1:12); Peter has a dream that teaches him that God shows no partiality and intends the gospel message to be preached to Gentiles as well as Jews (Acts 10:9ff.). Revelation is the disclosure of the character and purpose of God, and when it is received, it radically changes the lives of its recipients.

The revelation of God is not just one more item of information in our store of knowledge, not just one of the many things we know or think we know. When God is revealed, everything is seen in a new light. William Abraham helpfully describes revelation as a "threshold" concept. It is like crossing the threshold of a house. While some features of a house can be seen from outside, much remains hidden. In crossing the threshold, "one enters into another world." This is the effect of the event that Christian faith and theology call revelation: "Once one acknowledges the revelation, then everything may have to be rethought and redescribed in the light of what has been discovered."⁴

God Hidden and Revealed

While the idea of revelation has been a centerpiece of much modern theology, some theologians argue that its importance has been greatly exaggerated.⁵ They contend that this concept is actually quite peripheral in the Bible. One charge is that the notion of revelation tends to focus attention on the sorts of epistemological questions that are prominent in modern philosophy and science (Are our claims to knowledge well-grounded?), rather than on the question of salvation (Is there forgiveness of sins?). If we concentrate on the theme of revelation, do we not suggest that the basic human predicament is ignorance rather than sin? In the Bible people do not ask, "What must I *know*?" but "Who must I *be* and what must I *do* to be saved?" (see Mark 10:17; John 3:3).

There is some truth in this criticism. A doctrine of revelation throws both believers and unbelievers off track when it is presented as an effort to secure and defend a comprehensive *theory* of knowledge, including Christian

4. William J. Abraham, "The Offense of Revelation," *Harvard Theological Review* 95, no. 3 (July 2002): 259.

5. See F. Gerald Downing, *Has Christianity a Revelation?* (London: SCM, 1964); for a summary of the discussion, see George Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology: Recovering the Gospel in the Church* (Richmond: John Knox, 1981), 51-59.

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affirmations about God. Such efforts must inevitably fail. In all our knowing, and most certainly in our knowledge of God revealed decisively in Jesus Christ, there are truths that we know without being able fully to explain how we can possibly know them. The doctrine of revelation does not pretend to provide a full-blown theory of knowledge. Whenever the doctrine is understood in this way, it is not surprising that the question of whether or not it is possible to know God becomes more important than actually knowing God.⁶

The charge that revelation is an inflated concept in modern theology also gains credence if revelation is equated with a set of doctrines requiring unquestioning assent. According to Scripture, faith is primarily a matter of personal trust in and obedience to God rather than mere intellectual assent to a set of authoritative doctrines. But knowledge of God in the biblical tradition does not mean simply information about one of the myriad objects whose existence we may more or less indifferently acknowledge. Rather, revelation brings "saving knowledge," a knowledge that bears decisively on the meaning, wholeness, and fulfillment of our life in relationship to God and others. As we noted in the preceding chapter, Calvin speaks for the entire Christian tradition in insisting that the knowledge of God given in the gospel is far more than agreeing that God exists or assenting to whatever the church teaches. Properly speaking, God is known only where there is piety, where knowledge of the grace of God in Jesus Christ is fused with love of God and the desire to do God's will.⁷

But if it is a mistake to equate knowledge of God with mere information, it is also a mistake to think of faith as a desperate leap in the dark. Believers claim that what they affirm of God is true. How could we trust God if we did not have any knowledge of God's trustworthiness? How could we obey the will of God if we had no knowledge of what that will is? How could we rightly worship or pray or serve a God who is totally unknown and unknowable? How could there be any conviction or joy in proclaiming a God who is absolutely hidden? Christian faith and life are inseparable from reliable knowledge of the character and purpose of God. If we do not want to call the source of this knowledge revelation, then we will have to invent some other term to take its place.

There is another reason for criticism of the emphasis on revelation in modern theology. Talk of the self-revelation of God seems to suggest that we know all there is to know about God. The claim to total knowledge is emphatically rejected by postmodern philosophers and theologians, who believe all

6. See William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology: From the Fathers to Feminism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 466-80.

7. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.2.1.

such claims are inherently arrogant and inevitably lead to oppression of one sort or another. Human knowledge is fragmentary and incomplete. If this is true of our knowledge of ourselves and our world, it is surely true of our knowledge of God.

Confession that God has been revealed, however, is altogether different from the claim to know everything about God or to have God under our control. When God is revealed, God remains God and does not become a possession at our disposal. Whatever may be the case in other forms of knowledge, in the knowledge of God given in revelation, God does not become a prisoner of our categories and concepts. God remains free, ever mystery, ever "hidden." The paradoxical theme of God as revealed yet hidden is rooted in the scriptural witness and is basic to a Christian doctrine of revelation.

Scripture clearly declares that the holy, transcendent God of Israel, whose ways and thoughts are as high above us as the heavens are higher than the earth (Isa. 55:9), does not remain silent (Ps. 50:3). "Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning?" (Isa. 40:21). God has spoken and has done mighty deeds, and because of this, God is no longer unknown. In the Old Testament, God is reliably known in the history of the gracious covenant of Yahweh with the people of Israel. This history includes the promise of God to Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 17), the disclosure of the divine name to Moses (Exod. 3:14), the liberation of Israel from bondage in Egypt, the giving of the Torah, and the preaching of God's judgment and grace by the prophets.

Yet the witness of the Old Testament is also that *God remains, paradoxically, hidden in the event of revelation*. In God's self-revelation God has become identifiable, yet God is never fully comprehensible. Even in revelation — precisely in revelation — God never ceases to be a mystery, never ceases to be "more" than human beings can think or say. God remains ever free, and in this sense ever hidden in revelation. This is vividly expressed in many biblical narratives. At the burning bush, Moses is given the name of God, but it is the name of unfathomable mystery: "I am who I am," or "I will be who I will be" (Gen. 3:14).⁸ Moses asks to see God but is permitted to see only God's back side (Exod. 33:12-23). Elijah hears the voice of God not in the wind, earthquake, or fire, but in a small voice (1 Kings 19:11ff.); Isaiah declares, "Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Savior" (Isa. 45:15).

8. For this translation, see Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 180. Von Rad adds, "The promise of Jahweh's efficacious presence remains at the same time . . . illusive and impalpable — this is Jahweh's freedom, which does not commit itself in detail."

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The holy, transcendent God of Israel, above us as the heavens are higher than the earth (Ps. 50:3). "Have you not known? I told you from the beginning?" (Isa. 45:15). Mighty deeds, and because of this, God is reliably known in the covenant with the people of Israel. This history begins with Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 17), the disclosure of the liberation of Israel from Egypt (Exod. 3:14), the liberation of Israel from Babylon (Isa. 45:15), and the preaching of God's judgment.

It is also that *God remains, paradoxically*. In God's self-revelation God has been beyond comprehension. Even in revelation God ceases to be a mystery, never ceases to be or say. God remains ever free, and in this is vividly expressed in many biblical passages. God is given the name of God, but it is the "I am who I am," or "I will be who I will be" (Exod. 3:14). It is permitted to see only God's back, the voice of God not in the wind, earth, or sea (Isa. 45:15). Isaiah declares, "Truly, you are the Lord, the Savior" (Isa. 45:15).

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According to the New Testament witness, the revelation of God is decisively embodied in Jesus Christ. He is God's light in a world of darkness. In him God has been reliably and definitively revealed. In his proclamation, ministry, death, and resurrection, and in the renewing work of the Holy Spirit, a new relationship between God and all humanity is established. While expressing the revelation of God in Christ in different ways, the New Testament authors agree on the uniqueness, normativity, and unsurpassability of this revelation. They confess that in Jesus Christ, God has spoken not only through a prophet but through a Son (Heb. 1:1-2), that the eternal divine Word has become incarnate in a singular human life (John 1:14), that the light of the glory of God has shone in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6), that in him the Spirit-anointed liberator of all the oppressed has appeared (Luke 4:18ff.).

At the same time, for the New Testament witness as for the Old, *the revelation of God is, paradoxically, a hidden revelation*. The hiddenness of God in Jesus Christ is not simply that he is a finite, vulnerable, mortal creature like other human beings. Rather, God's self-disclosure is deeply hidden in the servant form of this person and above all in his crucifixion. As Paul recognizes, the message of God's act of revelation and reconciliation in a humble servant who suffers and is crucified for our sake is sheer scandal and folly to the wise and powerful of this world (1 Cor. 1:22-23).

Furthermore, for the New Testament community, becoming a Christian does not remove the hiddenness of God in revelation. A study of New Testament uses of the term "revelation" (*apokalypsis*) shows that it often refers to the future manifestation of Christ (e.g. 1 Cor. 1:7; 1 Pet. 1:13). Christians have seen God's glory (John 1:14), but they do not yet see God face to face (1 Cor. 13:12). There is a depth of riches in God that we do not now comprehend (Rom. 11:33). Our true life is hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:3). We are God's children now, but what we will be when Christ comes again has not yet been revealed (1 John 3:2). In brief, while God's revelation in Jesus Christ is completely trustworthy, we cannot fully comprehend the being of God and God's gifts of creation, reconciliation, and redemption.

This emphasis on the freedom, mystery, and hiddenness of God in revelation should not be seen as merely an invention of Christian apologetics designed to appeal to the postmodern sensibility of the fragmentary character of all human knowledge. The mystery of God is a theme that is deeply rooted in the Christian theological tradition.⁹ Augustine declares, "God is always

9. See Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); also *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, ed. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

greater (*Deus semper maior*), however much we may have grown."¹⁰ The theologians of the Eastern church emphasize the darkness of God, by which they mean the hiddenness and incomprehensibility of the essence of God.¹¹ Thomas Aquinas frequently reminds us that God remains largely hidden to finite human reason: "No created intellect can comprehend God wholly."¹² The theme of God's hiddenness is very prominent in Luther's theology: "God has hidden himself in Christ."¹³ According to Barth, all serious knowledge of God begins with the knowledge of the hiddenness of God, i.e. the inalienable freedom and surprising grace of God who is self-revealed in Jesus Christ. "God's hiddenness . . . meets us in Christ, and finally and supremely in the crucified Christ; for where is God so hidden as here, and where is the possibility of offense so great as here?"¹⁴ Implicit or explicit in the many variations on the theme of the hiddenness of God in the Christian theological tradition is the confession that in Jesus Christ crucified and risen, God is truly revealed yet also, paradoxically, hidden.

Revelation as Objective and Subjective

How shall we speak of the event of revelation? Shall we think of it as an *objective occurrence* or as a *subjective experience*? Does it refer to something that really happens "out there" in the world or is it primarily an event "in here," an interior change of consciousness or a new way of seeing the world on the part of the believer? Some doctrines of revelation emphasize the objective and others the subjective aspects of revelation. Surely both sides of the event of revelation are important and must be held together. Revelation is God's free and gracious self-disclosure through particular events that are attested and interpreted by people of faith. In Paul Tillich's words, "Revelation is always a subjective and an objective event in strict interdependence."¹⁵ Revelation refers both to the living Word of God speaking and acting through particular persons and events and to the inner working of God's Spirit enabling people

10. Augustine, *Expositions on the Psalms* (Psalm 63), in *Nicene-Post Nicene Fathers*, vol. 8, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 262.

11. See Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1957), esp. chap. 2.

12. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pt. 1, q. 12, a. 8.

13. *Luther's Works*, 28: 126. See also Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

14. Karl Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 335.

15. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1: 111.

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and Subjective

Shall we think of it as an *objective*? Does it refer to something that is primarily an event "in here," an event of seeing the world on the part of us? We can emphasize the objective and the subjective both sides of the event of revelation together. Revelation is God's free act in particular events that are attested and confirmed by God's words, "Revelation is always a mutual interdependence."¹⁵ Revelation is God acting through particular events of God's Spirit enabling people

(193), in *Nicene-Post Nicene Fathers*, vol. 8,

of the Eastern Church (Cambridge: James

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Altman, *The Crucified God* (New York:

Liberty Classics: Eerdmans, 1991), 335.

to see, appropriate, and bear witness to this activity. God is the primary actor in the event of revelation, but human beings are also participants.

Probably the most frequently discussed issue in recent reflection on the doctrine of revelation is what part human reason and imagination play in the revelatory process. A number of theologians have noted that the experience of revelation as described in theology is similar to other experiences of fresh insight or "paradigm shifts," as in artistic creation or in scientific inquiry.¹⁶ These theologians emphasize that the idea of revelation is distorted when it is seen as a supernatural substitute for the use of human reason and the play of human imagination. Revelation does not destroy or disable human capacities; to the contrary, the concrete love of God in Jesus Christ is powerfully attractive. It non-coercively captures the allegiance of the heart, brings new vision to human imagination, and provides new direction to human reason.

According to Garrett Green, the revelation of God in the history of Israel and supremely in the person of Jesus Christ takes effect in human life by releasing our powers of imagination from bondage to false idols. It provides us with a new paradigm of who God is and what it means to live according to God's will. Revelation and faith help us to see and thus to live differently; the whole of reality is reinterpreted in the light of the pattern of divine and human life embodied in the person of Christ.¹⁷ This is the point of the apostle Paul's appeal to his readers to have the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5) and to let their minds be transformed by the revelation of God in Christ rather than being conformed to ways of thinking and living characteristic of worldly powers (Rom. 12:2). In John Calvin's striking metaphor, the biblical witness to revelation is like a pair of spectacles that enable us to see God, the world, and ourselves in a radically new manner.¹⁸

Of course, reality can be seen and interpreted in many different ways. The revelation of God does not force itself on us. It frees us to see the world as created and reconciled by God, but this does not eliminate other possible ways of seeing. In the light of Christ as the true image of God (Col. 1:15), we are enabled to know and love God as holy and beneficent, one whose intentions toward us are gracious. We are not coerced but freed to understand ourselves as people created in God's image and destined for communion with God and each other. Believers are aware of other ways of seeing and interpret-

16. On the idea of "paradigm shift" in scientific inquiry, see Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

17. See Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989).

18. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.6.1.

ing reality and can even recognize the partial truth of these other interpretations. Nevertheless, they affirm that the revelation of the costly love of God in Jesus Christ is truth that can be counted on in life and in death (Rom. 8:38-39). He is not just *a* truth, but *the* truth that sets humanity free (John 8:32); not just *a* light, but *the* light that illumines all of life (John 8:12).

One of the most influential modern analyses of the meaning of revelation is that of H. Richard Niebuhr. He speaks of the event of revelation as being like a "luminous sentence" that we come across in a difficult book, "from which we can go forward and backward and so attain to some understanding of the whole."¹⁹ It is like a "special occasion" (Alfred North Whitehead) in the life of a person or community that provides a central clue for the interpretation of all other occasions. "The special occasion to which we appeal in the Christian church is called Jesus Christ, in whom we see the righteousness of God, his power and wisdom," says Niebuhr. "But from that special occasion we also derive the concepts which make possible the elucidation of all the events in our history. Revelation means this intelligible event which makes all other events intelligible."²⁰

We can summarize what has been said to this point about the meaning of the term "revelation" as used in Christian theology in the following theses:

First, revelation refers to *God's own self-disclosure*. Apart from this act, the character and purposes of God would remain a matter of sheer guesswork. To speak of revelation is to declare that *God* graciously takes the initiative and freely communicates with us. Revelation comes *to* us rather than *from* us. It is experienced as a gift we receive rather than as a discovery we make on our own about God, the world, and ourselves.

Second, the term "revelation" points to *particular events and particular people* through whom God has communicated God's identity and will. In Scripture, revelation means God's communication in word and deed with the people of Israel and above all, in the person and work, in the passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. There is a "scandal of particularity," a relentless specificity and an inextinguishable particularity about the reality Christians call revelation.

Third, the revelation of God is also, paradoxically, a *hiding of God*. If it is truly God who is revealed, God remains hidden, beyond our grasp, never our prisoner.²¹ For the revealed God is the free and ever surprising God who re-

19. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), 93. See also Green, *Imagining God*, 61.

20. Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 93.

21. See Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 404-9.

truth of these other interpretations of the costly love of God in life and in death (Rom. 8:38-39); sets humanity free (John 8:32); all of life (John 8:12).

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sists our efforts to turn God into an idol. We know this to be true primarily because of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. In his person, revelation means the presence of God in the least expected place, in the midst of sinners, in the company of the poor, in the deep hiddenness of the cross. This feature of radical otherness, of the hidden and the unexpected — even of the outrageous — belongs to the revelation of God.

Fourth, the revelation of God calls for our *personal response and appropriation*. As God's personal approach to us, revelation seeks the response of our whole person. Stated differently, true knowledge of God is practical knowledge rather than merely theoretical knowledge. The goal of the event of revelation is not our possession of secret doctrines but a transformed life with new understanding of God and ourselves, new dispositions and affections, new sensibilities, new ways of seeing the world and our neighbors.

Fifth, the revelation of God is *always a disturbing, even shocking event*. It disrupts the way we have previously understood God, the world, and ourselves. Precisely for that reason, revelation often encounters resistance and rejection.

Sixth, revelation becomes the *new interpretative focus* for our understanding of God, the world, and ourselves. Far from narrowing our vision or limiting our search for understanding, revelation renews the mind and transforms the imagination. In the light of the "special occasion" called Jesus Christ, we see God and all things in a new light and seek to act in accordance with this new vision. Revelation is a radical paradigm change in our interpretation of reality, and as such it is an inexhaustible source of creative imagination and of transforming human action in the world.

General and Special Revelation

In the above summary of the meaning of revelation, I have emphasized the particularity and the radical "otherness" of the revelation of God as understood by Christian faith and theology. Does this emphasis deny the presence and activity of God in all of nature and history? Is not the Spirit of God the universal giver of life (Ps. 104:30), and is not the Word of God incarnate in Jesus Christ (John 1:14) also present and at work in all creation (John 1:9)? What then is the relationship between the biblical witness to the revelation of God that culminates in Christ and what has been revealed of God in the natural order and in universal history?

Christian theology has traditionally distinguished two media of the knowledge of God: general revelation and special revelation. The Bible

teaches and experience confirms some revelation of God in the created order, in human conscience, and in the lives of people who do not possess the Mosaic law and have not heard the gospel message. "The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork," writes the psalmist (19:1). The apostle Paul contends that God's eternal power and deity have been clearly shown in the things that have been created (Rom. 1:20). When Paul speaks to the Athenians on the Areopagus, he proclaims to them the identity of the unknown God that they have been worshiping (Acts 17:22ff.).

Acknowledgment of the fact that the Bible teaches that some knowledge of God is available to all would seem to have distinct advantages. For one thing, it appears to provide a basis for presenting the Christian message with some assurance of common ground between Christians and non-Christians. It also clearly encourages Christians to be receptive to knowledge acquired by the human sciences and to be respectful of and open to the teachings of other religious traditions. On the other hand, a preoccupation with general revelation poses many dangers. It may lead to the conclusion that special revelation is superfluous, or at least that it lacks the critical significance that Christians have always attached to it.

Christian theologians have related general and special revelation in a variety of ways. At one end of the spectrum are philosophers and theologians who claim that religions based on allegedly special revelation are only different symbolic expressions of a universally available knowledge of God. At the other end of the spectrum is the argument that revelation in Christ alone provides true knowledge of God and that all other claims to know God are simply false. Somewhere in the middle range of the spectrum are those who insist on the importance of general revelation as providing a broad foundation for morality and religion, even if what is known on this basis is incomplete and in need of the fuller knowledge of God given in the special revelation attested in Scripture. According to the First Vatican Council (1870), for example, God's existence can be demonstrated and some things can be known of God by human reason apart from any appeal to special revelation. The relation between general and special revelation in this view is like the relationship between part and whole, the incomplete and the complete.

John Calvin's position on this issue, while not without some ambiguity, offers a distinctive emphasis. Insisting that there is a natural knowledge of God, Calvin readily speaks of a universal "sense of divinity" and a universally implanted "seed of religion." Not only do the liberal arts assist us in entering into the secrets of the divine wisdom, but even the uneducated are aware of the evidence of the divine workmanship in the creation. Hence Calvin con-

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cludes that "there is within the human mind and by natural instinct an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy."²²

All this sounds clear enough, but it is important to follow the whole course of Calvin's argument. Calvin contends that the universal "sense of divinity" is severely weakened by sin and is thus "insufficient," "confused," vague, and dim by comparison with the special revelation in Scripture. The relative dimness of the revelation in creation and in human conscience is, in Calvin's view, a source of real danger. What ordinarily follows from this indefinite and unstable knowledge of God is not what Vatican I optimistically depicts in its statement on what can be known of God by unaided human reason. Instead, Calvin emphasizes that the knowledge of God available to humanity in the world of nature and in the universal moral and religious awareness is regularly corrupted, often turned into something sinister and destructive. Calvin's contention, then, following the apostle Paul in Romans 1:18-23, is that while there is a universal revelation that renders all people responsible, the habit of sinful human beings is to turn this general knowledge of God into idolatry. Religion is often put to the service of evil human purposes.

Most Christian theologians today would be more generous than Calvin in finding truth and value in what can be known of God in the created order and in the different religions of humanity. As a renaissance scholar, Calvin honored the arts and sciences, but when assessing religions other than the Reformed faith, he tended to highlight only their distortions. By contrast, many Christian theologians today would emphasize that all religions must be approached with openness and respect, and some would acknowledge the presence of God's gracious initiative and faithful human responses in other religious traditions.

However, we should not allow Calvin's exaggerations to obscure the important point he is making — namely, that a vague and superficial religiosity, when it does not lead simply to indifference or despair, is continuously vulnerable to idolatrous manipulation.²³ One thinks of the ominous coupling of a shadowy religiosity with a militant nationalism or racism in such slogans as "God and Fatherland" or "God, family, and country." The ideology of too many German Christians during the Third Reich, the mixture of religion and apartheid in South Africa, and the vague but uniformly comforting references to God and religious values in chauvinistic movements in the United States

22. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.3.1.

23. For some of the ideas in this paragraph, I am indebted to Prof. Michael Welker of Heidelberg University.

and other countries are vivid reminders of the essential correctness of Calvin's (and later, Barth's) warning that we are repeatedly inclined to control and manipulate the knowledge of God that goes under the name of general revelation.

According to some critics of special revelation, concentration on the particular and unique revelation of God attested in Scripture and centered above all in Jesus Christ must necessarily lead to a narrow and arrogant attitude. Narrowness and arrogance have, to be sure, all too frequently found a home in the church, and on this account the church needs to be called to repentance. It is a mistake, however, to lay the blame for this on the appeal to special revelation. On the contrary, provincialism and exclusivism are often the result of losing touch with what is specifically Christian rather than excessive loyalty to it. Hence the familiar criticism of an emphasis on the particularity of Christian revelation should be reversed. A plausible argument can be made that a vague and amorphous religious commitment is far more vulnerable to ideological manipulation than the specific witness of the biblical tradition to the revelation of God. Indeterminate religiosity is easily co-opted by self-interested individuals, groups, and nations. It offers unlimited potential for pretension and self-righteousness. Admittedly, the Bible has also been used for ideological purposes, as the appeal to certain biblical texts to legitimize slavery and the subordination of women makes clear enough. Still, the danger that resides in vague religiosity is especially acute because its resources for self-criticism are considerably weaker than in a community of faith that recognizes the authority of the prophetic tradition of the Bible.

A new capacity for criticism, including self-criticism, accompanies the Christian experience of revelation. Revelation and the critique of all forms of idolatry go hand in hand. We should not think of special revelation, then, as the mere denial of general revelation. Nor should we think of it, equally simplistically, as the tranquil continuation and completion of general ideas of divinity. Rather, special revelation repeatedly challenges, corrects, and transforms all of our earlier knowledge of God, from whatever source, as well as confirming what is good and true in it. The revelation of God in Jesus Christ is a continual disturbance to all religious life, including and beginning with the Christian religion.²⁴

Prophetic criticism belongs necessarily to a revelation of God that calls for concern for the poor and needy (Jer. 22:16) and that summarizes the will of God as "to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly before God"

24. See Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*: "Revelation is not a development of our religious ideas but their continuous conversion" (182).

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(Mic. 6:8). In the New Testament the revelation of God finds supreme expres-
sion in one who takes up the cause of the poor, forgives sinners, teaches that
the greatest of God's commandments is to love God above all else and to love
one's neighbor as oneself (Mark 12:29-31), and at the end is crucified between
two criminals. If we look to this crucified and risen Christ as God's decisive
revelation, the knowledge of God will always be a disturbing and disruptive
reality in our lives. We will not pretend that revelation merely confirms what
we already know and how we presently live. We will not claim to have revela-
tion in our possession and under our control. Revelation always means the
surprising, unexpected, scandalous activity of God. The gospel of the cruci-
fied Lord constitutes a "permanent revolution" in our understanding of God,
the world, and ourselves.²⁵

In summary, while the distinction between general and special revela-
tion has some validity, it can easily be misused. It can lead to the domestica-
tion or even replacement of special revelation. Or it can promote the com-
partmentalizing of our knowledge of God with the result that revelation and
reason, Christ and culture, nature and history are seen as completely separate
domains. Knowledge of God based on general revelation does not remain un-
changed with the coming of special revelation. The surprising self-disclosure
of God in the ministry and cross of Jesus calls for the transformation of our
personal and interpersonal relations, our attitude toward nature, our cultural
activity, and, most basically, our ways of imagining and relating to God.²⁶

Models of Revelation

In a widely-read book, Avery Dulles identifies five models of revelation.²⁷
One of its values is the recognition that each model has both strengths and
deficiencies. Because it provides a good foundation for further reflection on
the doctrine of revelation, it is worth summarizing here.

According to Dulles's first model, revelation takes the form of authori-
tative doctrine. It is located in the infallible propositions of Scripture or the
infallible doctrines of the church. The model of revelation as authoritative
doctrines or revealed propositions was typical of pre-Vatican II Roman Cath-
olic theology and is still prevalent in some Protestant fundamentalist theolo-
gies. While this model may have the laudable aim of wanting to defend the

25. Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 182.

26. See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951).

27. Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 2d ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1992).

cognitive content of revelation, its view of the meaning of revelation is excessively rationalist. The revelation of God cannot be reduced to a set of authoritative propositions.

A second model identifies revelation with particular historical events. In this model revelation is not equated with the biblical text itself or with church teachings *per se* but is located in the momentous events recounted in Scripture. According to this view, the more we learn from historical research about events such as the exodus of Israel from Egypt or the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, the closer to revelation we come. The revelation of God refers to the "mighty acts of God" in history. Dulles thinks there is much to be said for this way of thinking about revelation, but contends that it rather too simplistically separates the acts of God from the interpretation that accompanies these acts in the scriptural witness and from the response of believers today to this witness.

According to Dulles's third model, revelation is seen as a special inner experience. It is essentially an inner feeling of communion with God. In this view, the locus of revelation is not the Bible or the doctrines of the church or the historical facts that purportedly lie behind the biblical witness. It is instead a present personal experience leading to a spiritual awakening and renewal. This model rightly calls attention to the personal and subjective side in the event of revelation but its view of experience is often narrow and individualistic. There is little sense here of the importance of the community of believers, its sacred texts, and its faith practices as bearers of the revelation of God.

Dulles calls his fourth model dialectical presence. In this model the emphasis is on a non-objectifiable encounter with the Word of God that is mediated by Scripture and church proclamation. God's Word cannot be identified with the word of its human witnesses, although it is mediated through them. When revelation occurs, it is the mysterious act of God's free grace. Dulles finds merit in this model's emphasis on the transcendence and freedom of God and the seriousness with which it takes the finitude and limitations of the media of revelation. Nevertheless, he thinks it is inadequately informed by the reality of the Incarnation. As a result, it fails to provide an intelligible bridge between God and creature.

The fifth model understands revelation as new awareness that leads to transformative action. Revelation is seen as a breakthrough in human consciousness that expresses itself in creative imagination and ethical action. In this understanding, revelation generates self and world transformation. The model of revelation as new awareness escapes the tendency of some of the other models to reduce the receiver of revelation to passivity before God and

the meaning of revelation is excessive and cannot be reduced to a set of authorities.

with particular historical events. In the biblical text itself or with momentous events recounted in Scripture we learn from historical research of the resurrection of Jesus in Egypt or the resurrection of Jesus. The revelation of God revealed by Dulles thinks there is much to be learned, but contends that it rather too often is the interpretation that accompanies the response of believers to

revelation is seen as a special inner experience of communion with God. In the Bible or the doctrines of the church, the biblical witness ultimately lie behind the biblical witness leading to a spiritual awakening. Its attention to the personal and its view of experience is often in the sense here of the importance of revelation, and its faith practices as bearers

of God's presence. In this model the emphasis is on the Word of God that is mediated through the Word of God. God's Word cannot be identified with the Word of God, though it is mediated through them. It is the act of God's free grace. Dulles emphasizes the transcendence and freedom of God, but the finitude and limitations of human beings make it inadequate to be informed by revelation, for it fails to provide an intelligible

revelation as new awareness that leads to a breakthrough in human imagination and ethical action. In the face of revelation and world transformation. The tendency of some of the models is to passivity before God and

emphasizes the active role of the receiver. Dulles suggests, however, that the new consciousness model of revelation frequently downplays or even breaks completely free of the witness of Scripture and tradition.

As is evident from this summary, Dulles does not consider any of these five models to be entirely satisfactory. Although he does not offer another model, he is clearly open to one that would more adequately describe the revelation Christians find preeminently in Jesus Christ as attested in Scripture and confirmed by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the life and practices of the church. He also reminds readers that the revelation of God cannot be confined to a past event or a present experience but also points to the final appearance of Christ at the Parousia (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:7; Col. 3:4). In other words, revelation is not finished, but an event whose completion Christians still await.

Revelation as God's Self-Disclosure Narrated in Scripture

Christian faith looks to the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as attested in Scripture as the supreme revelation of God and the basis of understanding all things in relation to God. While God is present and active in all of nature and history, for Christian faith and theology the fullness of revelation comes decisively in a personal life. Only revelation through a person can be fully intelligible to us, who are persons, and only personal revelation can adequately disclose the reality of God, who is supremely personal.²⁸ As Basil Mitchell notes, "The basic analogy involved in all talk of revelation is that of communication between persons."²⁹

If we take interpersonal communication to be the most satisfactory analogy of what is meant by the revelation of God, there will be some elements in common with each of the models in Dulles's typology, but the focus will be different. Our reflection will center not on propositions (although propositions have their place), nor on historical facts (although they are important), nor on our experiences of conversion and renewal (although these are certainly part of the meaning of revelation), nor on the crisis of the human condition before God (although it is impossible to separate revelation and crisis), nor on our heightened awareness of freedom and responsibility (although revelation does include these). Instead, we will attempt to understand God's self-revelation as analogous to interpersonal knowledge. We

28. See William Temple, *Nature, Man and God* (London: Macmillan, 1956), 319.

29. Basil Mitchell, "Does Christianity Need a Revelation?" *Theology* 83 (1980): 105.

must emphasize that this is *only* an analogy, and analogy in theology means a similarity in great difference.

How are persons known?³⁰ If we assume that persons are embodied agents who disclose their identity and intentions in their words and actions, an analogy between knowledge of other persons and the personal self-disclosure of God to us can be developed in the following way.

First, our knowledge of persons requires *attention to persistent patterns* in their actions that manifest, as we might say, who they really are, what is in their heart, what their true character is. Not everything that we do reveals our identity and our deepest intentions and dispositions. We may notice that in times of crisis a certain person is always the first one at the side of someone in need, asking what she can do to help. By virtue of this consistent pattern of activity, we feel justified in describing her as a truly sensitive and caring person. What she is "really like" has been "revealed" to us by a persistent pattern of behavior.

By analogy, the revelation of God can be understood as God's self-disclosure through personal action that exhibits a particular pattern. For Christian believers, the character and intentions of God are not immediately evident in every event of nature or history. They are focused in the particular event named Jesus of Nazareth — and not just in every detail that might be mentioned about this person (height, hair color, taste in music) but in the persistent pattern of his dedication to God and his self-giving love to others, distilled in the gospel stories and climaxed in the passion narrative.

Second, a person's identity is freely disclosed. While not necessarily arbitrary, there is an element of spontaneity and unpredictability about the action of persons. A person is *free to do new and surprising things*. When a person is stereotyped or his actions are thought to be entirely predictable, violence is done to his personhood. We often depend on others to tell us what they intended by their actions, especially when what they do is unexpected.

Similarly, while never speaking of God's action as capricious, the Bible always respects God's freedom to do the unexpected. While the faithfulness of God can be counted on, the purpose of God is accomplished in ever new and surprising ways. To the extent that we neglect this freedom and inexhaustibility of God, we turn knowledge of God into something we can control and manipulate to serve our own interests. As often as Israel was called by the prophets to remember what God had done and commanded in the past, Israel was also summoned to be open to the new actions of God (see Isa. 43:18-19).

30. The argument presented in the following paragraphs is indebted to Thomas F. Tracy's *God, Action, and Embodiment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

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Third, knowledge of persons involves a continuous *invitation to trust and to live in response to promises*. This is connected with the freedom of personal knowledge — freedom both on the side of the subject who is known and on the side of the knower. Because there is always the element of the new, the surprising, and the unpredictable in personal knowledge, promising is an important dimension of all personal relationships. We cannot promise our friend, nor can our friend promise us, to be absolutely the same tomorrow as today. But we can promise to be there for our friend, to be faithful in our care and love, even if this shows itself in a different and perhaps surprising way.

Here again the analogy proves useful in relation to the biblical description of God's self-disclosure. The revelation of God in the history of Israel and in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is characterized by promises and calls to faithfulness.³¹ "Your sins are forgiven" (Luke 7:48); "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20); "Believe in me, and you will never thirst again" (John 4:14); "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it" (Luke 9:24); "Take courage, I have conquered the world" (John 16:33); "Behold, I am with you always to the close of the age" (Matt. 28:20).

Finally, our identity as persons is often *rendered in narrative form*. If this is true of our self-disclosure to each other, by analogy it is also true of the self-disclosure of God. In Scripture God's revealed identity is rendered primarily by narrative.³² As F. Michael McLain writes, "If God is an agent who acts in the world so as to disclose divine character and purpose, then narrative is the appropriate form in which to render God's identity."³³

A number of contemporary theologians have explored the narrative form as a clue to understanding the meaning of revelation as God's personal self-disclosure.³⁴ Narrative is deemed an apt vehicle for identifying God because it can effectively convey the persistent patterns that define a person's character and purpose. It can depict personal action in its freedom, unpredictability, and promissory character. It is not surprising, then, that narrative

31. See Ronald F. Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985).

32. See Richard Bauckham, "Jesus the Revelation of God," in *Divine Revelation*, ed. Paul Avis, 174-200.

33. F. Michael McLain, "Narrative Interpretation and the Problem of Double Agency," in *Divine Action*, ed. Brian Hebblethwaite and Edward Henderson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 143.

34. See Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology*; also Stroup, "Revelation," in *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 114-40; and Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology*.

plays a special role in the biblical witness to the identity and purpose of God. In a recent work, Gabriel Fackre moves beyond Dulles's typology and develops an "encompassing view" of revelation set in a "narrative framework." According to Fackre, revelation must be understood within the context of the whole drama of God with the world from creation to consummation. Revelation embraces the entirety of the self-communicating activity of the triune God. The great drama of divine revelation attested in Scripture identifies God in multiple ways that include the activity of God in creation, reconciliation, and the final redemption of all things.³⁵

Although I agree with those who say biblical narrative is of special importance in a Christian doctrine of revelation, I believe a few qualifications are necessary. One qualification is that for Christian faith it is *not just any* biblical narrative that is decisive in rendering God's identity. At the center of the Christian understanding of the self-revelation of God is Jesus Christ the crucified (Gal. 3:1; 1 Cor. 1:23). In him the identity, purpose, and power of God are made manifest as nowhere else. In the words of H. Richard Niebuhr, "How strangely we must revise in the light of Jesus Christ all our ideas of what is really strong in this powerful world. . . . We see the power of God over the strong of earth made evident not in the fact that he slays them, but in his making the spirit of the slain Jesus unconquerable."³⁶

A second qualification of the narrative emphasis in a doctrine of revelation is that God's self-disclosure attested in Scripture is *not just* a narrative. The truth that Jesus Christ died and was raised for us takes narrative form, but Jesus Christ is not just a character in a story. Moreover, the narratives of Scripture are not simply interesting stories told to inform, entertain, or edify us. They aim to engage, liberate, convert, and transform us. Their purpose is to tell what God has done for us and to invite us to enter into the new freedom that is ours in Christ. They make truth claims about God and about the world in relation to God, and they call for our personal response. Only as these narratives of the activity of God intersect our own lives, personally and corporately, opening us to a new relationship to God, a new identity, a new life, and a new mission, do they become for us genuine media of the revelation of God.³⁷

A final qualification is that the biblical narrative of God's self-disclosure is an *unfinished* narrative. It remains open, as Rowan Williams reminds us:

35. Gabriel Fackre, *The Doctrine of Revelation: A Narrative Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

36. Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 187.

37. For an illuminating discussion of the "collision" between the biblical narrative and our personal narratives, see Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology*, 171-75.

the identity and purpose of God. and Dulles's typology and development in a "narrative framework." Understood within the context of the creation to consummation. Revela-communicating activity of the triune God attested in Scripture identifies God of God in creation, reconciliation,

biblical narrative is of special importation, I believe a few qualifications for Christian faith it is *not just any* biblical narrative. At the center of the revelation of God is Jesus Christ the crucified, purpose, and power of God are disclosed. H. Richard Niebuhr, "How do we see the power of God over the forces that he slays them, but in his crucible?"³⁶

emphasis in a doctrine of revelation. Scripture is *not just* a narrative. Revelation for us takes narrative form, story. Moreover, the narratives of revelation are told to inform, entertain, or edify and transform us. Their purpose is to invite us to enter into the new freedom of God's claims about God and about the world and our personal response. Only as we live out our own lives, personally and communally, do we participate in God, a new identity, a new revelation for us genuine media of the revelation.

the narrative of God's self-disclosure, as Rowan Williams reminds us:

A Narrative Interpretation (Grand Rapids:

the tension" between the biblical narrative and the narrative of revelation, 171-75.

"The narrative of Jesus is not finished, therefore not in any sense controlled, even by supposedly 'authorized' tellers of the story. . . . Jesus remains subject of his history."³⁸ To say that the biblical narrative of revelation is unfinished is to say that only God can complete it. We are not to try to bring the narrative under our control by closing it off ourselves and making it into a tidy system. To say that Jesus remains subject of his history is to say that he is alive, and that the self-revelation of God in him never becomes our possession. Recognition that the biblical narrative of revelation is unfinished will prompt us to attend to literary forms in the biblical witness other than narrative. These other forms articulate dimensions of God's self-revelation in God's history with Israel and in the person and work of Jesus Christ that might otherwise be neglected or ignored. In addition to narrative, Scripture contains prophetic oracles, proverbs, commands, hymns, cries, lamentations, and apocalyptic visions, and each is an important way of witnessing to the self-revelation of God who remains ever free and beyond our control.³⁹ While Scripture renders the identity and faithfulness of God capacious in its grand narrative of God's actions from creation to consummation and decisively in God's act of reconciliation in Jesus Christ, Scripture also gives voice to the experience of the absence and silence of God, the times when believers do not experience God's presence and do not see how their lives are encompassed by the overarching narrative of God's mighty deeds. The forms of the scriptural witness to revelation are diverse and none should be neglected.

Revelation, Scripture, and Church

In Christian theology the word "revelation" refers first of all not to the Bible, or to a creed, or to a set of doctrines, or to some ecclesiastical authority. It refers to the whole of the triune God's activity in creation, redemption, and consummation that has its center in Jesus Christ. His life, death, and resurrection are the supreme manifestation of the nature and purpose of God. The free grace of God in Jesus Christ is the core of the Christian message and the focus of a Christian doctrine of revelation.

Yet we would know nothing of the good news of the reconciliation of the world with God through Christ (2 Cor. 5:19) apart from the witness of Scripture and the activity of God's Spirit. The Spirit of God leads us to a right

38. Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 193.

39. See Paul Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," in *Essays in Biblical Interpretation*, ed. L. S. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 73-118.

knowledge of God and ourselves by illuminating the message of Scripture and opening our minds and hearts to this message. Where either the Spirit-illuminated witness of Scripture or its continuing proclamation by the church in the power of the Spirit is ignored or disparaged, the reality of revelation in the Christian sense is endangered.

In his doctrine of the three forms of the Word of God, Karl Barth clarifies the relationship between revelation and the concrete media through which it is received. As Barth explains, there are three forms of the Word of God: revealed, written, and proclaimed.⁴⁰ These distinct but inseparable forms of the one Word of God are related to each other like three concentric circles. The innermost circle is the revealed Word of God or the Word of God incarnate in Jesus Christ. We have access to this circle only through a second circle formed by the prophetic and apostolic witness of Scripture. This witness is in turn mediated to us by the proclamation of the church, the third, outer circle of the Word of God.

This description of the threefold structure of the Word of God makes it clear that God has chosen to give human beings an important part in the event of revelation. This is singularly true, of course, of the incarnation of God in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The Word became flesh (John 1:14). God is decisively revealed in the words and deeds of this particular human being. But Scripture and church proclamation, with all their limitations and flaws, are also forms of the Word of God and have an indispensable role in conveying God's self-revelation to us. The good news of God's reconciliation of the world in Christ comes to us not directly but indirectly, through the primary witness of Scripture and the secondary witness of church proclamation.

The light of God that shines in Jesus Christ is transmitted, first of all, through the prism of the biblical witnesses. As long as the church remains faithful to the self-communication of the triune God, it will acknowledge the priority and authority of the scriptural witness in its life and mission. At the same time, the real humanity of the biblical witnesses will also be recognized without apology or embarrassment. It is not a weakness but a strength of the Christian understanding of revelation that its original witnesses are unmistakably historically conditioned and remarkably diverse human beings. That we have the treasure of the gospel in clay jars (2 Cor. 4:7) is as true of Scripture as it is of all subsequent Christian witness based on Scripture. Hence not everything found in the Bible is to be taken as a direct word of God to us. Some texts of the Bible may stand in utmost tension with the revelation of the character and purpose of God as identified by the grand narrative of Scrip-

40. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/1 (2d ed., 1975): 88-124.

inating the message of Scripture message. Where either the Spirit- uing proclamation by the church araged, the reality of revelation in

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ture. We cannot deny, for example, that Scripture contains passages that de- scribe God in patriarchal images or as issuing commands to slaughter ene- mies. Scripture witnesses to revelation but is not identical with it. Even Calvin acknowledged this, although not as boldly as Luther.⁴¹ Today it is essential that a Christian doctrine of revelation distinguish clearly between Scripture's witness to the personal self-disclosure of God definitively in Jesus Christ and the historical contingencies and ambiguities of this witness.

But second, *the original witness of Scripture to God's revelation in Jesus Christ is itself mediated to us through the witness of the church.* We hear and understand the message of Scripture with the help of many interpreters. Like the Ethiopian official, we need guidance in the understanding of Scripture (Acts 8:30-31). If we were to cut ourselves off from the proclamation and life of the church as the medium through which we receive the biblical message, our understanding of the revelation of God would not be purer, as biblicists mistakenly imagine, but greatly impoverished. To be sure, the revelation of God places the church under judgment and calls it to repent of the ways in which it has obscured and distorted revelation. Nevertheless, the community of believers is the matrix of understanding, the indispensable context of interpretation of the revelation of God attested in Scripture.

Sensitive to the fallibility of church teaching and practice and aware of the need for continuous reform within the church, Protestant theology has tended to locate revelation in the biblical text alone, in isolation from the witness of the church past and present. But this is as barren as the attempt to set the church on the same level with or even above Scripture. While the Reformers were right in insisting that the central witness of Scripture is normative for the faith and life of the church, this witness does not exist in a vacuum. The truth is that neither "Scripture alone" nor "Scripture plus church tradition" is sufficient to communicate the gospel of Christ effectively. Only the Spirit of God who freely uses the witness of Scripture in the context of the witness and life of the church is able to create and nurture faith in and obedience to Christ as Savior and Lord.⁴²

Although the relationship between revelation, Scripture, and the teach- ings and traditions of the church continues to be a point of contention be- tween Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox theologies, all con-

41. On the one hand, Calvin speaks of God as the "author" of all of Scripture (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.3.4); on the other hand, he contends that it is only when Scripture "shows forth Christ" that it conveys the word of life (1.9.3).

42. See George S. Hendry, *The Holy Spirit in Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Westmin- ster, 1956): "Luther says the Word is the cradle in which Christ lies; we may also say that the church is the nursery in which the cradle lies" (95).

verge toward the recognition that Scripture and church doctrine are not two independent media of revelation. Church doctrines are what the church confesses and teaches on the basis of the revelation of God attested in Scripture.⁴³ Church teachings have a real but relative authority in the life of faith. Always subordinate to Scripture, the church's common creeds and contemporary confessions provide important hermeneutical keys to what is central in Scripture and give succinct summaries of the mighty acts of God. According to Calvin, ecumenical creeds such as the Apostles' Creed are to be highly valued because they "sum up in a few words the main points of our redemption."⁴⁴ Creeds and confessions play an important role in the life of the church as "primary commentaries" on Scripture, not as independent channels of revelation.⁴⁵

Recognizing that there are flaws and distortions in all witnesses to revelation is disturbing to many Christians. But if we remember that God's grace and power are made perfect in human weakness (2 Cor. 12:9), we will have little difficulty in seeing the grace of God at work in the fact that fallible human beings are taken into the service of God's revelation. By communicating indirectly with us, God's revelation is accommodated to our creaturely condition. God respects our humanity and seeks our free response.⁴⁶ The light of revelation does not descend on us perpendicularly from above; it comes through worldly media by the power of God's Spirit, who enlists our participation in the process of responsible interpretation and critical appropriation.

Because all human witnesses to revelation are subject to ambiguity and distortion, it is necessary to understand the reception of revelation as a dialectical process. On the one hand, there can be no reception of the revelation of God in Christ apart from *attentive and trustful reading and hearing* of the witness of Scripture in company with other members of the people of God. Only in the context of the faith, prayer, proclamation, sacramental life, and service of the church does the transforming power of Jesus Christ attested by Scripture become effective for us.

43. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1: *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition, 100-600* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971). Pelikan defines Christian doctrine as "what the church of Jesus Christ believes, teaches, and confesses on the basis of the word of God" (1).

44. Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.16.18. Cf. the concise formulation of Nicholas Lash: "What the Scriptures say at length, the creed says briefly"; *Believing Three Ways in One God: A Reading of the Apostles' Creed* (London: SCM Press, 1992), 8.

45. On the place of the church's creeds and confessions in relation to Scripture, see Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2: 585-660.

46. On "indirect communication" as the necessary form of God's revelation, see Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 216ff.

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Revelation are subject to ambiguity and the reception of revelation as a dialogue: there is no reception of the revelation without *trustful reading and hearing* of the word of the people of God. Proclamation, sacramental life, and the power of Jesus Christ attested by

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On the other hand, there is always a need for *critical appropriation* of the revelation of God in Christ as mediated to us by Scripture and the proclamation and life of the church. Only as we enter into the new freedom in Christ that resists every form of bondage, including those that may be supported by certain elements of Scripture and church teaching, do we become active and responsible recipients of the revelation of God. Neither the witness of Scripture nor that of the church is more than a servant of the living and free God. They point beyond themselves to the living Word of God, to a judging and renewing reality at work in our midst but never under our control.

A doctrine of revelation will thus acknowledge that we are human beings, that our lives are shaped by the particular communities to which we belong and most especially by the community of faith, by the values it espouses, the stories it tells, the doctrines it teaches, the practices it engages in. Reception of the revelation of God and the reformation of human life in its light occur in a communal context. This does not mean that faithfulness to the revelation of God is simply a process of "socialization" into the beliefs and practices of the Christian community. Becoming Christian involves far more than appropriating and repeating a tradition. To respond in faith to the revelation of the living God mediated through Scripture and the witness of the church is to become a free and joyful witness of the truth of the good news one has received and to share responsibility for interpreting it and living it out.

An important conclusion to be drawn from these reflections is that the community of faith that is called to service by the revelation of God must never presume to have control of the revelation that it attests. If that were to happen, revelation would be replaced by ideology, and theology by idolatry. God's self-revelation is true and trustworthy but it is never controllable, never simply identical with a book, a system of doctrine, a particular tradition, or the special experience of an individual or group. It is God's free and gracious act of self-disclosure in Jesus Christ mediated through the polyphonic witness of Scripture and the living testimony of the community of faith by the power of the Holy Spirit. Revelation can never be considered our possession, something we can take for granted. It is an event for which the church must continually pray: "Come, Holy Spirit! Speak once again to your people through your Word." In acknowledging our dependence on God's self-revelation supremely given in Jesus Christ, the Christian community confesses that it is not its own master, that God alone is Lord, that this community is called to proclaim Jesus Christ and not itself (2 Cor. 4:5), and that it must expect to be addressed and reformed again and again by the living Word of God in the power of God's Spirit.