

Inspiration and Revelation

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The term “revelation” is familiar to most students of the Bible as the name of the last book of the New Testament. “Revelation” is derived from the Latin word which translates *apokalypsis* in Revelation 1:1. This is why many commentaries and translations refer to the book of Revelation as the Apocalypse. The Greek term means “unveiling,” so it can apply to the “disclosure of truth.”

As important as the term “revelation” has become in modern theology, it was only one of numerous terms used in the Bible to define the concept. As Emil Brunner explains, “Neither in the Old Testament nor in the New Testament is there a word that corresponds to our theological idea of ‘revelation.’ The Old Testament has a number of words for this: God allows Himself to be seen, to be known, to be discovered; above all, God speaks... The same is true of the New Testament.” (*Revelation and Reason*, p. 21, n.4; cited by James Leo Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 1, p. 44).

Revelation means that God has made himself known to human beings. One form this unveiling takes is usually called “general revelation.” General revelation is knowledge of God which is available to all of mankind through nature and human reason. This is what David meant in Psalm 19, “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.” God has not left himself “without witness” (Acts 14:17; cf. Acts 17:26-28). We are unable to claim ignorance of the existence of God or of right and wrong. The apostle Paul said that immoral, godless mankind is without excuse, “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown

it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made” (Rom. 1:18-20; cf. Rom. 2:14-16).

Augustine, the great theologian of the early church and bishop of Hippo in north Africa, wrote these marvelous thoughts about general revelation, “For such is the energy of true Godhead, that it cannot be altogether and utterly hidden from any rational creature, so long as it makes use of its reason. For with the exception of a few ... the whole race of man acknowledges God as the maker of this world. In respect, therefore, of his being the maker of this world that is visible in heaven and earth around us, God was known by all nations even before they were indoctrinated into the faith of Christ” (*On the Gospel of John*, 106.4).

Another form of God’s disclosure of himself is “special revelation.” Special revelation is God’s unveiling of himself, which was initially given only to a few but was meant for all of humanity. In Judaism and Christianity revelation is especially transmitted to mankind by means of history. As the writer to the Hebrews said, “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” (Heb. 1:1). When we speak of special revelation, we think in particular of God speaking to Moses at the burning bush, of God revealing his will to the prophets, of the incarnation of deity in human flesh in Jesus Christ, and of the coming of the Holy Spirit on the apostles to guide them into all truth (Jn. 16:13). We think of both the words and actions of God throughout the ages.

Special revelation is relational. God reveals himself. We need to come to know God himself, because those who do not know God will be punished (Gal. 4:8-9; 1 Thess. 4:5; 2 Thess. 1:8; Tit. 1:16). Knowledge of God should be more than knowing a few facts about God. It should be personal. Maybe this is why man’s relationship to God and Christ is so frequently compared to the relationship between a husband and wife. A husband who only knows a few facts about his wife—for example, her height, her hair color and the color of her eyes—does not really know her very well.

One way that we come to know God himself is to know about God. This is why the scriptures describe God in countless ways. For example, the scriptures tell us that God is the creator, that he is good and that he is spirit (Gen. 1:1; Mk. 10:18; Jn. 4:24). The scriptures not only tell us what God has done, but also they give the meaning of his actions (e.g., Gen. 50:20). Therefore, special revelation is not only relational but also it is propositional. Our relationship with God is accomplished, in part, by what we are told about him in the scriptures in propositional truths (Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 100-102).

What is the connection between inspiration and revelation? God has revealed himself by means of the Holy Spirit inspiring the writers of the Bible to create the scriptures. Just as God revealed himself in the creation of the world, he has made himself known in the written word given by inspiration. The Bible contains a record of special revelation which is “able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15).