

Systematic Theology for the Local Church

#12—Bibliology—Part III¹

God Has Spoken to Sinners: Special Revelation

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For the studies in Bibliology: Become familiar with Sections 6-12 in House's *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine*. Read all of Packer's *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*. Packer's book was written against the background of the debate over Fundamentalism in the late 20th century. However, his presentation of the systems of authority (reason, tradition and Scripture) is timeless. Also, read Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, ch. 1, "The Fact of Divine Revelation," ch. 2, "The Inspired Nature of Holy Scripture," ch. 3, "The Attributes of Holy Scripture," and ch. 5, "The Bible as the $\Pi\omicron\upsilon$ $\Sigma\tau\omega$ for Knowledge and Personal Significance," which deals with the Bible as the basis for life. I encourage you also to listen to some of S. Lewis Johnson's studies in systematic theology available online. We have asked that you listen to at least five of these. With each of my studies I will be providing a running compilation of key definitions. I encourage you to keep up to date on these. I encourage you to bring House's book on Sundays and Wednesdays, since we will refer to it during the studies. It is also valuable to have your notebook with the set of definitions so you can look up any terms that you are unfamiliar with.

Resolution of incompleteness

We have seen that general revelation only tells us certain things about God and His purposes for human beings. We learn from nature that there is a creating deity who is worthy of our worship. Nature and our own makeup and consciences tell us that there are moral features to life. But we learn nothing of God's mercy or how human beings sensing guilt can reach Him. Furthermore, as Rom. 1 tells us, sinful human beings reject general revelation as a pointer to God.

Lewis Johnson points out that general revelation has the content to lead human beings to expect more from God². For example, we can see in nature both the goodness and the justice of God but we cannot see how they can be put together. There is an incompleteness. Our consciences tell us that we are doing something right or something wrong. But this only take us so far: we can't know if there is a way out of what appears to be a works righteousness. How can we know how to be righteous before God? I would add that sinful rejection of general revelation will keep most human beings from even thinking about this incompleteness.

It can only be the grace of God that has led Him to communicate patiently with us in other ways. To meet our need of knowing how to get to our Creator, He has told us much more in more direct ways, some through the medium of language itself. This kind of disclosure has been called *special revelation*. It is special, or limited, in that it has taken place on specific occasions with certain people. It partakes of evident supernatural qualities, since it occurs as a kind of intervention into the natural course of things in human existence. It differs from general revelation in that it gives information that we need to help our situation as sinners, while disclosure in nature, conscience and providence is addressed more to all of us as human beings. Here is a definition of *special revelation*:

Special revelation is the disclosure of information from God that is not available directly to all human beings.*

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² S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., "Revelation, or Has Man a Word from God?" Online audio Lessons in Systematic Theology, available at http://www.believerschapeldallas.org/tapes/slj-69_systematic-theology/part-1.htm.

This comes through the channels of direct communication (as through the prophets), dreams and visions, miracles, the very appearance of Christ in the incarnation and the superintending by the Holy Spirit of those writing what would subsequently be viewed as canonical Scripture. It tells what general revelation cannot—the express will of God for human beings as sinners who need to become related to a holy God. This purpose of special revelation is underscored in 2 Tim. 3:16-17 (God-given Scripture is profitable for bringing about righteousness) and Heb. 1:1-3 (Jesus, Himself a revelation from God, has accomplished final purification for sins).

In comparison with general revelation, God’s activity in special revelation has been more diverse. This is described in Heb. 1:1: “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways” But there were even channels beyond the prophets. At times God communicated directly (Gen. 17:1) in some kind of appearance (see Jn. 1:18), but at other times only a voice could be perceived (Ex. 3:2ff, where Moses apparently saw only the burning bush). Although every communication from God by the vehicle of language can be called a miracle, we would be inclined to view incidents such as the burning bush as more miraculous than God’s speaking through Moses to Pharaoh, as described in Ex. 4:12.

Some might criticize this division of revelation and its purpose into two segments. It is certainly true that the words general and special do not appear in the Bible in connection with God’s disclosure of Himself. But they are helpful in describing the areas or channels through which God has chosen to reveal Himself. There is no break in the unity of God’s revelation—whatever the source, the same God is behind it all—but the twofold division speaks of God’s desire to communicate to us in diverse ways, an activity of God that should lead us to appreciate Him more, since due to our sinful condition He is under no obligation at all to tell us anything.

Revelation by direct communication

An example of this is Ex. 6:28-7:5, where God speaks with Moses face to face. Of course, Moses later includes this in his writings, which become part of Scripture:

²⁸ Now when the LORD spoke to Moses in Egypt, ²⁹ he said to him, “I am the LORD. Tell Pharaoh king of Egypt everything I tell you.”

³⁰ But Moses said to the LORD, “Since I speak with faltering lips, why would Pharaoh listen to me?”

7 Then the LORD said to Moses, “See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet. ² You are to say everything I command you, and your brother Aaron is to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his country. ³ But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and though I multiply my miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt, ⁴ he will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and with mighty acts of judgment I will bring out my divisions, my people the Israelites. ⁵ And the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it.”

Revelation by dreams and visions

To direct Jacob to move to Egypt, God appears to him through a vision: “And God spoke to Israel in a vision at night and said, “Jacob! Jacob!” (Ex. 46:2)

Revelation through miracles

While there are many examples that could be mentioned here, the four that Wayne House lists are representative³: the call of Abram in Gen. 12, the birth of Isaac in Gen. 21, the Passover in Ex. 12 and the crossing of the Red Sea in Ex. 14. It is important to remember that God does not perform miracles to entertain people. They are always related in some way to His plan for the ages (the birth of Isaac), His protection and instruction of His people (the Passover) or His provision of redemption (the resurrection).

Revelation in Christ

The greatest revelation connected with a person is centered on the Lord Jesus Christ. Quite apart from anything He ever said, He Himself was a disclosure by God (Heb. 1:2). The very fact that God, in the Person of the divine-human Being, walked among us, constitutes a giving of information about Him. In fact, Jn. 1:18 tells us that this revelation, the incarnation itself, is unique, since it somehow tells us more about God, and takes us closer into the divine presence than any other communication from God: “No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.”

The reason that the Son is the ultimate revelation is given in Mt. 11:27: “All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” Thus, although God Himself spoke to people previously, the constant presence of a divine Being, who could be observed rigorously, was the greatest of all disclosures of God. Certainly Jesus disclosed God’s nature as a perfect Being, since He Himself never sinned. The existence of God was clearly established. And the very obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ, apart from His Words, constituted a lesson concerning the existence of a divine will for human beings.

Revelation that is Scripture

Although the revelation taking us closest to God Himself occurred in the Person of Christ, the most valuable for later generations is the revelation which is Scripture. For although God spoke and appeared to many, we would have no record of any of it—no trustworthy record, that is—if it were not fixed in a lasting medium. We couldn’t know anything of the previous types of special revelation that we have mentioned if they hadn’t been preserved.

We should remember that all of the Bible is really a revelation, even though some of the content was known previously. Historical and geographical records may have been generally accessible and may even be mentioned outside the Bible in other literature. But their arrangement and inclusion with material that no human being had access to—data concerning God and His will—amounts to a revelation.

I have avoided parallelism with the preceding section titles and named this section “Revelation that is Scripture” to avoid any suggestion (e.g. with a title such as “Revelation in the Bible”) of the erroneous view that God’s revelation is *contained* in the Bible. The Bible *itself* is a revelation.

There are many examples that we could look at, but here are two that stress the source of Scripture as being God Himself. The first is Jeremiah 1:4-10:

⁴The word of the LORD came to me, saying,

⁵“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”

³ H. Wayne House, *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 22.

⁶“Ah, Sovereign LORD,” I said, “I do not know how to speak; I am only a child.”

⁷ But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a child.’ You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. ⁸ Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you,” declares the LORD.

⁹ Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, “Now, I have put my words in your mouth. ¹⁰ See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.”

About this passage Robert Reymond says:

Here Jeremiah makes it clear that God had set him apart before he was born—indeed, even before he was conceived—to the prophetic office. Once again, from this passage it is made plain that to be a prophet one had to be commissioned by God and the one so commissioned was under obligation to speak God’s words. The prophet’s message, in sum, had to originate with God⁴.

The second passage is 1 Cor. 2:6-13. I have underlined the key words for our purposes:

⁶ We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. ⁷ No, we speak of God’s secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. ⁸ None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹ However, as it is written: “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him”— ¹⁰ but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. ¹¹ For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man’s spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. ¹² We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. ¹³ This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.

Although Paul is speaking primarily of the words he preaches orally, these words came to be written down, so they possess the quality of being revealed truth from God. Again, Reymond says about this passage:

In sum, Paul asserts here that, in his capacity as an apostle, both the *thoughts* he proclaimed . . . and the *very words* with which they were framed, were not ultimately his but originally were the Spirit’s thoughts and words. . . . And again, one might justly infer from this that if Paul recorded these thoughts in written form, framing them by these Spirit-taught words, what he wrote would equally be the Spirit’s thoughts and words in inscripturated form.⁵

Advantages of Scripture as revelation

There are some obvious advantages of Scripture over the other forms of special revelation. To begin with, the written text preserves messages originally given orally or in writing. They could easily have been lost over the years during transmission. Of course, the Holy Spirit preserved some information over long periods of time before it was written down. Moses wasn’t present at the Creation, and wrote somewhat after the fact!

Written revelation also has the advantage of being transportable. In fact, God has made taking Scripture with us anywhere quite easy due to ready access to writing materials and the ability to translate, advancements that were both in place during and before Abraham’s time.

⁴ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of The Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 29.

⁵ Reymond, 32-33.

Because the Bible can be brought to people who are in diverse locations and removed in time from those who experienced God directly as recorded in the Bible, individuals in every generation around the world become responsible to it. If we only heard about some message that God had given to people many years ago in a distant place, we might not feel it was worth investigating, and might not even be able to go and check on it even if we wanted to. But the grace of God has made the Bible accessible to many different language groups, societies and generations. The fact that in any generation, including the present one, there are many around the world who do not have the Bible in their own language should spur us to be more involved in translating and publishing this precious revelation.

The process of scriptural revelation

The Bible is quite clear in teaching that the Holy Spirit of God is the Agent of revelation, as described in Acts 1:15-16:

¹⁵ In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) ¹⁶ and said, “Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus— ¹⁷ he was one of our number and shared in this ministry.”

Peter is referring in v. 16 to words found in Ps. 69:25 and Ps. 109:8 that he will quote in v. 20. David, who is the human author of Pss. 69 and 109, could not have spoken about Judas ahead of time, since he could not have known about his life and existence at all. But God knew it perfectly and revealed to David what he could not know himself. (Whether or not David understood what the Spirit was leading him to write is another matter.) In 2 Pet. 1:21 this work of the Spirit is described as ‘carrying along’ the prophets of the Old Testament. That the human authors participated intelligently is clear from the many biblical indications of their emotions and desire found in their writings. But it is also quite clear that the Spirit of God used them as channels for the message exactly as He intended it to be given through them.

Limitations of special revelation

There are limits to special revelation as there are to general revelation. Deuteronomy 29:29 reminds us that God has not told us everything that can be known about Himself: “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children . . .” There are many things we would like to know, and probably many things we would not understand, that God in His wisdom has kept closed to us. But we are responsible for what we do have, for it is what we need for pleasing God: “All Scripture is God-breathed and useful . . . so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Although special revelation has been given in stages, so that each new disclosure adds more to the picture, we are obligated to attempt to get the most from the whole written message and obey what we find.

Study questions

1. Be able to define *revelation*, *general revelation* and *special revelation*. Review all the definitions on the next page.
2. What kinds of revelation are found in the following passages? If special revelation, which category is represented?
 1. Acts 9:4-6
 2. Num. 12:6-8
 3. Rev. 1:10-11
 4. Acts 17:24-28
 5. Ps. 94:9-10
 6. 1 Tim 3:16
 7. Ex. 33:11
 8. Jn. 1:18
 9. Jn. 14:9
 10. Mt. 11:27

Running compilation of key definitions

1. Systematic theology: The organized presentation of all that the Bible teaches about God and His works.
2. Exegesis: The actual practice of studying or interpreting a document or other message to determine its meaning.
3. Context: Context in a document or utterance is the surroundings of a portion of a word, a word or a group of words.
4. Bibliology: The doctrinal study of the nature of the Bible.
5. Biblical authority: The quality inherent in Scripture by virtue of which human beings are completely answerable to its content.
6. Revelation: The information about Himself given by God to human beings.
7. General revelation: God's disclosure of Himself, available directly to everyone, given through means other than dreams, visions, direct words and Christ Himself.
8. Special revelation: The disclosure of information from God that is not available directly to all human beings.