

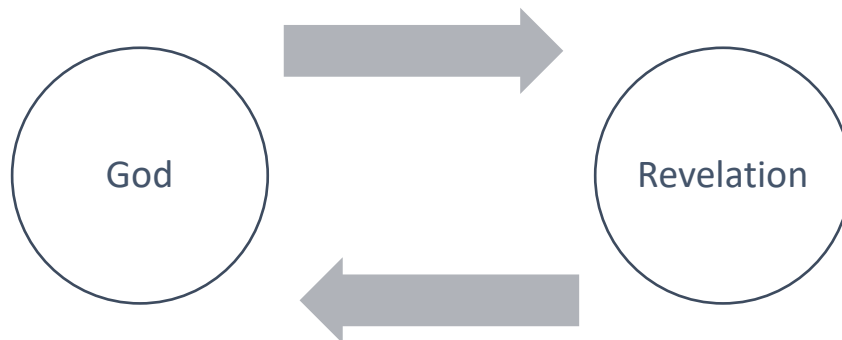
Doctrine of Revelation

1 INTRODUCTION

Our faith is founded on revelation. Our hopes and aspirations are invested in the reality that the God of the universe has clearly revealed himself to humanity. In order to properly explore divine revelation in Scripture, we must first investigate divine revelation as a whole. What does it mean that God has revealed himself, and how has he done so?

2 THE NATURE OF REVELATION

A strange irony exists in the expression, “the revelation of God.” On the one hand, the expression underscores revelation’s *source*. It is *divine* revelation—revelation that comes from God. It is that which God *reveals*. On the other hand, the expression equally underscores the *subject* of revelation. It is revelation *about* God. In revelation, God reveals *himself*.



Thus, as we study the concept of God *revealing*, we inevitably find that God is, in turn, *revealed*. That is as it should be, for when we learn about God *through* his revelation, we are discovering exactly what he intends to do *with* his revelation. The study of God’s revelation—divine disclosure—reveals several significant theological realities.

2.1 GRACIOUS

Carl F. H. Henry, in his multivolume magnum opus *God, Revelation, and Authority*, provided the most beautifully elegant definition of revelation as **God’s willful self-disclosure, wherein He forfeits His own personal privacy so that His creatures might know Him.**¹

We live in a society that deeply values personal and individual privacy. We have laws that protect it. Yet we probably don’t immediately think of personal privacy in relation to God. Henry suggests

¹ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority, Vol 3: The God Who Speaks and Shows* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999), 405.

that we do. The act of divine revelation is something that originated out of God's absolute sovereign will. He did it freely. Nothing acted upon him, compelling him to reveal himself.

Divine freedom is an essential divine attribute. Grudem states, "There is no person or force that can ever dictate to God what he should do. He is under no authority or external restraint."² We see this truth expressed by the psalmist, who writes, "Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever He pleases" (Ps 115:3). Likewise, Paul attributes God's decisions and actions to the "good pleasure of His will" (Eph 1:5, 9; Phil 2:13; Col 1:19).

This same principle applies equally to God's self-disclosure. God revealed out of "the good pleasure of His will." As Henry writes,

*If divine revelation...means anything, it implies among other things that God need not have thus disclosed Himself. God might indeed have remained silent and incommunicative in relation to His creatures. His revelational speech to mankind is not an inescapable or inevitable reality. It is instead a demonstration of His own character.*³

What should be immediately apparent from such thoughts is the grace inherent in divine revelation. If understood rightly, the knowledge of God should produce humility and thankfulness. Pride is completely antithetical to true knowledge, for we recognize that we know only because God has first revealed.

2.2 NECESSARY

If revelation is given only by divine initiation, then it follows that man's knowledge of God is impossible apart from revelation. While revelation wasn't necessary for God to provide, it is necessary for man if he is to have any knowledge of his Creator. "Because humans are finite and God is infinite," writes Erickson, "if they are to know God it must come about by God's manifestation of himself."⁴ Likewise, Berkhof explains,

*In the study of all other sciences man places himself above the object of his investigation and actively elicits from it his knowledge by whatever method may seem most appropriate, but in theology he does not stand above but rather under the object of his knowledge. In other words, man can know God only in so far as the latter actively makes Himself known. God is first of all the subject communicating knowledge to man, and can only become an object of study for man in so far as the latter appropriates and reflects on the knowledge conveyed to him by revelation. Without revelation man would never have been able to acquire any knowledge of God.... The position must be maintained...that theology would be utterly impossible without a self-revelation of God.*⁵

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 216.

³ Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, Vol. 3, 405.

⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 178.

⁵ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1958), 35-36.

And Pache pushes the argument even further:

*God is, by definition, inaccessible to the creature. His omnipotence, eternity and absolute perfection are by their very essence inconceivable to our limited minds.... It is evident, moreover, that for man to conceive of the Supreme Being in His absolute nature, he would have to be God Himself!*⁶

We may be tempted to assume that this necessity is somehow a post-fall reality and that humanity before the fall was not hard-pressed with the same limitations as we now suffer. To be sure, the Fall fundamentally effected man's cognitive abilities, both morally and rationally. We'll explore these effects in more detail later in our study.

At the same time, we would be overestimating our intellectual capacities to assume that man somehow had the innate ability to comprehend God. "Mankind's inability to comprehend God fully is not the result of the Adamic fall. It antedates the fall of man. Inability to understand God' fully is related even to the perfect man's finitude at creation."⁷ Thus, after creating man and woman, God revealed to them their divinely-intended purpose and function—to procreate, fill the earth, subdue it, and exercise authority over the created order (1:28). He directed them to what they could and could not eat (1:29; 2:16-17). He warned them about the consequences of disobedience (2:17). Implicit in this account is that man's understanding of his existence, purpose, and moral responsibility relied upon God's initiation. As Barrick notes, "Eve the unfallen Adam needed divine revelation to begin to perceive the fringe of God's ways and the edges of His being (cf. Job 26:14)."⁸

The rest of Scripture attests to this fact as well, and is seen most notably in the Bible's common metaphor for Scripture as *food*. Just as food is essential for man's existence, so too is God's words. Thus Job testifies that "I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food" (Job 23:12). Israel is challenged to recognize that "man lives by everything that proceeds out of Yahweh's mouth" (Deut 8:3; cf. Matt 4:4; Luke 4:4). Peter adjures his readers to "long for the pure milk of the word" (1 Pet 2:2).

An equally helpful metaphor is that of *light*. While darkness is representative of ignorance and lack of knowledge (Job 37:19; 38:2; Eccl 2:14), light portrays the illumination of God's truth in life. Thus the psalmist calls God's word "a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps 119:105; cf. Prov 6:23) which, when opened, gives light and understanding to the simple (Ps 119:130). Peter speaks of God's word as "a lamp shining in a dark place," guiding the believer through the obscurity of night until the day dawns (2 Pet 1:19).

In both metaphors, the emphasis is on man's utter reliance on God's revelation. Without it, he goes hungry. Without it, he walks in darkness. So if man is to know God, he must rely on God's self-disclosure.

⁶ René Pache, *The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture*, trans. By Helen I. Needman (Chicago: Moody, 1969), 11-12 [emphasis in the original].

⁷ William D. Barrick, "The Necessity of Scripture," MSJ 15, no. 1 (Fall 2004): 155.

⁸ Ibid.

2.3 POSSIBLE

At the same time that we affirm the necessity of revelation and the reality of God's incomprehensibility, we must also recognize two important truths. First, God is *incomprehensible*, not *in-apprehensible*. That is to say, God's fundamental nature, being, and essence, make humans incapable of *fully* knowing God (cf. Ps 145:3; Rom 11:34). In other words, it is impossible for us to fully know or understand any single thing about God. But this is not to say that God is *unknowable* (*in-apprehensible*). We *can* know God. Our knowledge may be limited by our humanness, our fallenness (or both), or by the amount and level of God's self-disclosure. Yet as God's images, we *can* know and understand something about God—partially, but truly. To this, Bavinck identifies the strange irony of this fact:

[T]hat which God reveals of himself in and through creatures is so rich and so deep that it can never be fully known by any human individual. In many respects we do not even understand the universe of created beings, which again and again confronts us with enigmas and mysteries. How then should we be able to understand the revelation of God in all its riches and depth? But by admitting all this we by no means deny God's knowability. God's incomprehensibility, instead of abrogating his knowability, presupposes and affirms the same. The unsearchable riches of the Divine Being constitute a necessary and important element of our knowledge of God.⁹

Second, God *has* disclosed himself to humanity. As we established, he was not obligated to do so. Nevertheless, he has revealed himself, and, as Chafer intimates, man's status as God's image on earth drives toward a natural expectation that God would and has communicated himself to his creations:

Having made man in His own image and having endowed man with the capacity to commune with Himself, it is reasonable to expect that this competency in man would be exercised; that in due time God would disclose to man truth concerning Himself and His purposes, also man's true place in the divine plan of creation—his relation to God, to eternity, to time, to virtue, to sin, to redemption, as well as to all other beings in this universe in which man's life is cast.¹⁰

Taken even further, we can echo the words of Pache when he asserted that the Lord “takes pleasure in revealing Himself.”¹¹ God announced through the prophet Ezekiel, “I will magnify Myself, sanctify Myself, *and make Myself known* in the sight of many nations; and they will *know* that I am Yahweh” (Ezek 38:23).

This knowledge is multifaceted. On the one hand, it speaks of intellectual knowledge. God communicates truth about himself which man can apprehend cognitively. But the ultimate goal of God's self-disclosure is for man to *know* God in a salvific, relational sense. “This is eternal life,” says Jesus, “that they may *know* you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3). Here we see the results of the fall on humanity. It is possible to both know God and not know God at the same time. He may know God cognitively without knowing him relationally. Of course, the former is intended to lead to the latter, but man's spiritual condition gets in the way! Jesus affirmed this when he

⁹ Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, trans. And ed. By William Henriksen (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997 reprint), 41-42 [emphasis in the original].

¹⁰ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), 1:48.

¹¹ Pache, *The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture*, 12.

said, “No one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son *wills to reveal him*” (Matt 11:27). The apostle Paul, likewise, wrote that “the world in its wisdom *did not come to know God*” (1 Cor 1:21), yet rejoiced in his salvation, in which he aimed “to *know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings*” (Phil 3:10). Barrick nicely summarizes the discussion:

Thus it is possible to say of an individual that “he knows God” and, at the same time, “he does not know God”—both statements can be true of the same person (whether believer or unbeliever) at the same time. The believer has saving knowledge of God, but does not know God fully. An unbeliever may “know” (= know about) the God of the Bible from both natural revelation and special revelation, yet still not have saving knowledge of God.¹²

Yet the question remains, no *if* man know, but *how* man can know. And this question brings us to the divine *modes* of self-disclosure.

3 THE MODES OF REVELATION

The fact of divine revelation is evident in the fact of Scripture itself. Yet from that very text we learn that God has revealed himself to us in a variety of modes. Theologians generally categorize revelation into two basic classifications: general revelation and special revelation. The particularities of each of these is the focus of the next two section.

¹² Barrick, “The Necessity of Scripture,” 156-7.