

**Based on: Roger Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002.**

**Divine Revelation: Universal *and* Particular (chap. 3)**

**Christian Scripture: Divine Word *and* Human Words (chap. 4)**

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Last time we discussed some theological basics. We distinguished between dogma (ideas universally accepted by all Christians), doctrines (ideas accepted by certain groups of Christians), and opinions (ideas accepted by individual Christians). These terms are defined differently and you may disagree with the three-fold division, but for sake of simplicity we'll stick with these categories and definitions. Each week we'll look at a topic (or topics), and in explaining I'll try to offer up what I believe falls into the category of dogma and what I believe should be seen as doctrine and/or opinion. As I said last time, in order to appreciate the diversity within the larger unity of Christian belief, we need to keep the category of dogmatic essentials rather minimal in order to allow for the expression of a larger diversity in the non-essentials of doctrines and opinions. That being said, today we will look at the issue of divine revelation, which is foundational for our discussions of particular theological formulations in the weeks ahead. We'll begin with God's self-revelation in general, and then move to a more specific manifestation thereof when we discuss God's revelation through the Christian Scriptures.

Let's begin with a definition of God's self-revelation, which Olson suggests be understood as "any way in which God communicates himself or something about himself to others" (72). For something to be revealed, it would otherwise be unknown. Therefore, to reveal something is to uncover or disclose that which had not yet and would not have been known otherwise. It seems simple enough until when one moves beyond this basic understanding and seeks to "flesh out" the manner in which God reveals himself the matter gets a bit muddled and not a little controversial. As Olson reveals, the debates regarding divine revelation circle around three polarizing questions: General or particular? Personal or propositional? Completed or continual?

I believe that Olson is correct in pointing out that these are false dichotomies, and that we need to learn to take a "both-and" rather than "either-or" approach in order to appreciate the diverse perspectives that exist within the unifying dogma regarding God's revelation. Which begs the question, what is the universally accepted position (or dogma) regarding divine revelation? Though others may disagree, I see it as this: God reveals himself through a variety of means, but has done so most fully and explicitly through Jesus the Messiah.

Now that we have established what unites us as Christians, we can turn to the variety of views on the particulars regarding God's revelation. What is important is to remember that while diversity inevitably means disagreement, it need not lead to divisiveness. Too often we equate disagreeing with a particular view or decision as divisive. It can be when we seek to make non-essentials essentials, but if we can maintain unity around a central and rather small core of shared beliefs we can learn to agree to disagree with a generous harmony rather than myopic hatred.

That being said, let's look briefly at each of the three polarities offered by Olson, beginning with the final two matters and concluding with the issue of God's general and particular revelation. Again, I'm going to be assuming a "both-and" position that affirms that God has and continues to reveal himself along both spectrums rather than assuming we have to choose between one and the other.

Regarding the question of personal and propositional revelation, Olson believes that God reveals himself by encounters/actions (personal) as well as by offering an understanding/interpretation of these actions (propositional). In other words, God acts in history and those actions are recorded and then interpreted, so it is both a personal, experiential revelation as well as an interpretive, propositional revelation.

Regarding the question of completed and continual revelation, Olson states that "so long as we give primacy and normativity to original revelation in Jesus Christ and Scripture, there is no great danger...in acknowledging a certain kind of continuing revelation" (88). In other words, our understanding of God's future actions can and should be interpreted in light of God's past actions, particularly those revealed in the life and teachings of Jesus, but this need not rule out the possibility of God's self-revelatory action in the future.

This brings us to what I believe is most difficult issue regarding God's general and particular self-revelation. Most Christians affirm that God reveals himself through nature (see Rom 1.18ff, Psalm 19) and other means such as human reason and experience. Issues arise, however, when discussion shifts from this general affirmation to debates about what can be known through this form of revelation and whether or not it is sufficient for salvation.

One perspective held by many theologians throughout the course of Christian history suggests that revelation through nature and reason provides people with the bare knowledge that there is a God. However, they also say that a special revelation of God is necessary for redemption (or salvation). The implications of this perspective seem to suggest that this natural knowledge of God available through God's self-revelation in nature is enough to condemn persons to hell (viz. separation from God) but not sufficient for salvation (viz. unity with God) which is only found, it is asserted, through knowledge of Jesus Christ. And what is usually implied in the statement "knowledge of Jesus Christ" is a particular list of facts//beliefs about Jesus that one must hear and to which one must then give intellectual assent. While the particular formulations of this perspective vary, they all seem to understand salvation as a result of having the correct doctrinal and theological opinions about Jesus. The primary issue this approach raises for me is how the God who revealed himself as love could set up the system in such a way that those who lived before Christ and those who lived after Christ but never heard of him could be forever separated from God simply for their bad luck of being born in a time and/or place where they couldn't obtain this information. Again, most who hold this view would not formulate the matter so starkly, but these seem to be the underlying implications.

The other perspective is that revelation through nature and reason, as one of the means by which God reveals himself, is sufficient for redemption based on the determination of God alone who has revealed himself in Jesus as loving and merciful, wishing none to perish and all to come to redemption (viz. reconciliation with God and humanity). While these issues will resurface again when we come to the topic of salvation, it's important to briefly expand upon this idea here as well. Jesus says in Luke 12.48 that "to whom much is given much more will be required." I think the application here is that those of us who have had the opportunity to hear the good news of Jesus will be held to a different standard than those who did not have the same opportunity. Put another way, in the first view I mentioned the standard is generally some list of ideas or doctrines about Jesus (decided upon by a given group or denomination) that a person must accept in order to be "saved." In the second view the standard is relative to the person based on the judgment of God alone, knowing that God is a God of grace and mercy who desires that none to be separated from his love (2 Pet 3.9).

The first view, in my opinion, has no sufficient answer for how everyone who lived *before* Jesus (including all the biblical "heroes of the faith") or those who lived *after* Jesus (but never heard anything about his life and teachings) can be "saved." The second approach removes the difficulty by leaving the judgment up to God who is always revealing himself in myriad ways, and who desires all creation to be reconciled in and embraced by his extravagant love. For those who lived before Jesus or who never heard about Jesus we trust that God is a God of grace.

I lean on C.S. Lewis in this regard who believed that none will be in hell (viz. separated from God) apart from their own choosing, offering the suggestion that "the doors of hell are locked on the inside."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the standard is that people respond to the light (viz. the revelation of God) that they have been provided and God alone is the judge not you and me. After all, I believe that Jesus' declaration that he is "the way, the truth and the life and none come to God but through him" (Jn 14.6) was meant to reveal that the manner of life he taught and embodied—the Kingdom of God—made possible by and through God's grace was the way to redemption and reconciliation rather than by hearing and giving intellectual assent to ideas about Jesus. This is why in Matthew 25 Jesus depicts the scene of final judgment as a separation of those who cared for the needy and less-fortunate and those who did not. To me, this reveals that our response to God's revelation—whether we encounter only God's general revelation through nature and reason or God's particular revelation through Jesus the Christ—is a manner of life that corresponds to God's initial intent for all of creation, one characterized by harmony, love, mutuality, reconciliation, compassion, mercy and grace.

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1940), 129-130

This brings us to our second topic regarding revelation, Christian Scriptures. Probably to the surprise of no one this has proved a rather controversial topic throughout Christian history over matters such as which texts should be included, why these texts should be considered more authoritative than other writings, and how we are to understand Scripture as divinely inspired. As we will do throughout our study, let me begin by setting forth what I believe to be the unifying center (or dogma) around which all Christians can unite: God has revealed himself through certain texts that we call the Bible, which is authoritative for the faith and practice of Christians, the composition of which involved the interplay of human and divine “actors.” The diversity arises over the doctrines and opinions regarding which texts should be included and how the Bible is an inspired book (that is, what was the role of God and the human writers in the process of composition).

Let me begin by stating that the idea of the Bible magically falling from the sky is nearly universally rejected by any serious student of the Bible. God did not simply part the heavens one day and drop down the red-letter King James Version of the Bible. Rather, the formation of the Bible we now possess was a process that took place over many centuries and amidst much controversy and discussion. In some ways, the process is still ongoing with each new translation of and commentary on the biblical texts.

For the OT books and the NT gospels the process proceeded as follows. It began with the recorded events themselves followed by a period of oral retelling and interpretation of the meaning/significance of the events. This eventually led to the stories being written down (which involved further interpretation) followed by a period where the texts were edited (more interpretation), which finally resulted in the canonical form of the texts. The NT letters, written texts from the beginning, were clearly contextual and circumstantial works. They were composed to address situations specific to the circumstances of the day, and they contain both timeless truth as well as situational ethics. Put another way, they contain assertions and ideas based on the life and teaching of Jesus that can be considered applicable at any time (see 1 Cor 7.10-11), as well as personal suggestions and opinions (see 1 Cor 7.12-15).

The books we now call the OT were accepted as authoritative by Jewish leaders around AD 90, and were subsequently informally accepted as authoritative by Christians in the AD 100s and formally at councils in the AD 300s. The books we now call the NT were also accepted as authoritative at several councils in the AD 300s based on a number of criteria such as antiquity, usage among churches, apostolic association, and so forth. Yet even today there isn't total agreement upon the total number of books accepted as authoritative. Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox include several other texts known as the apocrypha or deuterocanon that Protestants do not accept as authoritative for faith and practice though some Protestants rightly regard them as informative and helpful in biblical studies. Finally, the translations we have today are based on the compilation and interpretative translation of thousands of original language manuscripts. So, we see that it is through a rather lengthy and complex process that we come to have the Bible that we read today and therefore the matters of authority and inspiration are understandably complex.

This brings us to our final issue for today, namely the particular understandings of God's inspiration of Scripture in conjunction with the persons who actually wrote and edited the biblical texts. Once again, let me emphasize that we are now dealing with non-essentials. The essential Christian affirmation is that God reveals himself, and that the canonical Scriptures are particularly authoritative for Christian faith and practice. The non-essential affirmations are those dealing with the number of books included, and with one's particular understanding of the matter of biblical inspiration.

Olson describes two theories of inspiration known as “plenary verbal inspiration” and “dynamic inspiration.”

The first theory known as “plenary verbal inspiration” suggests that God inspired both the authors and the particular words that were written down. God's Spirit came upon the writers in such a way that while they retained their mental faculties and freely chose the words and phrases, they were the precise words and phrases God desired them to choose. They were not coerced, but nevertheless they wrote only those words that God desired them to write.

This view, in my opinion, could be compared to the Calvinistic perspective regarding the interplay of human free will and divine providence. Let me explain. Calvinists believe that God elects some to salvation and others to damnation, yet they will also affirm that humans have free will (we'll discuss this further when we reach the topic of salvation in a few weeks). God doesn't force us to choose one or the other, yet we can only choose that which God had determined we would choose because he has caused events to be such that we can only choose one option. Nevertheless, we are said to have freely chosen. My mind cannot comprehend that kind of freedom, because freedom seems to imply the ability to choose between at least two competing options. Yet this view of inspiration, like the Calvinistic understanding of free will, suggests that while there was only one possible outcome the writers were still free. Moreover, those who hold this view are generally forced to assert and defend the ideas of biblical inerrancy and infallibility regarding every thing the Bible says. The logic is that since every single word was chosen by God, it must be true and without error on any subject. Not just matters of faith and practice, but even matters of science, history, biology and so on. The view is like a house of cards, because if any statement—however small and inconsequential—in any text proves incorrect or contradictory then none of the Bible can be trusted. I imagine some of the difficulties of this view are becoming clear.

The second, and in my opinion more viable, option is called “dynamic inspiration.” This view suggests that God inspired the writers in general but not the words in particular. As Olson summarizes: “The human authors [are seen] as receiving divine thoughts and communicating them in their own words using their own styles and expressions. This was....a process through which the Spirit of God prepared the human authors and led them up to the point where they freely wrote in their own words truths God wanted communicated” (104).

This perspective allows for the uniqueness of the individual writers and editors to influence the writings, and allows for cultural and social influences in the texts themselves, which accounts for the diversity of perspectives we find in the biblical witness. This view sees Scripture as divinely influenced (inspired) without neglecting to affirm the obvious cultural, societal, and historical influences. We need not fear that this somehow undermines the authority of the biblical witness, because we can still affirm that the Bible communicates an authoritative voice regarding matters of Christian faith and practice. We need not fear that the Bible has errors in matters of science and/or history or that it contains diverse (and even competing) perspectives on historical happenings. Why? The purpose of the Bible is not to be a textbook on all subjects, but to reveal the nature of God and the redemptive way of life manifested most fully through the life and teachings of Jesus the Christ. In Olson's words, “the Bible is sacrament [viz. a means of grace] because, although in one aspect it is a human book of human words and sentences, it is also a material channel of God's grace and is uniquely used by God to bring people into transforming encounter with God that informs and changes them” (106). In sum, the “dynamic inspiration” option allows us to affirm the human influences that are evident in the texts and to avoid the error of making the Bible divine, while also affirming God's influence that transforms the biblical witness into sacrament (a vehicle by which God reveals himself and his redemptive grace).