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The Christian Faith and Revelation

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I

A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The Christian faith rests solidly on God's own revelation of Himself and of His will with respect to man. Divine revelation is an act of God, not subject as such to the correction of the philosopher. Divine revelation has, however, a human correlative, namely theology. Theology, as the word is here used, is the church's speaking and teaching about God and His will. It is not itself revelation, which is always God's activity, but the church's speaking and teaching based upon divine revelation and therefore subject to correction, where it may need correction, on the basis of divine revelation.

Divine revelation is therefore a subject of paramount importance for the Christian church, and particularly for those who are called to teach in the church.

That the importance of revelation for theology is being recognized in the church today is evident from the amount of attention this subject is receiving. Theologians of every theological persuasion, from the most conservative to the most liberal, devote much space to it in their writings.

As may be expected, the treatment varies

widely according to the theological stance of the writer. In Paul Tillich revelation is conceived humanistically, as something which lies in the realm of nature and which could, under suitable circumstances, happen to any human being. In Rudolf Bultmann revelation happens every time a man comes to a realization of his inauthentic existence and passes, somehow, through hearing the preaching of the cross, from inauthentic to authentic existence.

Karl Barth, on the other hand, considers revelation, which he discusses at great length in his *Church Dogmatics*, as something utterly beyond the reach of natural man, a transcendent act of a transcendent God. Because Barth is consciously striving to present a Biblical picture of revelation, because he has exerted a great influence in conservative Christian circles, and because he seeks also to serve a corrective function in the understanding of revelation in these circles, we shall briefly characterize his view of revelation.

Barth refuses to identify revelation with the Scripture itself, as the orthodox dogmaticians of the Lutheran and Reformed churches during the 17th century did. He very properly recognizes revelation as something which occurred, in large measure, before any part of the Scripture was written. God's speaking to Adam and Eve, to Noah, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and in large part also His speaking to Moses took place before any part of the Old Tes-

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tament was written. The incarnation of Christ, His preaching, teaching, and miracles, His suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension, all of which constitute revelation, were accomplished before the gospels were written. Thus it is plain that revelation has taken place apart from Scripture and that it may be considered as something separate from the Scripture.

This view of revelation stresses the fact that revelation is an act of God, involving actions which were foretold by God's prophets in the Old Testament and, where necessary, explained by them and proclaimed by the apostles in the New Testament. This view of revelation finds the center, the ultimate revelation in Jesus Christ, in His incarnation, teaching, suffering, death, and resurrection. The Old Testament looks forward to this revelation; the New Testament looks back upon it.

Accordingly, the Scripture is not the revelation itself, but is record, witness, and medium of this revelation. It is record because it records the acts of God which constitute the revelation; it is witness because the record is not a dead, meaningless record, but bears witness to the world that God has revealed Himself and speaks of the manner and of His revelation; finally it is medium of revelation for the generations who live after the revelation took place. It is through the Scripture, and through preaching and teaching that communicates the message of Scripture, that the revelation, which cannot be repeated, reaches later generations and enables them to benefit by the revelation once made.

Barth introduces a useful distinction between objective and subjective revelation. By objective revelation he understands the revelatory acts of God, particularly the in-

carnation and work of Christ, which are unrepeatable. By subjective revelation he understands what takes place in a person when, through the hearing or reading of the Word of God, a man comes to faith in Christ and thus is personally enlightened through the revelation mediated through the Scripture and the witness of the Christian church. This is essentially what theologians in other ages have called conversion, regeneration, or enlightenment. To think of this event as subjective revelation has the advantage that it stresses this experience as an encounter with God rather than as a mere intellectual experience.

In contrast to the long treatment which the subject of revelation receives in systematic theology today, orthodox Lutheran and Reformed theologians in times past treated the topic of revelation very briefly. This is true particularly of the dogmatists of both confessions during the 17th century, the so-called age of orthodoxy in Protestantism.

It should be noted, however, that a difference is observable between the theologians of both confessions who stood closest to the Reformation itself, and the theologians of the 17th century. Heinrich Heppe, speaking for the Reformed churches, says: "The older Reformed theology distinguished between the 'Word of God' and 'Holy Scripture' most definitely. By the first term they meant all that God had spoken to the fathers in divers ways and in latter times by His Son. It was therefore taught by Calvin and his immediate successors in church teaching . . . that the Word of God, *i. e.*, the manifold revelations or words which God had spoken to men were transmitted orally at the start

and that it was only later that they were recorded.”¹

A similar position is evident in Martin Chemnitz, who in Lutheranism stands midway between the Reformers and the Lutheran dogmaticians of the 17th century. He writes: “We have until now shown two things from the most ancient sacred history: 1. That the purity of the heavenly doctrine was not preserved always and everywhere through tradition by the living voice, but was repeatedly corrupted and adulterated; 2. In order that new and special revelations might not always be necessary for restoring and retaining purity of doctrine God instituted another method under Moses, namely that the doctrine of the Word of God should be comprehended in writing.”²

A change from this position is evident in the dogmaticians of both confessions during the 17th century. Concerning the Reformed dogmaticians Heppe says: “The later dogmaticians, on the contrary, separating the idea of inspiration from that of revelation unanimously teach that the Word of God rests, not upon God’s personal acts of revelation, but upon the manner of their recording, upon inspiration. On this view the Word of God is the word brought to record by inspiration, whereby the concept ‘Word of God’ and ‘Holy Scripture’ were identified.”³

A similar development is evident in the

¹ Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics, Set out and Illustrated from the Sources*, revised and edited by Ernst Bizer, English translation by G. T. Thomson (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1950), p. 15.

² Martin Chemnitz, *Examen Concilii Tridentini*, ed. Ed Preuss (Berlin: Gust. Schlawitz, 1861), p. 10.

³ Heppe, p. 15

orthodox Lutheran dogmaticians of the 17th century. Abraham Calov (1612 to 1686), whose definition of revelation is copied verbatim by John-Andrew Quenstedt (1617—1685), “the bookkeeper of Lutheran orthodoxy,” writes: “Revelation is an act, divine, external, by which God revealed Himself to the human race through His Word for its information to salvation.” He adds: “The form of divine revelation is *theopneustia*, through which divine revelation is what it is.”⁴

This identification of revelation with Scripture is characteristic also of at least two notable dogmaticians of the Lutheran Church in America. Adolf Hoenecke (1835 to 1908), a leading dogmatician of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Church, devotes 31 pages to a discussion of revelation and stresses the importance of revelation for Christian theology, but he has no word of criticism for the discrepancy between the position of the Reformers and that of the orthodox dogmaticians of the 17th century. Rather, he seems to share the position which appears to subordinate revelation to inspiration.

Francis Pieper (1852—1931) of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod has no locus on revelation in his *Christian Dogmatics* but treats the inspiration of the Scripture on more than 150 pages. He has a short paragraph on revelation, sandwiched in between the locus on Scripture and the doctrine of God. It reads:

The only source of man’s knowledge of God is God’s self-revelation. There can be no absolute knowledge of God independent of God’s self-revelation, because

⁴ Adolf F. Hoenecke, *Evangelische Lutherische Dogmatik*, I (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1909), 218.

God dwells in the light which no man can approach, 1 Tim. 6:16. . . . God has revealed Himself in a twofold manner: a) In creation, or in the realm of nature, and b) in His Word, or in Holy Scripture, the only source and norm of Christian doctrine. Accordingly we distinguish between a natural and a Christian knowledge of God.⁵

We propose to follow the Biblical manner of the Reformers, both Lutheran and Reformed, and to treat revelation as an act and speaking of God, not only in the Scripture but also before there was a Scripture. This approach will take away nothing from either the honor or the importance of the Scripture, but will restore revelation to its rightful place as the activity and speaking of God, and will also accurately define the relation of the Scripture as the God-given, inspired record of divine revelation to divine revelation itself.

Because Christianity is not based on human reason but on divine revelation, it is a faith, not a philosophy. It says: "*Credo*. I believe. We believe, teach, and confess."

From ancient times the church has confessed her faith. At first the confession was very brief: Jesus is Lord. Against docetic and gnostic heresies this formula was expanded into the predecessors of our Apostles' Creed. Arian heresy led to the expanded formulation of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and the Athanasian Creed. The doctrinal aberrations which made necessary the Reformation of the 16th century led to the formulation of the Augsburg Confession and later of other confessions. While these confessions use

⁵ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, trans. Theodore Engelder, I (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 371.

certain philosophical terms, they are never philosophy. They are the expression of the church's faith, based on divine revelation of God transmitted to the church of today in the Holy Scripture.

II

GOD'S REVELATION THROUGH "DEED-WORDS" AND "SPEECH-WORDS"

The Christian faith is based on divine revelation. But how does God reveal Himself? How has He revealed Himself? The writer to the Hebrews answers: "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. 1:1-2). In addition to the ways of revelation mentioned in the Epistle to the Hebrews, there is the much-discussed and much-debated revelation of God in nature. Of this we read in Rom. 1:19-20: "What can be known about God is plain to them (the Gentiles), 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. So they are without excuse."

Theologians of former generations spoke on the basis of this passage about a natural knowledge of God. Barth's violent reaction against the concept of a natural knowledge of God and of the "natural theology" that had been developed on the basis of it, particularly in liberal theology, compelled theologians to take a closer look at this passage. It does not actually say that the Gentiles can know God, but merely that there are some things that can be known about God, and that these things are plain to the Gentiles, namely, God's eternal power and deity. These are perceived in

the things that are made—in God's creatures. But God Himself the Gentiles cannot know from nature. Therefore they make themselves idols and call them god. For this Paul gently rebukes the men of Athens in his sermon on the Areopagus (Acts 17:22-30), but at the same time uses such knowledge about God as they possessed from nature to lead over to the preaching of Christ, in whom God has become incarnate.

What Paul here asks the Athenians to do we must all do. We must turn from the evidences for God in nature to His revelation of Himself and of His will in the many and various ways in which He spoke to the fathers by the prophets, and above all to what He has spoken to us by His Son.

As we examine these instances of revelation according to the inspired record we come across facts which have caused some German theologians to speak of revelation through *Tatwort* (literally, deed-word) and *Redewort* (speech-word). We will operate with these terms and the concepts for which they stand as we proceed to study some individual examples of revelation recorded in the Scripture. These examples are by no means the only examples, for the Scripture is full of recorded instances of revelation; nor are they the first recorded instances, for the latter occur in connection with the Biblical account of the creation and of the fall into sin. (Gen. 1:18-20; 2:16-17; 3:9-19)

Examples of revelation which will make clear the nature of revelation are Gen. 12: 1-3, the calling of Abraham, and Exodus 3, the calling of Moses. In the account of the calling of Abraham we are told first: "Now the Lord said to Abraham." God spoke to

Abraham. It was a very personal thing God did. It is communication from person to person in understandable human words. This is the first thing to note about God's revelation. It is person-to-person encounter. It involves God speaking to man.

"The Lord said to Abraham, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.'" God gives Abraham a command. It was not an easy command but a difficult and probably disagreeable one—to leave his country, his home, his father's house, and most of his kin. God's revelation does not deal in trivialities but in great and difficult things.

Moreover God adds a promise to the command. He tells Abraham to go "to the land that I will show you." This is a promise of guidance and of further revelation. But it does not tell Abraham everything he would have liked to know at this stage. Therefore it called not only for obedience, but most of all for faith that would result in obedience. This is a characteristic of all God's revelation. It is not something which can leave the recipient of the revelation cold. It seeks a response, the response of faith and obedience.

The promise that He Himself will show Abraham the land where he is to go is not the whole promise in this revelation. God adds: "And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth will bless themselves." Could Abraham possibly have understood all the implications of this great but mysterious promise? Would we understand the promise if it had not

been interpreted for us in the New Testament? St. Peter refers the promise to Christ: "You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God gave to your fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your posterity shall all the families of the earth be blessed.' God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you in turning every one of you from your wickedness" (Acts 3:25-26). Paul interprets the promise to mean that "the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the Gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In thee shall all nations be blessed.'" (Gal. 3:8)

The New Testament understanding of the revelation at the calling of Abraham tells us that this revelation was given in the interest of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. God has great things in mind when He reveals Himself to man.

God also expects a response when He reveals Himself. His revelation at the calling of Abraham called for faith and obedience. Abraham responded with faith and obedience. "So Abram went, as the Lord had told him. . . ." (Gen. 12:4)

The promise that God would show him the land to which he was to go implied that there was to be further revelation to Abraham. Further instances of revelation to him, and after him to Isaac and to Jacob, are recorded in Gen. 12:7; 13:14 to 18; 15:1-21, and in other passages in the Book of Genesis.

In the calling of Abraham, *Redewort* predominates. God speaks. Genesis also shows us a revelation of God through *Tatwort*. Gen. 12:10-16 records a journey of Abraham into Egypt on account of a famine in Palestine. Because Sarai, Abraham's wife, was beautiful, she was taken into

Pharaoh's house. "But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abraham's wife." We are not told that God spoke to Pharaoh in words. He employed "deed-words." Pharaoh, however, got the message. "So Pharaoh called Abram and said, 'What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me she was your wife?'"

God often employs "deed-words" to warn people, but not all understand the message as well as Pharaoh did here. "I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and lack of bread in all your places, yet you did not return to me,' says the Lord. 'And I also withheld the rain from you when there were yet three months to the harvest; I would send rain upon one city, and send no rain upon another city; one field would be rained upon, and the field on which it did not rain withered; so two or three cities wandered to one city to drink water, and were not satisfied; yet you did not return to me,' says the Lord." (Amos 4:6-8)

The second account of a particular revelation which calls for our attention is the calling of Moses, as recorded in Exodus 3. This chapter relates that as Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law on Mount Horeb, God appeared to him in a burning bush and called out his name. When Moses answered, "Here am I," God identified Himself to Moses as "the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." After identifying Himself, God told Moses that He had seen the affliction of His people in Egypt under Pharaoh and that He would send Moses into Egypt to lead them out of bondage into a land flowing with milk and honey, the land He had sworn to their

fathers. Moses pleaded inability for so great a task, but God promised to be with him. When Moses, still very reluctant to obey, asks God what His name is, He says: "I AM WHO I AM. . . . Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

We have here essentially the same sequence we observed in Gen. 12:1-3 in the calling of Abraham. God confronts Moses personally. God speaks to him. He lays a very difficult command on him. He adds a very gracious promise to the command. And He expects a positive response, a response of faith and obedience.

The revelation to Moses here is essentially "speech-word." God speaks to Moses. He promises that "speech-word" will be accompanied and followed by "deed-word." He said to Moses: "I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. So I will stretch out My hand and smite Egypt with all the wonders which I will do in it; after that he will let you go" (Ex. 3:19-20). This was fulfilled when the Lord smote Egypt with ten plagues (Ex. 7:14; Ex. 12:32). Against nine plagues Pharaoh's heart was hardened and he resisted God's "deed-word," but at the tenth, when all the first-born in the houses of the Egyptians died, his opposition collapsed. He summoned Moses and Aaron by night and told them to leave the land of Egypt.

This "deed-word" was continued at the Red Sea, when Pharaoh overtook the departing Israelites. God miraculously made a way through the sea for the Israelites, while the army of Pharaoh was overwhelmed by the waters and drowned (Ex. 14:10-30). Israel, at least this once, understood the "deed-word" of God. "And Israel saw the great work which the Lord

did against the Egyptians, and the people feared the Lord; and they believed in the Lord and in His servant Moses." (Ex. 14:31)

The instances of revelation studied up to this point involve personal confrontation of certain individuals by God with the imposition of divine commands of great import, accompanied by divine promises of great scope. Both called for faith and obedience. In neither can it be said that anything that in any way represents "doctrine" or "a doctrine" was communicated. God revealed Himself and His will, a gracious will to redeem and to bless.

Not long after the calling of Moses and the delivery of Israel from the bondage of Egypt, a solemn revelation occurred in which God revealed His law on Mount Sinai, a law which was written and destined to be taught to Israel, and in the course of history to many nations outside Israel.

This revelation is recorded in Exodus 19 and 20. As in previous revelations, there is a personal confrontation of the people to whom the revelation is made by God Himself. In contrast to the revelations made to Abraham and Moses, this revelation is accompanied by dreadful manifestations of fire, smoke and thunder, sound of the trumpet, and the quaking of Mount Sinai. The people are restrained from touching the mountain. They are terrified and stand afar off, afraid to hear the voice of God.

It is under terrible manifestations such as these that God spoke the Ten Commandments as they are recorded in Exodus 20 in a voice which men could understand. God's law is by divine revelation.

The Old Testament records many other

instances of revelation, especially to the prophets of Israel. God indeed "in many and various ways . . . spoke of old to the fathers by the prophets" (Heb. 1:1). The instances of revelation we have discussed reveal God's will toward His people and toward all mankind in Law and Gospel. All the other revelations serve this great purpose. The revelation was not given all at once. Subsequent revelations amplified and clarified previous revelations until the fullness of the time had come and God disclosed His good and gracious will, sending His Son, made of a woman, under the Law, to redeem those who are under the Law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. (Gal. 4:4-5)

The beginning of this revelation to the patriarchs and to Moses was made long

before the Scripture was written, just as the revelation of God in Christ was made before any part of the New Testament was written. Therefore it is not accurate to identify revelation with the Scripture. First there is revelation, then there is Scripture. Scripture, correctly understood, is the record of God's revelation. That record witnesses to the church and to the world that God has revealed Himself. As far as the generations who were born after the revelation took place are concerned, the Scripture is the medium of revelation through which the revelation comes to them and without which medium they would have to remain in ignorance of the revelation and of God's law and the Gospel, for the sake of which the revelation was made.

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