

The Light

Natural, biblical and personal revelation

GOD HAS SPOKEN

The sound of silence

The human mind probes the darkness of space with state of the art telescopes and peers into the lens of the electron microscope in search of the mysteries of the universe; eyes and ears at the frontiers of human knowledge and experience. Yet the constant testimony is that we are alone in the cosmos. Human data-gathering produces endless statistics but nothing that compels people to accept there is a meaning, purpose or moral wholeness about existence. We are told that all there is to be heard is 'the sound of silence'. The universe has become a darkness, a place of despair. The majority of people, unable to cope with this meaninglessness, cocoon themselves in a controlled environment of amusement and self-indulgence.

'A light shining in a dark place'

Christians know that 'God has spoken and must proclaim it!' (cf Am 3:8). We know that the cosmos is no silent void in which people are doomed to grope amid the echoing cries of their own self-despair. Rather we know for certain that everything has been brought into being by God's word (Gen 1:3), which continues to sustain it each moment (Heb 1:3) and will bring all things to his final conclusion (Rev 19:13). The universe is not a silent place but alive with the sound of God's voice. It gives clear direction, like 'a lamp shining in a dark place' (2Pet 1:19), to those who will receive it. Its vibrations pulsate through the whole created order for those who will feel them.

God has chosen to speak most clearly to the human spirit; that dimension of personhood, which harmonises most closely with his own essence. God's word can be received or ignored. It should be life to us, but it challenges our rebellious self-interest, so often we refuse to hear and like the original couple we hide. People persistently offer deaf ears and blind eyes to God's communication, while at the same time shouting in anger at the fact that there is no voice to hear.

'What is truth?'

Central to the Christian faith is the fact that, 'God is, and he has spoken'. It is this that makes us unique and upon this we build. To challenge the fact that God has spoken or to attack the words that he has said is an attempt to lay an axe at the root of our faith.

We are presented with a paradox. People deny there is any meaning to the universe, yet the market place of the world is filled with myriad voices each selling their solution to the human dilemma, their dreams and promises for the future. The bewildered onlooker has every reason to ask, with the same quizzical air as Pilate, 'What is truth?' (Jn 18:38):

- For many, truth must be 'scientific' and can never go beyond empirical experiment (counting, measuring and weighing)



- The lawyer and historian in their analysis of actual events will listen to the testimony of many witnesses in an effort to reconstruct the truth of what actually happened; however close they may get to the truth they will never succeed in presenting it fully

For modern people, as with the ancient Greeks, 'truth' is essentially intellectual, 'the full or real state of affairs'. To the philosopher it is 'real being in the absolute sense'.

'Who is truth?'

The tragedy of Pilate's question is that it was wrongly phrased. Had he asked, 'Who is truth?', he would have had the answer standing right before him; Jesus - the way, the truth and the life (Jn 14:6). The Christian knows that one can only begin to answer the question, 'What is truth?', when one has first answered the question, 'Who is truth?'. In discovering Jesus we discover the answer to both questions.

Biblically 'truth' can refer to intellectual facts that one can be certain about (Dt 17:4), but primarily truth is moral (Gen 42:16). It is the character that is trustworthy, consistent and reliable. The basis of truth is in the character of the person rather than merely the facts of the case. This reliability is a fundamental attribute of God (Ps 31:5; Jer 10:10).

The Hebrew *emet* (truth) is sometimes rendered 'faithfulness'. God's truth 'reaches the clouds' (Ps 108:4). Yahweh is truth; it is seen both in his loving care for his children (Gen 32:9-10) and in his hostility towards sin (Ps 54:5). The truth fundamental to his character is displayed in his activity. He judges truly (Ps 96:13). He sends forth his truth (Ps 57:3). Scripture declares, 'As you are truth so is your word truth ... standing fast in heaven' (Ps 119:89). Truth is the bedrock of all human relationships (Ex 20:16; Dt 32:4).

The Greek *aletheia* of the New Testament is used with the sense of that which is:

- Dependable, honest and upright in character (Rom 3:7; 2Cor 7:14)
- Real and complete in the absolute sense, not false or wanting (Mk 5:33; Gal 2:5; Eph 1:13)
- Real, as opposed to an appearance or a copy (Heb 8:2; Jn 6:32; 15:1)

All truth finds its origin in God; apart from him there is no truth. All truth is God's truth. Those who wish to discover truth, and recognise it as such, must do so from a relationship with God through Christ Jesus. God has spoken. The content of his message is 'truth', the vehicle of his message is his 'word'.

The word of God

The 'word of God' is central to biblical revelation. God's word is an extension of his unique personality and is invested with his divine authority:

- It is to be obeyed by both angels and humans (Ps 103:20; Dt 12:32)
- It stands for ever (Isa 40:8)
- It cannot return unfulfilled once uttered (Isa 55:11)
- It was creative at the birth of the universe (Gen 1:3)
- It is proclaimed in God's dealings with humanity (Num 12:6; Heb 1:1)
- It reaches its climax in Jesus, it is a 'Christological' title (Jn 1:14; Heb 1:1-3)



God's word comes to us in the form of commandment, prophecy, warning, judgment and encouragement. In every sense God's word is life (Phil 2:16), truth (Eph 1:13), salvation (Acts 13:26), reconciliation (2Cor 5:19) and the proclamation of atonement (1Cor 1:18). When anyone is confronted with God's word they are confronted with God himself.

Having affirmed that God has spoken let us look at the nature of his 'revelation' and the 'inspiration' necessary to communicate it.

REVELATION

'The One who communicates'

Revelation is a primary act of God's grace. God is not only the one who is, but also the one who communicates. We must always remember that if God had not taken the initiative of drawing us into a personal relationship, then God would remain unknowable.

The biblical words for revelation (Heb *gala*; Gk *apokalypto*) each have the sense of 'unveiling something hidden' so that it may be seen for what it is. Scripture proclaims that God the creator actively discloses his power, glory, nature, character, will and plans - in essence 'himself', in order that people might know him.

To speak of revelation one thinks of scripture, but the idea is broader than this. There is diversity in revelation:

- God sovereignly reveals himself in creation and in human actions (natural revelation)
- God's directly inspired words and his actions in history are recorded in the biblical text (biblical revelation)
- God's Spirit enlightens individuals to recognise revelation for what it is (personal revelation)

We must be careful not to draw too sharp a distinction between the different aspects, as they flow into each other and each plays a part in revelation as a whole. However, it is necessary to understand the different dimensions.

Natural revelation

Since the 17th century, in particular, there has been much debate about the subject of revelation. The uniqueness of biblical revelation has been questioned. It has been suggested that there is only general or natural revelation about God in the world. Greater status has been given to human reason and its ability to discover God. The validity of the major world religions has been emphasised.¹

However, the conflicting variety of world religions and philosophies is testimony itself against the human ability to discover God by reason alone. Scripture is clear that we

¹ There is the story told of a group of blind beggars confronted with an elephant. One caught hold of its ear and declared an elephant was like a fan. Another caught hold of its tusk and said it was like a sword. Another its leg and declared it was like a tree trunk. Another its trunk and said it was a snake. Another its tail and said it was like a fly-whisk. Another bumped into its side and said it was like a wall. They were each saying something true about an elephant but none had the whole truth.



cannot see God because he is transcendent (Jn 1:18; 1Tim 6:16; Ex 33:20). Neither can we find him by searching within the universe (Job 11:7; 23:3-9). God's thoughts cannot be read by guesswork (Isa 55:8-9).

▪ **Cosmic witness**

Creation and the way in which God orders the world is an important aspect of revelation:

- The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge' (Ps 19:1-2)
- '... yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good and gave you from heaven rains and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness' (Acts 14:17)
- 'For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For 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' (Rm 1:19-20)

▪ **Provocative**

Central to natural revelation is that it is provocative. It confronts each person with a presence of God. A light shining that they cannot ignore, they do so at their peril. Wordsworth captures this sense of the provocative presence of God in the lines:

'And I have felt,
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
and rolls through all things.'²

Just as any masterpiece bears the marks and character of the artist, so creation reveals the fingerprints of God. Added to which it is saturated with his presence. All this is to focus people's attention towards the truth and meaning of the universe, to stir the spirit to faith, to raise hope and to set people searching for God. It is God's plan to deliberately stimulate a restlessness that can only find its rest in him.

- '... that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each one of us' [Acts 17:27]

² William Wordsworth, '*from Lines Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*' quoted in J Hayward (Ed) '*The Penguin Book of English Verse*' Penguin 1956 p262



▪ Manifesto

Not only has God saturated creation with a sense of his presence, but he has also written the manifesto of his kingdom upon the hearts of every individual:-

- 'When Gentiles who have not the Law do by nature what the Law requires ... they show that what the Law requires is written upon their hearts' (Rm 2:14-15)

This is clearly stating that within each person there is an instinctive God-given sense of how they should live; it reflects God's desire, to which they have to respond by accepting or rejecting; neutrality is impossible. It is seen most clearly in the human expression of community life, marriage, love, justice, mercy etc. This inner manifesto finds its roots in people's spirit and is another clear mark that we have been made in 'the image and likeness of God' (Gen 1:27). It is a paradox that what God requires is written upon the hearts of everyone (Rom 2:15), and yet it must be ignited by the Spirit and rewritten on the basis of covenant relationship (Jer 31:33).

▪ Conscience

Another God-given dimension, which interacts with natural revelation, is our conscience, that human capacity to weigh things and decide between right and wrong. It confirms to us when we are doing God's will or pursuing our own ends. How it functions depends upon how it is fuelled and by the patterns of behaviour that it is caught up within.

- 'Their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them, on that day' (Rm 2:15-16)

Paul clearly expects that there will be those who pursue the truth. However, with all the natural revelation God has given, people have deliberately and willfully turned their back on it and so are 'without excuse' (Rom 1:20).

▪ Crisis

Natural revelation brings people to a crisis point of decision,³ a point of faith or a point of judgment. It presents God's eternity, power, glory, kindness and moral law to humanity. It provokes us to ask questions about God. It stirs up an awe that should lead us to worship. Sadly the beauty of natural revelation often only serves to condemn people in their rejection of God. Individuals suppress the truth that surrounds them, refusing to honour God, turning instead to immorality and idolatry (Rom 1:18-25).

Where there is faith, natural revelation opens the windows on God's goodness even wider. This is seen most clearly in the 'nature Psalms' (8,19,65,104), and elsewhere.

³ The crisis moments can be many; the birth of a baby ('the everyday miracle'), death and tragedy and so much more. Each occasion opened the door to being confronted with spiritual things and raising profound questions, but equally when the moment passes pursuit of the spiritual questions can pass or even turn people to cynicism.



▪ **Limitation**

The philosophical arguments for the existence of God cannot 'prove' their case if a person is unwilling to accept the truth by faith in the first place. But where there is already faith the arguments bring the confirmation. Natural revelation should provoke us to faith, obedience and worship, but it cannot bring a full knowledge of God without special revelation.

World religions illustrate the variety of conclusions people can draw; both the abominations that can be developed by the human spirit and also the deep aspirations that can be expressed. Nature also confronts us with many paradoxes that challenge our belief in God.

Therefore natural revelation is profound. While it is limited it is important and prepares the ground in which biblical revelation can take root.

Biblical revelation

▪ **The necessity**

Natural revelation is true, but incomplete in itself. It points forward and confirms that there is more to be said:

- Biblical revelation is necessary because natural revelation is incapable of revealing the true nature of the transcendent God and of uncovering the 'mystery of the ages' (Rom 16:25; Heb 9:26)
- Biblical revelation is necessary because humanity is sinful, our rebellion has dulled our powers of perception (2Cor 4:4). Human wisdom and God's truth so often run in different directions
- Biblical revelation is necessary because it makes obscure things clear, brings hidden things to light, shows signs and speaks words. It causes the people addressed to see, hear, perceive, understand, know and experience

▪ **The demand**

Biblical revelation demands a response of trust and obedience towards God. It is not information without obligation; if we have heard we must act. Our life is to be ruled by what God tells us, not by our own personal whims (Dt 29:29).

▪ **The nature**

Biblical revelation takes place in the deeds ('the God who acts') and the words ('the God who speaks') of God:

- God acts and speaks in historical events
- God inspires the written records of these events
- God inspires people to see the significance and authority of these records

Biblical revelation is first and foremost a revelation of God's person and nature. It is not information; it is a confrontation of humanity with God. In the Hebrew scriptures this is



highlighted in the theophanies (cf Gen 35:7; Ex 6:3; Num 12:6-8), and in the emphasis upon God's:

- Uniqueness (creator and ruler)
- Name (Yahweh 'the One who is')
- Covenant (binding relationship)
- Holiness (awesome characteristics eg. justice, mercy)

▪ **The incarnation**

In the New Testament revelation is brought into full focus with the Incarnation, God's final revelation, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, (Heb 1:1-2; Jn 1:18; Col 1:19; 2:9), also the revelation of God's plan through him (Rom 16:25-26; 1Cor 2:7-10; Eph 1:9-14; 3:3-11). The purposes of God are not separate from Jesus' character. What God has done, is doing and will yet do, unfold according to his character, and in unfolding reveal yet more of his nature. Jesus is the most complete revelation of God, Jesus is the 'Word of God'.

INSPIRATION

'God breathed'

'All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness'
(2Tim 3:16)

The Greek *theopneustos* is 'God breathed'. It has the sense of divinely 'expired' rather than 'inspired'. The primary sense is passive, God having 'breathed out' scripture. However, the active sense of 'scripture breathing out God' is also clearly implied. To say that scripture is 'God breathed' is not saying there is something superimposed upon it to make it different. It is a statement about its origin. It is a divine product that must be estimated as such.

The scriptures are the result of the creative activity of the divine breath. They owe their very existence to God. Individuals wrote them but God brought them into being. The content and character of scripture have been decisively determined by the creative and all-controlling activity of the Spirit.

"God breathing" is a graphic metaphor which is rooted in the Hebrew scriptures:

- By the word of God the heavens were made, and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth' (Ps 33:6)
- The Spirit of God has made me, the breath of the Almighty gives me life' (Job 33:4)

The breath of God in scripture denotes the active outgoing of divine power. New Testament revelation shows it to be the third person of the Godhead.

God's own words

The words of scripture are God's own words. The Torah and the Prophets are spoken of and written as God's own speech (1Kg 22:8-16; Neh 8; Ps 119; Jer 25:1-13 etc).



When passages from the Hebrew scriptures, which were not originally direct statements by God, are quoted in the New Testament they are referred to as divine statements (Mat 19:4-5; Acts 4:25; 13:34-35; 28:25; Heb 3:7; 10:5; cf. Gen 2:24; Ps 95:7; Isa 55:2).

Scripture becomes living media for God's communication to the human spirit today. Paul refers to God's promise to Abraham [Gal. 3:8] and his threat to Pharaoh (Rom 9:17), both spoken long before the biblical record was written, yet refers to them as scripture. This illustrates how closely the statements of scripture are equated with the utterances of God.

There are strict statements that no word should be added or subtracted from the text (Dt 4:2; Rev 22:18-19). As books came to have the same sanctity the same prohibitions were seen to apply.

The inspiration of scripture does not refer to literary style, as in other literature, but to its revelation of divine character.

Human mouth and pen

'No prophecy ever came by human impulse, but individuals
moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God'
(2Pet 1:19-21)

There is a close analogy between the 'incarnation' and 'inspiration'. Conceived of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God was born of a woman. Similarly the words of God were conceived of the Spirit, then thought shaped and proclaimed by human prophets. Scripture is quite obviously human work, yet it is still more the activity of the Spirit.

Scripture is God's words; conceived in the human spirit, spoken through human lips and written by human hand. Scripture has a double authorship. The primary author is God the Holy Spirit through whose initiative, prompting, enlightenment and supervision each individual author worked. Human authors contributed much to the making of scripture; historical research, theological meditation, linguistic style and much more. Each biblical book is genuinely the literary creation of its author, yet theologically, from the standpoint of its content, each book is entirely the creation of God.

All scripture has the character of a prophetic declaration. The prophets saw and heard the word of God. It was placed into their mouths (cf. Jer 1:9; Ezk 3:1). They were under divine commission and constraint (Num 22:18; 24:13). Often they would have spoken differently if they could (Jer 20:9). The author of every biblical book was uniquely chosen so that the divine message, for their own and future generations, might be faithfully proclaimed through the colour and texture of their particular personality.

The subtle miracle

How the process of inspiration takes place is by its very nature a mystery. It is certainly not dictation, automatic writing or any other process, which would suspend the action of the human author's mind. The action of the Spirit would have heightened the freedom, spontaneity and creativeness of the author it would not have suppressed it.



Inspiration did not obliterate the personality, style, outlook and cultural conditions of the author. Indeed these factors need to be recognised as important factors in the sovereignty of revelation. The environment within which revelation took place and the personalities who received the word were divinely chosen and given the exact material required to communicate God's heart perfectly. It is no accident that Hebrew culture, language and ideas form the ethos within which revelation takes place. While the message is ultimately focused upon a universal screen, the original personal and cultural pigment remains a vital ingredient of the message.

Inspiration and inerrancy

Is scripture without error? This became an important question provoking much argument since the end of the 19th century, particularly between fundamentalists and liberals. On this matter there are a number of important things to be said:

- Scripture clearly proclaims its own inspiration, it is 'the book of God', but it does not make any statement about inerrancy
- Inspiration refers to the text of the original writers, not to any errors that may have occurred during transmission. Therefore the meticulous textual study of manuscripts is an important aspect of biblical studies

This focus on inerrancy is a distraction and reductionist in approach and is in danger of creating a two-dimensional understanding of scripture. The truth of scripture is not determined by whether or not there are mistakes in the text, but on the message it communicates about the character of God, particularly that revealed by the person of Jesus. Discussion on inerrancy usually fails to recognise that the text draws together different traditions, reflecting a range of understandings and weaves them together with a genius that is dynamic in opening up reflection rather than closing it down.

Difficulties with the text

The biblical text does present us with genuine difficulties in places and these must not be underrated or dismissed. They may be:

- In the area of text or grammar
- Historical (events about which little or nothing is known)
- Social or cultural, the significance of an act or event obscure or even repulsive
- Scientific, reflecting a different world view or human, eyewitness perspective
- Theological, touching mysteries God has hinted at but not explained

When the New Testament writers paraphrase the Hebrew text it is not a sign that they did not accept the inspiration of the original words. Rather they were using accepted rabbinical technique which expects a knowledge of the original and seeks to expound its meaning. They are applying strict theological principles about the relation of Christ and the Church to the Hebrew scriptures.

Belief in the *full* (plenary) inspiration of scripture would appear to demand inerrancy. One must ask:

- What is to be understood by the word 'full'?
- What are the implications of 'all scripture' being 'God breathed' (2Tim 3:16)?
- Is it categorically stating the impossibility of error or not?



Whatever difficulties the biblical text may present, one can be certain that it provides a true record of what the community of faith has come to understand God has said and done within history for human salvation in its broadest sense. In that sense it is true in what it proclaims. It is reliable as a witness to what happened as interpreted by the community endeavoring to understand the divine perspective. It is perfect in its discernment and presentation of spiritual values.

Scripture is to be treated as the truth; trustworthy and of supreme worth, within which all pursuit of truth is able to find itself:

'He that has seen has borne witness, and his witness is true,
and he knows that he tells the truth that you might believe.'
(Jn 19:35)

'Words 'become' God's word'

While scripture is objectively God's word there is also a sense in which it has to 'become' God's word to people by their response to it by the action of the Spirit upon their heart. Words alone have no life (2Cor 3:6), it is what they do to our spirits and the room they make for the activity of God's Spirit. A veil can prevent us from understanding the scriptures (2Cor 3:14). This in no way invalidates God's word; it is rather a statement about the blindness of the human spirit. The greatest horror is those who think they see but don't (Jn 9:38-41). It is essential that the 'eyes of our hearts are enlightened' (Eph 1:18). Like the couple on the road to Emmaus our eyes can be kept from recognising the truth (Lk 24:16) until they are opened in recognition (v31). There is in all this the sovereign work of the Spirit and the free response of the heart.

AUTHORITY

Foundation in God

All authority finds its origin and foundation in God. He is the source from which it flows. As Christians our authority rests in our relationship with God made possible through the revelation of himself in word and deed, most comprehensively in his son Jesus. The whole of scripture proclaims Jesus as Lord, Christ and Saviour.

Example in Jesus

The fact that the scriptures have their origin in God clothes them with his authority. Jesus' use of scripture and their witness to Jesus further endorses it. The breathing of the Spirit through scripture and the witness of our spirits that it is true completes the picture. Thus the Bible comes to us with supreme authority as the word of the Godhead.

Experience in the Spirit

We have authority, not in ourselves, but on the basis of our relationship with him who is supremely the Word of God, the complete revelation. In the scriptures we see him revealed, by the Spirit we know him experienced. In this is our authority, in this is our understanding; in this is our final victory (Rev 19:11-16).



Questions

1. In what sense is the Bible 'the word of God'?
2. What is meant by natural revelation? What is its purpose and what are the limits?
3. What would be the implications to you if some one could prove that there was in fact an error in the biblical text?
4. Christians believe that God reveals himself in both nature and scripture. What do you think people in our society think about the idea of 'revelation'? Why is revelation important? What do you think is distinctive about a Christian understanding of God's revelation?

Reading & Resources

WJ Abraham *'The Divine Inspiration of Holy Scripture'* Oxford 1981
DA Carson & JD Woodbridge [Ed] *'Scripture and Truth'* IVP 1983
A Dulles *'Models of Revelation'* Gill & Macmillan 1983
TN Finger *'Christian Theology'* (Vol 1) Herald Press 1985
C Henry [Ed] *'Revelation and the Bible'* Tyndale 1958
AE McGrath *'Christian Theology: An Introduction'* Blackwell 1994

