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Revelation in Christian Theology

Glen E. Harris Jr.

Christianity is a revealed religion. We do not embark on the theological task desiring to study God in himself (archetypal knowledge), but as he has revealed himself (ectypal knowledge). Most people who make concessions for the concept of divine revelation agree upon this assertion, but deduce very different conclusions from it. In the Bible, the idea of revelation generally means ‘unmasking’ or ‘unveiling’ of that which was previously unknown. The Hebrew and Greek terms which lie behind these words refer to a host of divine activities from theophanies to apocalyptic manifestations, from God’s handiwork in the cosmos to the work of grace in the human heart.¹

Because of the naturalism that is so pervasive in modern theology, some have argued that the biblical idea of revelation (theophanies, apocalypics, etc.) is inconsistent with modern dogmatics, not to mention phenomenologically untenable. Gerald F. Downing is one such theologian. Downing has argued that these biblical ideas are wholly inconsistent with the contemporary doctrines of revelation in the form of theological propositions or existential experience, which, he notes, can only be traced back to the era after the Enlightenment. In his opinion, because the modern idea of revelation is inconsistent with both the biblical usage and the pre-Enlightenment Christian tradition, it should be abandoned. Revelation is not central to the theological task because of its ethereal nature. He goes so far as to deny the possibility of a present form of divine revelation (adhering to the biblical usage) and relegates it to the eschaton.² Knowledge of God will come only when he shows himself finally and ultimately in the Parousia, he argues. James Barr supported Downing’s thesis in his 1966 article, “The Concepts of History and Revelation”. In it, Barr states, “There is little basis in the Bible for the use of “revelation” as a general term for man’s source of knowledge of God or for real communication from God to man’.³ From these two thinkers alone, it is easy to see that the doctrine of revelation is under attack for its ambiguity in the theological arena.

Downing’s findings certainly do raise some serious questions for those of us who consider ectypal knowledge of God via divine revelation as a present

possibility. Yet Downing is not without his critics. Avery Dulles is quick to point out that if revelation did not occur, ‘How could we obey a God who had not made his will known? How could we love him if he had not disclosed his love for us? How could we proclaim salvation by a God who had not manifested himself as our Saviour?’⁴ Downing is convincing in arguing that the doctrine appears almost exclusively in the post-Enlightenment discussion, but ‘he is less than successful in maintaining that the concept is not a valid one’.⁵

Colin Gunton also criticizes Downing’s thesis. He observes that though we ought to forgo purely speculative language in our theological propositions, propositions (which he sees as having revelatory character) do and must occur in Scripture. He notes that ‘Some propositions may be merely abstract, but the kind of ones which theology is and has been concerned *are not*’.⁶ Gunton cites the Jewish credal formula of Deuteronomy 6:4 as containing propositions that the Lord expects Israel to know: He is God and He is one. Believing certain facts has always been fundamental to knowing God in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Though a fully articulated doctrine of revelation may not be present in the pre-Enlightenment theological method, the idea of mediation, which is correlative to revelation, is unmistakable. Though the ancients did not expound the doctrine of revelation *per se*, their doctrines on man, sin, grace, atonement, and glorification necessitate mediation, which is one primary quality of revelation. In the patristic thought, grace is revelation and revelation is grace. Herman Bavinck echoes this thought, ‘All revelation, and especially that which comes to us in Christ through the Scriptures, is an act of God’s grace, a free dispensation of His will, and a token of His undeserved and perpetually forfeited favour.’⁷ This patristic understanding informed the Reformers and those who would follow. God’s revelation (often seen as a mediatory act) is intrinsically tied to redemption, and thus Downing’s argument on purely eschatological revelation cannot stand the scrutiny of a closer study. How can eschatological revelation be possible if the path which leads to that eschaton can be navigated only by the gracious act of redemptive revelation? Our answer must be that God is knowable in our present state because He has chosen to reveal Himself.

The act of revelation is simply an unmasking or making known of that which was previously unknown. The *process* by which this unmasking occurs is a

topic of deeper discussion. In order to make this process more concrete, many books have been written of late that propose equally as many models of revelation. Yet for the sake of this analysis, we will look at four models which encompass the majority of theological understandings within Christianity.

Models of Revelation

Revelation as Proposition

This first model has been, in effect, the default model of revelation throughout the history of Christian theology. Popular among most Evangelicals is this view that God has revealed Himself primarily through the doctrines recorded in the canonized Scriptures. Neo-scholastic Roman Catholics who adhere to a propositional understanding would add the magisterium of the Church to their expression, as it stands alongside Scripture. For both of these groups, their respective criteria are deemed ‘deposits of revelation’ or ‘deposits of truth.’ J. I. Packer summarizes this position, at least from the Evangelical perspective, ‘the Bible [is] an infallible written revelation from God’.⁸ Of this group it could be said that the God who reveals Himself in Scripture is the God who *speaks*.

Adherents to this position generally see revelation in terms of two categories: general or natural revelation and special or supernatural revelation. Benjamin Warfield states, ‘The one [general/natural] is addressed generally to all intelligent creatures, and is therefore accessible to all men; the other [special/supernatural] is addressed to a special class of sinners, to whom God would make known His salvation.’⁹

General revelation is the testimony of God’s glory in nature, God’s self witness to all people. Calvin notes that ‘The manifestation of God, by which he makes his glory known in his creation, is, with regard to the light itself, sufficiently clear; but that on account of our blindness, it is not found to be sufficient’.¹⁰ The blindness is a result of the Adamic lapse and this natural revelation, though not salvific, only renders a person more culpable.

The only type of revelation that is sufficient for redemptive knowledge of God is this special or supernatural sort. When propositionalists speak of revelation without any further qualification, they are speaking of it in terms of this second category. God reveals himself especially within the economy of grace through his inscripturated voice. Espousing this view is what allowed Tertullian in the

second century to say that in Scripture, ‘God has added a written revelation for the benefit of everyone whose heart is set on seeking Him.’¹¹ Christian Pesch, a Roman Catholic, summarizes the position well when he says, ‘Natural revelation is given by deeds (*per facta*); supernatural by words. By deeds even things manifest themselves, but only persons do so by words.’¹² The salvific and redemptive encounter with the Triune God comes only by special revelation as God works by speaking in and through the text of Scripture. In this text, the words form sentences which form paragraphs which form the sacred pages (*sacra pagina*) which are the deposits of divine doctrine. These deposits exist for the very purpose of leading humanity out of darkness and into the salvific light of the knowledge of God.

Generally, those who view revelation in terms of propositional statements and doctrine tend to see immediate special revelation as having ceased at the end of the apostolic era. The terms ‘closed canon’ and ‘cessationism’ often refer to this idea. God has spoken once-and-for-all in the pages of Scripture and nothing more needs to be said concerning faith and salvation. The revelatory act that now occurs could be called ‘mediate special revelation’ whereby the deposit of revelation in the Bible is believed to be true. Thus, faith is an assent (*assensus*) to the doctrinal positions which compose the divine revealing. Most propositionalists are quick to note that this assent can occur only if the Holy Spirit makes it possible. The historically Calvinistic doctrine of the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit (*testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum*) certainly influenced this idea and has been perpetuated by the teachings of most Reformed systematians. Calvin observes, ‘For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men’s hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit.’¹³ It is this spiritual component that differentiates those who simply read the words of the Bible from those who read it as the Word of God. Since the Word and the Spirit are wed, if there is no Holy Spirit in illumination, then there will be no Word as that which is illumined.

In summary, the propositional model posits that special revelation can be found in the pages of the Bible inasmuch as the Holy Spirit illuminates them to the mind of the reader. The truth of the text is discerned not only through grammatical–historical exegesis, but also through an awareness of the spiritual qualities of it. The strengths of this model are that it has a distinguished history

in the Church, it adequately expresses the Bible's own claims to be the inspired word of God, and it provides Christians with a deposit of truth to be studied and maintained in order to know God. The weaknesses of this model are that it often promotes a form of Christianity that is cerebral (orthodoxy over orthopraxy), it tends toward biblicism/bibliolatry and from the Bible's self-understanding of being the word of God, can make faith an act of mental assent rather than personal trust, thus diverging from Anselm's classic dictum, 'I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so that I may understand.'¹⁴ In his book *Nature of Doctrine*, George Lindbeck has identified these scholastic tendencies in both Protestantism and Roman Catholicism and notes that they ought to be 'rejected as intellectualist and literalist, and resting on the mistaken assumption that it is even possible to state the objective truth about God definitively, exhaustively, and timelessly in propositional form'.¹⁵

Revelation as History

The propositional approach to revelation is one that puts the word of God (i.e. the Bible) in a historical context, but is not able to make a connection with our time save through the doctrine of the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit. By His agency, an ancient text speaks to a modern person. In the last century, many theologians have resisted this strain of thought. They locate the corpus and power of revelation not in the words of God, but *in, through, and as* His deeds.¹⁶ Thus, Archbishop William Temple can say, 'The main field of revelation must always be in the history of men.'¹⁷ Of this group it could be said that the God who reveals Himself in Scripture is the God who *acts*.

Advocates of the historical model do not claim to have access to revelation proper. Through the Bible, Church councils, and historical dogma, we are provided with retrospective indicators of revelation. Revelation as history does not compete with doctrine, but argues that doctrine can only be understood in the context of a historical framework. 'Doctrine is viewed here,' comments Rene Latourelle, 'under the form of *meaningful events* of God and His plan; it does not derive from pure speculation on God.'¹⁸ For Oscar Cullmann, the historical locus of revelation is *sui generis*, found in a 'sacred history' which has its midpoint in Jesus Christ, framed in by creation and the eschaton.¹⁹ However, this sacred history is not subjected to historical analysis, but only to the eye of faith. This subjectivity amidst objectivity is not unlike the purpose served by Calvin's *testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum*, though applied to a

different end. The Bible does include historical data, but not for the sake of mere historicism. The cosmic history therein is a vehicle for salvation history (*Heilsgeschichte*) and salvation history necessarily includes cosmic history. Thus, Cullmann could say that the Bible is 'revealed prophecy concerning history'²⁰ rather than history in itself or for itself. Cullmann affirmed that in any revelatory act from God, there were three distinct moments—

- 1) **the Naked Event**—the historically objective happening witnessed by both believer and unbeliever alike;
- 2) **the Divine Disclosure**—the illumination of the significance of the event to the prophet through the event; and
- 3) **the Association**—the correlation of the event by the prophet to earlier revelations in salvation history.²¹ These revelatory events do not stand by themselves, but require prophetic interpretation for their significance within the *Heilsgeschichte*. The act cannot stand in isolation from the interpretation for interpretation is the lens through which the act must be viewed. Such interpretation preserves the historical uniqueness of the revelatory acts and protects them from the scrutiny of purely objective historical analysis.

Any discussion of this model would be amiss without discussing the theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg. Born in Germany in 1928 and a student of both Karl Barth and Edmund Schlink, his theology, encapsulated in his magnum opus *Systematic Theology* (1998), does much to synthesize modern theology and science. Reacting against both the Schleiermacherian view of revelation as subjective religious consciousness and the Barthian view of revelation as the objective word of God in dialectical presence, Pannenberg commits revelation to universal history. He argues that revelation ought to be understood 'in terms of a comprehensive whole of reality, which, however, is not simply given, but is a temporal process of a history that is not yet completed but open to a future which is anticipated in the teaching and personal history of Jesus'.²²

Pannenberg's theology is more prospective than retrospective at this point. The true significance of God's work in and through history will only be understood in the eschaton. He differs with Cullmann and the like who depend upon the *Heilsgeschichte* for the revelatory act. With Pannenberg, revelation is in the past, the present, but especially in the prolepsis. Avery Dulles surmises that

Pannenberg's locus of revelation 'is not to be found in a special segment of history [like Cullmann] but rather in universal history—the history of the whole world as it moves to its appointed consummation'.²³ It is the anxious and eager expectation of such a consummation which is foundational to Pannenberg's theology of hope.

Also, Pannenberg favours the revelatory significance of history over individual events. Reflecting upon the exodus of Israel, he states, 'In Deuteronomy, the attention is not on the single events, but on the complex of the exodus and occupancy of the land, all of which is viewed as the self-vindication of Jahweh.'²⁴ In espousing this view, Pannenberg avoids some of the resulting particularities of the *Heilsgeschichte* camp. As aforementioned, Cullmann believed that the prophetic interpretation of the revelatory act was necessary and made possible only by the eyes of faith. Pannenberg, on the other hand, uses the following text to argue for the universal availability of divine revelation in history to all people: 'We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God' (2 Cor. 4:2). The reason some do not believe is not because interpretation of revelation presupposes faith, but because those who refuse to see God in history have had their minds blinded by the god of this world (cf. 2 Cor. 4:4). Commenting on this universality, Pannenberg says: 'The paradox that there are persons who will not see this most evident truth [God acting in history] does not absolve theology and proclamation from the task of stressing and showing the ordinary, and in no way supernatural, truth of God's revelation in the fate of Jesus.'²⁵

Revelation is available to all via history, but it is this very history which Pannenberg does not cease from stressing as revelatory. He resists any accusations of pantheism. Pannenberg further opines, 'The divinely revealed events and the message that reports these events bring man to a knowledge he would not have by himself. And these events *do* have transforming power.'²⁶ Thus, both the history which the Christian community calls its own as well as the history which it now creates is revelatory, though incomplete until the eschatological consummation in the Parousia when the masked will become unmasked and the one known will know as he is known (1 Cor. 13:11-13).

The historical model sees the content of divine revelation in terms of the prophetic interpretation of God's salvific acts in the past (so Cullmann) as well as the universal testimony in a world racing towards the eschaton (so Pannenberg). The centre of salvation history is found in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, an event which points directly to a future resurrection and thus, to our hope.

Avery Dulles notes that this model does justice to the biblical idea of trusting in the covenant faithfulness of Yahweh in the past as a hope for the future.²⁷ Also, it makes faith neither the mental *assensus* of a Warfield or a Hodge nor the leap of a Kierkegaard or a Barth, but a 'fully reasonable act'.²⁸ It is a paradigm of remarkable flexibility and engages well in interfaith dialogue. For this reason, Dulles favours the historical model over the propositional model as stated above. Evangelical theologian Millard Erickson also values this model (though not exclusive of other models) for its 'view that historical events do not merely promise or contain or become revelation, but actually are revelation'.²⁹ This, he feels, does match the claims of Scripture often neglected by advocates of the other models.

However, the historical model is not without some major problems. One of these is the lack of distinction between general and special revelation of which Scripture often speaks, a distinction which has been called 'the touchstone'³⁰ for any fruitful discussion of the harmony of divine revelation. In an effort to make divine revelation universal in character, the historical model effectually abolishes any category of special revelation. Those who do acknowledge the God of history, according to Pannenberg and the like, do so out of a rational awareness of the God who acts *in, through, and as* history rather than being the recipients of a divine action of grace *ab extra*.

One of the foremost problems with the historical model is the fact that it makes the triune God of history more impersonal than the biblical accounts justify. Pannenberg argues that Yahweh's voice is heard not only *in* the annals of history but *as* history as it builds toward consummation. Though he disavowed any beliefs in pantheism, he can be properly accused of a certain strain of pantheism. His portrait of God as history itself is distant and impersonal.

One of the most important promises to Yahweh's covenant people is personal in nature: 'I will be your God and you shall be my people' (cf. Jer. 11:4; 30:22).

The Scriptures are replete with this familial, covenantal language that is necessarily personal and also exclusive. In addition, knowledge of God never comes *in abstracto* but is also accompanied by obedience. The historical model cannot accommodate this aspect of the divine-human encounter. Though a person may look back into history and have faith or look forward to the eschaton and have hope, a true revelation of the personal Triune God will produce love, both for God and for one's neighbour. This love will be enacted unto obedience. History as such cannot bring repentance, for it has no personal interaction. It stands aloof and, as a result, so does the conviction of our unworthiness in the face of the Holy One.

Revelation as Religious Experience

With the Peace of Westphalia, the Thirty-Years War ended and Europe embarked upon an era when Protestants and Roman Catholics would have to share a continent. In an effort to solidify doctrinal standards as set by both the Protestant (i. e. Lutheran and Reformed) confessions and the Tridentine formulae, each tradition saw their respective orthodoxies harden. Both groups, wholly committed to their own magisterium, retreated into exclusive fellowships. The Protestants appealed to many of the fathers (and especially to Augustine) while the Roman Catholics preferred Thomas Aquinas and Peter Lombard. One historian has noted, 'The watchword was Back! rather than Forward! The distant past, it was believed, possessed a truth which later generations had corrupted or obscured.'³¹ Within the Protestant sphere, groups made similar appeals but drew upon different sources from antiquity.

Since the early church had mystics and spiritualists throughout their history, one popular approach was to retreat into these ancient forms of spiritualism. This group reacted against noumenal Christianity by emphasizing religious experience and personal piety. They were given the name 'Pietists' for this reason. Their foremost concern was with orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy. Instead of endless metaphysical arguments (which they considered speculative at best), one should learn to love God with one's heart. Thus, Immanuel Kant could say in his preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason* that his goal was to 'abolish knowledge to make room for faith'.³² The knowledge which Kant sought to abolish was to be replaced by rationalism and empiricism. Though the Reformers understood *scientia* and *sapientia* as a symbiosis, these Pietists saw the former as parasitic upon the latter. For Kant, ethics became the main

sphere of influence because here, unlike the metaphysical and theological arena, a rational faith (*vernunftsglaube*) could be explicated and exercised. Kant emphasized deontological morality as the road to serving God and improving societal relations.

Friedrich Schleiermacher, a Reformed Pietist of Prussian descent, is considered by some to be ‘to Christian theology what Newton is to physics, what Freud is to psychology and what Darwin is to biology’.³³ Influenced though he was by a Reformed upbringing and a Kantian ethic, he was convinced that religion would thrive neither in the noumenal, speculative sphere (contra Reformed scholasticism) nor in the ethical or moral sphere (contra Kant). Reacting against the former, Schleiermacher says, ‘If, then, piety did consist in Knowing...then the strength of the conviction would be the measure of piety.’³⁴ He knew this to be false, for one could be sincerely convinced by a metaphysical idea and be sincerely incorrect. Concerning ethical religiosity, Schleiermacher notes—

If, on the other hand, piety consists in doing, it is manifest that the doing which constitutes it cannot be defined by its content; for the experience teaches that not only the most admirable but also the most abominable, not only the most useful but also the most inane and meaningless things, are done as pious and out of piety.³⁵

Thus, Schleiermacher’s resolution was to find his own *via media* in terms of what he called ‘feeling’ (*Gefühl*). This term is not exhausted by the English equivalent for it ‘does not connote a sensation...but a deep sense of awareness’.³⁶ It is an emotion of ‘utter dependence’ which includes ‘a cognitive element, in that it presents itself as an immediate consciousness of the finite existing in and through the infinite, as an intuitive sense of the ultimate unity of all things, the principle which is God’.³⁷ This awareness is manifested in the believer through ‘absolute dependence’ upon God in all matters of knowing and doing. If one follows the *Gefühl* then one will arrive at true piety and true religious knowledge. With this presupposition in place, Schleiermacher set out to redefine the Christian faith in terms of *Gefühl*.

The doctrine of revelation is one doctrine that was severely altered by the application of the *Gefühl* principle of Schleiermacher. He, with the help of Albrecht Ritschl, changed the face of continental European theology during the nineteenth

century and when looking at the doctrine of revelation, this alteration is apparent. Historically, the concept of revelation was diverse, but unanimously conceptualized as from beyond (*ab extra*). With this existential shift, Schleiermacher and Ritschl began a new movement of revelatory thinking in terms of immanence (*ab intra*). The Bible was neither an unfailing record of God's words nor a faithful testimony to God's works. It does record the religious happenings of an ancient community devoted to God, but is now to be understood as 'a model for all attempts by Christians to interpret the significance of Jesus Christ for specific historical circumstances'.³⁸ Of this group it could be said that the God who reveals Himself is the God who is *present within us through a specific religious consciousness*.

Schleiermacherian and Ritschlian theology had a profound effect upon such twentieth century theologians as C. H. Dodd, John Hick and, at times, Karl Rahner. These theologians typically rail against the naïve objectivism of the two aforementioned models (propositionalism and historicism). Against the propositional model, they argue that if revelation of God is made equal to a certain dogma about God, then this is, in effect, idolatry. God cannot be contained in words or works. He is always personal and thus always eliciting a personal response in the creatures to which he relates. Against the historical model, they level the charge that revelation means an encounter with God which produces piety. Auguste Sabatier, a French Protestant, notes, 'The object of the revelation of God can only be God himself, and if a definition must be given of it, it may be said to consist of the creation, the purification, and the progressive clearness of the consciousness of God in man-in the individual and in the race.'³⁹ This understanding has been called 'immediacy' because the relationship of God (the subject of the act of revelation) to the recipient is one of intimacy and proximity.

The strengths of this system are found mostly in its objections to the previous forms. The experiential model does not undermine the many existential questions that Scripture addresses. The religious and communal consciousness supported by this model is indicative of the apostolic community. Also, it does not claim to objectify the Almighty. One can have a legitimate encounter with God that is completely different from someone else's without seeking to determine who is right and who is wrong. It is a very pragmatic system in that one is not bound to outward forms or protocols in religious exercises.

The main problem with this model is that it does not account for the tensions between sinful humanity and divine holiness. No model or concept of revelation can neglect the *ab extra* nature of revelation without disparaging both human depravity and divine holiness. This is precisely why the patristic usage of grace presupposes a belief in revelation. With experientialists, God is made radically immanent because the ontological divide is practically denied. Religion is based on criteria internal to human beings and thus subjective. The Bible has no normative authority to govern the life of the Church. Doctrines are not accepted and thus not able to systematize and elucidate the teaching of Scripture. Avery Dulles aptly remarks—

By divorcing revelation from doctrine this model pays a price. It disappoints many of the expectations with which people ordinarily approach religion. It says in effect that there are no divine answers to the deep human questions about the origin and ultimate destiny of humanity and the world.⁴⁰

The Christian community cannot jettison the idea that divine revelation necessarily comes to us from beyond (*ab extra*). God does come to us, as Schleiermacher and his followers would implore, but he does so from a transcendental throne. Because he is transcendent, he is able to convict and condemn through the Law and revive and heal through the gospel. When he makes himself known, we will be unmistakably aware, but our very awareness of the encounter is only because we recognize that the being which we encounter is not like us. He is thrice holy and we are a people of unclean lips; only the God from beyond can cleanse us.

Revelation as Dialectical Presence

The fourth and final model of revelation for this survey is one that was born out of a reaction to the previous model. The optimism of humanistic pietism and experientialism met resistance with a new group of theologians in the early twentieth century who sought to re-establish the transcendence of the Godhead in Christian theology. In the era of disillusionment following the First World War, many of these dialecticians realized that the anthropology of liberalism and the precision of scholasticism simply could not provide sound answers for the theological and societal questions that the war necessarily elicited. This movement, often called neo-orthodoxy, began in the 1920s and was lead by

thinkers like Karl Barth and Emil Brunner who were later aghast to see their mentors and teachers (who followed the schema of Schleiermacher and Ritschl) endorse the National Socialist movement in Germany which precipitated the Second World War. If Nazism was the product of one's theology, then that theology must be re-examined.

Three defining characteristics of neo-orthodoxy are the use of dialectic, embracing of paradox, and an emphasis on crisis theology.⁴¹ The philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard was a major impetus in this methodology as he fought to attack the Hegelian systematization of reality. Hegel's employment of thesis–antithesis–synthesis was his way to create a linearity which exposed truth (thesis) and its tensions (antithesis) and moved toward a resolution (synthesis). The criticism levelled by Kierkegaard is that the Hegelian model relegates reality to the noumenal realm; it neglects the existential realm of reality where tension and anxiety cannot be resolved neatly. Thus, the synthesis is artificial. The relationship between thesis and antithesis must be preserved and embraced; this is the dialectic, an 'unresolved diastasis'.⁴² Any model that promulgated reason over faith was denounced because when paradoxes exist, faith is paramount (an echo of Anselm's dictum *fides quarens intellectum* of which Barth was so fond).

In neo-orthodoxy, the rationalism of both liberalism and scholasticism was averted by the dialectical ability to create new theological ideas and defend traditional ones by holding together in the diastasis seemingly opposite truths. The Christian faith in a transcendent triune God can be neither rational nor simple, according to neo-orthodoxy. In his seminal text *Der Römerbrief*, Barth says—

Those who claim to speak simply [about theology] seem to me to be— simply speaking about something else. By such simplicity I remain unconvinced.... True apprehension can be achieved only by a strict determination to face, as far as possible without rigidity of mind, the tensions displayed more or less clearly in the ideas written in the text.⁴³

One area where neo-orthodoxy made great efforts to separate itself from both liberalism and scholasticism was in its doctrine of revelation. Following Kierkegaard's lead, God was often referred to as the 'infinite qualitative

distinction' or by Barth, 'the Wholly Other'. Obviously, this God was not Schleiermacher's God. Barth notes—

If I have a system, it is limited to a recognition of what Kierkegaard called the 'infinite qualitative distinction' between time and eternity....The relation between such a God and such a man, and the relation between such a man and such a God is for me the theme of the Bible and the essence of philosophy.⁴⁴

The relationship is marked by an ontic divide which has no viable analogies or touchstones. It can be crossed unilaterally through the event of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ.

Because of their belief in the radical freedom and transcendence of God and man's inability to grasp such an idea (*finitum non est capax infiniti*), his self-revelation became the point of departure for their theological task. Revelation was absolutely essential for the redemption of mankind because of an innate depravity which keeps man blind. If God did not make himself known, then he could not be known and even in his making known, he remains unknown. Through their dialectical lens, God could be both the *Deus absconditus* (the hidden God) and the *Deus revelatus* (the revealed God) at the same time. Thus Barth can say, 'The revelation attested in the Bible is the revelation of God who by nature cannot be unveiled to men.'⁴⁵ The self-revelation of a God who is infinite and free to a human being who is finite thus becomes the possible impossibility. Elsewhere, Barth notes that revelation 'is not an immanent, this-worldly revelation, but comes from outside man and the cosmos. It is transcendent revelation'.⁴⁶ Barth's final phrase is an adequate summary: God retains his sovereignty in transcendence, but he also relates personally through revelation. Of this group it could be said that the God who reveals Himself is the God who is *Wholly Other and yet, the One who meets us in the person of Jesus Christ*.

Clearly, this too is an influence from Kierkegaard and his struggle with Hegelian philosophy. God's revelation (though *ab extra*) can, does, and must have an existential element. Emil Brunner posits, 'Revelation is not concerned with "something", but with myself, and with God Himself, namely, with my salvation and with His dominion over me and His communion with me.'⁴⁷ God

alone can cross this ontic, existential divide between divinity and humanity and has done so in the Incarnation. It is then no wonder that for neo-orthodoxy, revelation is seen primarily as the person of Jesus Christ because ‘the content of revelation is not God in his abstract essence, but God who turns toward his creatures in judgment and forgiveness—that is to say, in Jesus Christ’.⁴⁸

Jesus Christ becomes the existential link to reconcile God and man, not in the form of propositions or history or experiences exclusively, but in the form of a personal I–Thou encounter. Barth and Brunner both drew on Melancthon’s dictum from the *Loci communes theologici*: ‘To know Christ means to know His benefits (*Hoc est Christum cognoscere, beneficia eius cognoscere*).’⁴⁹ Taking this understanding to its logical end, Brunner couples the doctrine of revelation in its fullest sense with christology, for in knowing Christ, we know God.⁵⁰ However, this knowledge is appropriated through faith. Though the neo-orthodox party places a great emphasis on the objective pole of revelation, there remains room for a subjective experience of the objective reality. Furthermore, these two ideas are not divorced from one another as separate entities, but they belong together.

Barth’s correlation between the objective and subjective can be found in his pneumatology. He calls the Holy Spirit both the subjective reality and the subjective possibility of divine revelation. He says, ‘It is Christ, the Word of God, brought to the hearing of man by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, who is man’s possibility of being the recipient of divine revelation. Therefore this receiving, the revealedness of God for us, is really itself revelation.’⁵¹ Barth here draws on the Reformed idea of Word and Spirit to unify both the objective (grace) and subjective (faith) poles of revelation. Kevin Vanhoozer remarks that for Barth, ‘The Son is the essential and objective form of God’s self-communication to the world; the Spirit is the subjective power of the word without which the word is not recognized or received.’⁵²

Jesus Christ is seen as the revelation of God in the primary sense; he is the word of God revealed. Barth placed both Scripture (the word of God written) and proclamation (the word of God preached) as secondary forms because they are instruments which rightfully and faithfully point back to the personal revelation of God—Jesus Christ.⁵³ These two media are not the word of God in themselves, only Christ is that. Barth saw the Word of God as something

more than a static entity. It was a personal force, an encounter, and an event. However, Barth was not without many critics for this concept of the Word of God and the implications it held for his understanding of Holy Scripture. Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson note—

Barth's view of Scripture caused much controversy and criticism. Liberals accused him of elevating the Bible to a special position that nearly equated the traditional doctrine of verbal inspiration, thus removing it from historical inquiry. Conservatives, on the other hand, assailed Barth's subordination of Scripture to a non-propositional event of revelation and his explicit denial of its inerrancy.⁵⁴

This understanding of revelation as primarily the person of the God-man caused some differing viewpoints on the place and purpose of natural revelation within the model of dialectical presence. The academic face-off between Brunner and Barth, a disagreement which produced a major rift in the neo-orthodoxy movement, is but one manifestation. If a person knows God through his unveiling in Christ, then how can nature, which does not reflect the truth of the incarnation, crucifixion, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, be revelatory? Brunner felt that a minimal knowledge of God remained in this postlapsarian era through the *imago Dei* which remains marred, but intact. He notes that theologians should teach general revelation 'because the Holy Scriptures teach it unmistakably'.⁵⁵ He also cites the early fathers and the *theologia naturalis* of both Luther and Calvin as justification.

Karl Barth did not follow Brunner's concept of general revelation because it jeopardized his Christocentric (sometimes bordering on Christomonistic) doctrine of revelation. For Barth, any so-called revelation which did not reveal Christ was not revelatory. Barth's response to Brunner's theology of general revelation came in the form of a pamphlet simply titled *Nein!* Barth felt that natural theology was what was leading Germany (where he was teaching when he published the pamphlet) headlong into the Nazi ideology of human triumph at the cost of human oppression. Also, Barth's soteriological monergism was so radical that any concept of human effort compromised his concept of salvation *sola gratia*. Revelation, in Barth's mind, is always by grace and that grace is always a miracle. Thus, 'the gospel stands in no need of any point of contact other than the one created by the Holy Spirit'.⁵⁶

The model of dialectical presence has some great strengths, but with them come great weaknesses. Not surprisingly, the strengths inherent in this model are reactionary to the weaknesses of the previous model of religious experience. Barth especially was well aware of inroads made by the Schleiermacherian theology of immanence and thus, his theology reflects a God who is radically free, sovereign, and transcendent. We will never know (and thus control) God fully; we will only know him inasmuch as he reveals. This model does justice to the biblical attestation in Genesis, Job, Isaiah (esp. chs. 40–66), and Romans.

Neo-orthodoxy did not eschew the problem of divine holiness and human sinfulness. Rather, they used God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ to be the means of reconciliation. Also, the understanding of the concept of the word of God as being a powerful event rather than a book of doctrine does justice to the biblical idea of 'the word of the Lord' found among the prophets and 'the word of God' in the prologue of John's Gospel. God is not objectified and thus potentially manipulated by being equated with words on a page. Rather, in His freedom, he can take human words written by prophets, apostles, etc. and make them His words. In an era when liberalism and traditional scholasticism had become increasingly polemical, neo-orthodoxy helped to establish a middle way without compromising either their commitment to historical criticism or the Christocentricity of their message.

The weaknesses of the position of neo-orthodoxy are significant as well. The stances of both Barth and Brunner on revelation in general and inspiration in particular were disarming to both conservatives and liberals. The dialectical approach worked well as a theological presupposition to reinforce the transcendence of God, but in applying the dialectic to traditional doctrines, it is suspicious. For example, Avery Dulles notes, 'These theologians insist on the word of God as the norm that judges all human words, but then they add that the word of God is never accessible except in deficient human words.'⁵⁷ Also, because God is for Barth and Brunner the 'infinite qualitative distinction', immanence is not given due attention. The *Deus absconditus* does not necessarily become the *Deus revelatus* in neo-orthodoxy. As a noun, the term 'revelation' is spoken of with lucidity, but as a verb, its meaning is at best obscure and at worst nonexistent. We are left wondering *how* this God is made known. Millard Erickson opines, 'While neo-orthodoxy maintains that God is genuinely known in the encounter, and that faith

evokes implicit belief in the truth of certain claims or propositions, it does not make clear just how this happens.⁵⁸

Another criticism commonly made against Barth is that his understanding of the relationship between revelation and Scripture is faulty. Barth insisted that God did speak and when he did so, it was a communicative act. He also affirmed that the Bible had supreme authority, and yet Barth refused to embrace the view that the Bible is the word of God as would a propositionalist. The Bible could not be called the word of God in its fullest sense because such an affirmation would be idolatrous and would compromise the supremacy of Christ.

However, if God speaks to us in revelation, which the Bible *becomes* in the event of revelation (so they argue), how can Barth and neo-orthodoxy divorce Christ's words concerning Himself from *who* He is and *how* He intends to be understood? In any communicative speech act, listeners do not divorce the words of a speaker from the ethos and pathos of the speaker. The speaker says words (locution) which represent action or emotion on behalf of the speaker (illocution) in order to produce a response in the listener (perlocution).⁵⁹ On a purely anthropological level, the only way one person can be revealed to another is through such communicative acts which involve not only speech (locution) but action/emotion (illocution).⁶⁰

Barth's threefold distinction of the word of God is not able to accommodate this common linguistic idea because the person of Christ (illocution) is severed from and made superior to the accounts of his personhood (locution), when the person and correspondent propositions should be seen as a communicative continuum which brings about repentance (perlocution). Archbishop Peter Jensen has aptly remarked, 'In Barthian terms, as we have seen, the uniqueness of Christ as the only revelation is so pressed that there is no room for any other candidate; not even for Scripture itself.'⁶¹ Obviously, Barth's hermeneutic of John's prologue was the starting point for his whole theology of the word of God. In this area of Barth's theology (as in some others), his Christocentricity creates a theological quagmire that rushes helplessly into Christomonism and isolates itself from any fruitful discussion in trinitarian dogmatics.

The Synthesis: A Word-Spirit Approach

No single model of the four surveyed is an adequate, all encompassing expression of divine revelation. Attempting to create endless models by syncretistically piecing together the positive aspects of each model is also presumptuous. Fundamentally, we must say that God reveals Himself (*Deus revelatus*) but remains hidden within the very act of revelation (*Deus absconditus*). The act, account, experience, or event of revelation will never be exhaustive for God will remain mysterious, even in our knowledge of Him. Thus, we may not say that the Bible, salvation history, religious experience, or dialectical presence is revelation *per se*, for that would be to presuppose unmediated revelation. These may be classified as revelations from the triune God, but not necessarily revelations *of* the triune God. As it concerns this doctrine, I simply cannot accept Rahner's axiom, 'The "economic" Trinity is the "immanent" Trinity and the "immanent" Trinity is the "economic" Trinity'⁶² for this would mean that God is encapsulated in his medium of revelation. None of the aforementioned revelatory models actually unmask God, though he uses each to be unmasked.

It may be that the strengths and weaknesses of each system are seen only in relationship to the others. These four common approaches may be more symbiotic than competitive as they exist not in hostile disjunction but in historical dialogue with one another. Alister McGrath reminds us, 'It must be stressed that these [models of revelation] are not mutually exclusive. The affirmation of one does not imply the negation of any one or all four of the remainder. Correctly understood, they represent different emphases within the Christian understandings of revelation.'⁶³

What these four models do teach us is that God has, in fact, revealed Himself. Downing's thesis described earlier has no ground upon which to stand for God has revealed Himself in order to bring about the knowledge which leads to redemption. This salvific knowledge is the goal or quest of all Christian theology, and thus revelation as an act of grace is central to this task. Revelation is the Archimedean arm by which God moves the world. John Webster echoes this truth in his definition—'Revelation is the self-presentation of the triune God, the free work of sovereign mercy in which God wills, establishes and perfects saving fellowship with himself in which humankind comes to know, love and fear him above all things.'⁶⁴ This unmasking of the face of our majestic God *is* revelation.

God can be found to speak in the pages of Scripture, he shows himself to be sovereign over a history that draws toward the eschaton, and he is made known through our experience of him, that personal encounter which occurs in Christ Jesus our Lord. These four emphases are based upon the presupposition that revelation does occur and through that revelation, the Triune God can be known. A unifying principle in this discussion, one that will be faithful to both the ancient biblical and modern existential requirements of revelation, is found in the word-Spirit principle as articulated by many of the great theologians and confessions of the Church's past. It is also promising to see this idea reappearing in the theologies of some promising Evangelicals.

For example, Millard Erickson uses an incarnational model to best summarize what he feels revelation to be—Jesus' life and speech. The word became flesh (John 1:14) by the agency of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary. Thus, the life of Jesus of Nazareth was a word-Spirit act. The God-man also claimed to speak with the authority of God only after his baptism and subsequent anointing by the Holy Spirit, another word-Spirit act. Erickson comments, 'Jesus both spoke the Father's word and demonstrated the Father's attributes. He was the most complete revelation of God, because he was God.'⁶⁶

Kevin Vanhoozer sees the trinitarian revelation of God as being the *res sine qua non* in fruitful discussions between the world religions. If Christianity is to remain distinct and avoid the slippery slope from inclusivism into pluralism, then the Spirit must be conceived not as the ambiguous *Geist* of Hegel, but as the Spirit of Jesus Christ who was incarnate, who died, and who rose from the dead. Vanhoozer remarks, 'It is time to reclaim the Reformed emphasis on the inseparability of Word and Spirit, and in particular its doctrine of the testimony of the Spirit, for a theology of religions.'⁶⁷

Donald Bloesch's contribution too has been notable in this area. He states, 'To speak of a theology of Word and Spirit or Spirit and Word is to reintroduce into theology the critical role of the experience of faith...to affirm a theology of Word and Spirit is to affirm that the experience of faith is correlative with God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ.'⁶⁸

These two powers, the Word of God and the Spirit of God, must be present and efficacious for the Triune God to meet man, humble man, condemn man as well

as justify man, sanctify man, and glorify man. One is not primary to the other, for neither exists in exclusivity of the other. The word ensures the faithfulness of the revelation to the nature of divine reality (the ectypal to the archetypal) while the Spirit takes that revelation and effectively applies it to the fallen human *ab extra*. Mindful that this proposal warrants neither scholastic fundamentalism governed only by an objectified word nor ecstatic charismaticism driven only by a subjective spirit, the Word-Spirit principle is a safeguard against many of the abuses and extremes of the aforementioned models, keeping us at the centre of Scripture and thus the centre of revelation: Jesus Christ.

In revelation, we have a personal encounter with the word, Jesus Christ, as he is portrayed in the word, the Bible, though the miracle of the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit which breathes into dead men new life, opening blind eyes and deaf ears. Through revelation, we can see the acts of our covenant God in salvation history as he orchestrates and oversees the sojourning of a redeemed race. By revelation, we are given consciousness of an unmasked God who is not only Creator and Redeemer, but Father. In, through, and by revelation we are being conformed to God's image, an image which was previously held in wholeness and has since been forfeited and fragmented, but an image that now known through the eyes of faith will one day be sight.

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ENDNOTES

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