

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bq\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php)

# The Necessity of Christ for Revelation.

(Paper read at the Rawdon Conference, June 23rd, 1931.)

I HAVE been asked to deal with some aspect of Revelation, and it seemed to me that I could not do better than introduce for discussion the topic of how Christ is necessary for our knowledge of God. My main reason is that here is ground which has been allowed too long to lie fallow, although the emergence of the Barthian theology promises to break it up afresh. For many years now, since the modern view of the Bible came into prominence, the tendency has been to centre discussion on the problems of Biblical revelation, and the consideration of other aspects of revelation has been accordingly neglected. There are cogent reasons, I believe, why it is worth while at the present time to give fresh attention to the subject of Christ's place in the scheme of revelation. May I submit three.

In the first place, theological thought has never, so far as I can see, given adequate discussion to this aspect. What has been most prominent in theological discussion is the work of Christ in the narrower sense. Although it has always been taken for granted that it was part of Christ's mission to reveal God to men, the thought has always been dominant that He came first and last to redeem them. No doubt it was thought that to stress overmuch the revealing office of Christ would lead to a too intellectual conception of Christ's mission—that He came to give knowledge and satisfy intellectual curiosity rather than to give life. It may be admitted that the danger of intellectualism is real, but it has surely been often overlooked that a large part of the method of salvation is by a new and more vivid revelation of God. No man can be saved unless on the basis of a new vision of what God is. It is when a man realises what the character of God really is, or more specifically what His love means, that he discovers he is savable. If salvation means the discovery that God forgives, and that His grace is available for holy and righteous living, it comes with the realisation only that God is of a certain character—that is, a God of forgiveness and grace. If this relationship between revelation and redemption had been more widely appreciated, more attention might have been given in theological thought to the place of Christ in revelation.

Then, secondly, the faith that Christ is the Supreme Revealer of God needs safeguarding to-day in view of certain

modern tendencies of thought, both within and without the Church. Inadequate Christologies are always emerging, and we have to recognise that every insufficient theory of Christ's Person undermines the full conception of the revealing office of Christ. My own position is that we cannot retain Christ in His proper place as Supreme Revealer unless we concede to Him full divinity. To this point I shall return, but meanwhile let me affirm that when we are offered some new theory of Christ's Person, it is as important to ask how it bears upon Revelation as it is to ask how it bears upon Redemption, unless we realise, as we ought to do, that revelation is an integral part of redemption.

But the attack upon Christ's Person, and so upon His place as Supreme Revealer, does not always come from within the Church. Whilst the present tendency in the Church is to move in the direction of more conservative positions, the situation is far otherwise outside the Church. If Christ is more generally appreciated to-day than ever He was, that welcome fact must not obscure for us the recognition of the other fact that the Christ whom the world appreciates is not always the Christ of the Catholic faith. Middleton Murry offers us a beautiful conception of Christ, but it is one which is adequate neither to the historic faith nor to a saving gospel. To estimate Christ as a great religious thinker or genius alongside the other great founders of religions may be no mean thing, but it is not sufficient, not even if He be regarded as *primus inter pares*. The modern studies of the historical Jesus and of comparative religion may appear to encourage such a point of view; and it behoves us who share in those studies to be alive to the perils that may attend them. The Christian faith requires something more than that men recognise that Christ is a revealer of God, or even that He makes a supreme revelation of Him; it requires the recognition of Him as *the* Revealer of God, who makes His revelation in a way that no other can. We have to defend the fundamental truth that Christ is as unique in His Revealership as He is in His Saviourhood.

Finally, we have to meet to-day a still more fundamental subversive tendency which would endeavour to destroy the reality of special revelation altogether. Many modern writers—Bernard Shaw and Julian Huxley, for instance—deny supernatural revelation altogether, and allege, in effect, that the only revelation is that provided by a scientific study of the universe. Thus science is developing a religious cult of its own, and we may expect to hear more of it rather than less. On the one hand, psychological investigation is establishing the fact that man possesses an innate religious disposition; and on the other physical science is increasingly inclined to posit some kind of

spiritual basis as the ground of the universe. How these two tendencies can be united to frame a new natural religion is well illustrated in C. E. M. Joad's recent book, *The Future of Religion*. He recognises that man, as man, possesses a religious disposition, and he claims that its proper satisfaction must be the worship of Nature. Here we have a new Positivism taking the form of a Nature-mysticism. It is obvious that such views must be met, in order to vindicate the idea of special revelation, without the admission of which the whole superstructure of Christian revelation falls to pieces.

For these reasons principally I believe it is worth while to urge re-consideration of the place of Christ in Revelation, and as a modest contribution to this end I propose to submit briefly the thesis that Christ is fundamentally necessary to Revelation. That there is revelation apart from Him, no one would deny, but the essence of historic Christianity rests on the conviction that only in Christ do we get the revelation of God which is fully adequate to our deepest human needs. I propose to prove my thesis by attempting to show how the chief modes of non-Christian revelation bear witness by their limitations to the imperative need of the higher revelation in Christ. I recognise that this is to box the compass in the limits of a brief paper, but it appears to be the only effective method of procedure.

Let us begin with the most general modes of revelation, and first of all with natural revelation. The question is, how far does the study of natural phenomena take us towards the revelation of God? I believe that too much has been made of the religious significance of Nature, with all due deference to the rhapsodies of the church of which Wordsworth is the high priest. Religious minds, in particular, tend to read into the natural order what they desire to find there; and I should agree with the Dean of St. Paul's that Nature does little more than reflect our own moods. Without doubt, the contemplation of Nature does often lead to a vivid apprehension of God, but it is not always realised that those who profit most from worship in her temple are those whose faith in God rests on other grounds. We cannot deny that close scrutiny of Nature's ways may lead not to the confirmation of faith but to its shipwreck. Nature is glorious if you keep one eye shut. Open both eyes, and you see not only the beauty of Nature but Nature under a less attractive aspect—"Nature red in tooth and claw." The supreme difficulty in the way of a thorough-going appreciation of Nature as a medium of revelation is the problem of evil. We ought not to commend Nature as a witness to God until we can offer a satisfactory solution of that problem. But it is a tremendous undertaking if we have to solve a huge and well-nigh intractable problem before we can show

men the face of God. Yet we may hope that the advance of scientific research will furnish one day such further data as will enable philosophy to give a simpler answer to this difficult problem than we can at present offer.

But suppose we grant that the message and witness of Nature is unambiguous, the question remains whether she would afford us, even then, a revelation of God which answers the deepest needs of the human spirit. Nature is silent when man craves forgiveness and spiritual peace. She is indifferent to his profoundest yearnings, and has no balm when his spirit is tormented and distracted. To know that the universe bears witness to the reality of an all-wise Architect is not knowledge that heals the wounds of the heart, that ministers to the diseased conscience, that grants assurance that God cares and wills to redeem and to bless.

There is another mode of general revelation which strictly speaking is but a special form of natural revelation—the revelation within the soul of man, his instinctive feeling that over against Him is Another, who is the foundation of all life. The early Apologists made much of this testimony of the soul to God, but it is not nearly so significant as they or others have often imagined. It bears less witness to God than to the fact that man as man has a religious “instinct”—an innate desire for an Object of worship over against himself. I am well aware, of course, that this religious disposition is the basis of all religious insight and that progress in religious conceptions is due to the high development of this disposition in prophetic minds—those who possess religious genius, and through whom new and higher stages of religious knowledge are reached. But what I have in mind at the moment is the religious intuition of the average individual. And I affirm that the sense of the numinous which every man possesses is insufficient for an adequate revelation of God. As soon as the religious genius emerges, whom we acknowledge to be in some sense a supernatural figure by calling him inspired, the common man is carried beyond his private intuition, which is apt to be vague and indeterminate, into a new knowledge that lies beyond his personal power to reach; when that happens revelation then ceases to be general and has become special. When men need to know the character of God, it is surely futile to say to them, look within and consider the testimony of your own souls. No man can create out of his individual intuitions a conception of God which is adequate to the demands of his soul. What he wants is something far bigger than the reflection of his own vague and hesitating conjectures. His untutored insight will carry him but little way unless it is supplemented by some larger conception. Whatever else his soul will

tell him, when he turns to consult it, it will surely tell him that his deepest need is for a revelation of the Divine that lies beyond his own discovery. He cannot rest satisfied with the uncertain feeling that there is some sort of a God somewhere, his craving is for dependable knowledge of what sort of a God it is. And here we touch upon the essential defect of all natural revelation: it may testify to the existence of God, but it has no sure testimony as to what is His nature and character.

Let us next turn to special revelation of the prophetic type, from which I exclude, of course, the revelation in Christ which is a type of an unique character. Here we have revelation developing through the agency of outstanding men endowed with exceptional religious gifts and possessing a spiritual experience of eminent quality—men whom we usually designate along with their utterances inspired. Many interesting points might be raised here, did time permit. There is, for instance, the question of inspiration—a subject which badly needs new treatment—what we mean by it and in what degrees it should be assigned to the Old Testament prophets, to the founders and leaders of the non-biblical religions and to the other great thinkers who have made outstanding contributions to the spiritual knowledge of the race. I venture to think that some competent scholar might do us fine service by giving us a careful and thorough book on the subject of the psychology and theology of inspiration. Such questions must be left, however, and we must content ourselves with a brief consideration of the limitations of this type of special revelation as it is seen at its highest in the Old Testament prophets.

The high achievement of Old Testament prophecy may be taken for granted. We cannot, indeed, appreciate too highly the marvellous contribution which was here made to the world's knowledge of God, but whilst we freely acknowledge our debt to it, we are compelled to ask in what way this revelation falls short, so that we need to look for a yet higher revelation in Christ for the satisfaction of our deepest needs. I think it may be said that Biblical scholarship has established the position that the shortcoming of the Old Testament revelation does not lie in its essential content. The subject cannot be entered upon here, but Kautsch's judgment may be taken to represent the conclusion of sober scholarship: "The New Testament," he says, "had nothing further to add to the outline of the idea of God in the Old Testament, but, on the contrary, is glad to employ its language." The defect of the Old Testament revelation lies elsewhere—in its failure to make its conception of God vivid enough and to draw out to a sufficient degree the wide implications that lie inherent in it. The Old Testament never wholly succeeded,

except possibly in a few instances, in lifting its idea of God out of the nationalistic setting and in completely universalising its conception. A higher revelation was required which would fill in the outline already drawn and which would make the message applicable to the universal heart of man in the whole range of his spiritual need. This is not difficult to discern by us who stand in the full light of that higher revelation, but could hardly have been perceived by those who produced the earlier revelation; yet the Old Testament often produces the impression that the Old Testament prophets themselves were not unaware that their revelation was not final, but pointed to something beyond itself. But if the Old Testament revelation at its highest bears testimony to the need of a yet completer disclosure of the Divine, still more must whatever revelation has been given through the prophets of other cultures. If the Jew was not sufficient to himself, still less the Gentile. We can speak in the most generous terms of all that inspired men have enabled us to see of God, and we can give full value to the debt we owe to all of whatever time or culture who have given us insight into the nature and character of God, yet as Christians we have to add that beyond the best that has been won there is a higher which has been available only in Jesus Christ. We achieve nothing by denying revelation outside our own borders; the Christian evangelist will only gain by freely and gladly recognising whatever contribution others have made to the common stock of our religious knowledge. His best claim for the Christian revelation is not that here alone is the only authentic revelation of God, but rather that here is the crown and consummation of all revelation. Beginning with generous appreciation of all other revelation, the Christian apostle must proceed on the basis of the wise apologia of the writer to the Hebrews: "God, having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners, hath in these last days spoken unto us in a Son . . ."

We come finally to the crux of the topic—wherein specifically lies the necessity of Christ to revelation. We have already noted that it does not lie in the requirement of a further revelation beyond that given by the Old Testament prophets. On them Christ built up His doctrine of God, neither adding to it nor essentially abrogating any part of it. If we say, as is often done, that the peculiarity of the Christian revelation lies in the conception of God as Father, we are overlooking the fact that that doctrine is implicit in the teaching of the prophets, though not formulated in the same language. The differentia of the Christian revelation lies elsewhere and can only lie in the mode of its presentation. The originality of the Christian revelation lies in the fact that it is a revelation made available through an

incarnation: God spake in the prophets . . . in these last days He hath spoken unto us in a Son. Christ may be regarded as the greatest of the prophets, but so to designate Him is to miss His essential distinction from them. As they, He spoke by word; unlike them, He spoke by what He was. Christ did not bear witness to a revelation, He was the Revelation Himself. The Christian revelation is not merely the teaching of Christ, it is Christ Himself. The significance of His teaching is truly seen only in relation to His personality; it is part of the revelation, but significant not merely or mainly because of its intrinsic worth but because it is an expression of His personality. It scarcely needs demonstration that He wished His revelation to be identified with Himself. Whatever be the historical basis of the Fourth Gospel, there is no question that in this respect that Gospel correctly interprets the mind of Christ: Christ does not like John, bear witness to the light; He is the Light of the world; He is not an apostle of truth, He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father," and other such utterances are only another version of the indubitable words of Christ: "All things have been delivered unto Me of My Father; and no one knoweth the Son, save the Father, neither doth any one know the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son willeth to reveal Him."

We have now to ask in what particular respects the revelation through the Incarnation enhances the prophetic revelation.

In the first place, the Christian revelation has the superiority of being what may be termed dramatic. The word is not wholly fitting, for it carries with it the suggestion that the Incarnation was a mere show; yet it suggests the difference between the two revelations—the difference, if I may put it so, between reading a play and seeing it performed. The older revelation was a testimony, a spoken message, a witness by word of mouth; the higher a revelation seen and handled. Christ did not merely speak of God, He was God. The consequence is that the Christian revelation is the most vivid that men can possibly receive. In Christ revelation has taken on the utmost degree of reality. Here God has done His utmost—He can do no more—to impress men with His character. The messenger of God has no need to describe God, he has the simple function of pointing to Christ and saying, There in that human life dwells the fulness of God; the thoughts, feelings, and activities there displayed are the very thoughts, feelings and activities of the very God Himself.

Further, not only does the Incarnation dramatize the idea of God, it universalizes it by setting it in a universal context, the context of humanity. The prophetic revelation never wholly

freed itself, even at the hands of its noblest exponents from the matrix in which it had been conceived and developed. That matrix was indispensable for the growth of the revelation, but it presented a difficulty to the non-Jewish mind of different culture and history. It never ceased to be the Jewish revelation, and it is doubtful if Hebrew religion could ever have become truly universalized apart from its development into Christianity. But the revelation in Christ is expressed in terms as wide as humanity itself. Christ might speak the language of His race, expressing His thought in the terms of His cultural inheritance, but His life was as intelligible to the Gentile as it was to the Jew. And to-day, wherever the story of Christ is told, the story needs no interpretation; men and women of all types and cultures respond to the presentation of the divine in Him. The missionary achievements of the Christian Church are ample justification for the divine choice of the Incarnation as the final method of revelation.

Again, the Christian revelation affords, through the Incarnation, the most varied and extensive illustration of God in action in the specific sphere of human individual relationships. The Old Testament prophets tended to see God against the wide background of the national life, whereas Christ, through the Incarnation, presents God in the most intimate contact with individuals. For when God is disclosed in a single human life, it is possible to see Him in action and at a glance, so to speak, in the narrow compass of human relationships. Without such a revelation human insight can gain some understanding of God's ways with His children, but the discovery is made only through experience by a long trial in which there must needs be many false or inadequate judgments which have to be corrected and amplified. A millennium of reflection and experience taught the Hebrew race the truths which Christ took up into His own revelation, but in Him they are truths turned into very life. It is possible to know from Christ a whole realm of truth about God in His purposes and ways which otherwise could only be won through long generations and by the process of the working of many minds, and then not with the same vividness and wealth of illustration. It was a great achievement for a Hebrew prophet to declare, "Who is a God like unto Thee that pardoneth iniquity," but the message takes on a new vividness of meaning when it is illustrated in Christ's dealings with sinful men and women, or in His acceptance of the Cross.

I may make mention of one other cardinal characteristic of revelation through Christ the Incarnate Son—it gives to revelation a certainty and finality which could come in no other way. If Christ is truly Son of God, His revelation possesses an

authority and certainty which no other revelation could claim, no matter what its history and no matter how completely it has been verified in experience. It is always possible to entertain hesitation about any revelation, however impressive, if it has come through purely human channels. But about a revelation which has proceeded from the very Son of God, one feels a confidence which is of peculiar quality. This I recognise rests the validity of the Christian revelation upon a judgment as to the Person of Christ, but I do not fear to affirm that. It is not to say that the revelation of Christ has not an intrinsic worth independent of any judgment as to His Person. It would be absurd to say that one cannot learn from Christ except on the recognition of His divinity. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the full weight of His revelation is not felt until it is realised that here is the disclosure of the Son of God Himself. There are certain elements in the Christian revelation which, in the end, must rest upon authority. Some of the affirmations of Christ are incapable of complete verification in experience, and it is futile to say that they can be accepted on the ground of their intrinsic truth. Christ teaches me that God is love; I am anxious to believe it, and I can see many reasons why it must be true. But I am sometimes confronted with facts of experience which shake my confidence, and then I have no recourse but to fall back on the sure testimony of Christ. Intellectually I cannot believe in the love of God until I have solved the problem of evil, but I have not solved it, and scarcely hope to do what the ages have failed to accomplish. Yet when I consider the revelation of Christ in His Cross, I rise superior to my doubts and difficulties; that Christ believes is enough for me. Hence the less divine I conceive Christ to be, the less sure I am that I can rest in His revelation.

And here I must be content to stop, save for a rapid summing-up. The revelation of Christ is a vital element in the Christian faith, and it calls for defence from time to time. We have to secure not only that Christ has a place in revelation, but *the* place, the very centre of it. But for the most part that vindication rests on the vindication of the wider affirmation that Christ is the only-begotten Son of God. I feel more and more that the whole superstructure of the Christian faith rest on that historic foundation. We all approach that truth along our own lines. My own attempt to study the doctrine of Revelation has compelled the conviction upon me, as would the study, I believe, of any other aspect of the work of Christ. I see that Christ is necessary for the knowledge of God, and I see, too, that He is necessary because He alone is the Incarnate Son of God, who speaks to us, not as one of the prophets, but as a Son.

W. E. HOUGH.