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A BRIEF HISTORY OF DIVINE REVELATION

Fred G. Zaspel

Surely among the most important considerations that we can ever entertain is this: God has spoken. It is a staggering thought, and it carries far-reaching implications. That God has spoken and that we are enabled to hear his Word is a marvelous condescension of grace. It is life's greatest privilege to hear him. But it is a privilege which entails enormous responsibility.

"General revelation," God's self-disclosure in creation and in providence, offers us much. We can learn from it of God's great power and Godhood, his glory, his goodness, his wisdom, his patience, even something of his righteous requirements of us. And since the very beginning, men and women created in the image of God have heard God speak. Although in varying degrees God's self-disclosure has been universally suppressed and denied, it has remained constant and evident and sufficient to render all of humanity guilty of conscious rebellion against its creator (Psalm 19:1-3; Romans 1:18-21).

But as marvelous as God's general revelation is, it lacks specificity and detail. We need something more. We are ignorant, and we are rebellious; and so we must have more knowledge of him than is available generally through the created order and in our conscience. We need desperately to know what his Law requires and how that Law can be kept. More than that, we need desperately to know how we can find remedy for our rebellion. We want to know if God

will have us back. We want to know *how* he can take us back and under what terms. For all this, and so much more, God's highest earthly creatures require more revelation, a further self-disclosure of God.

Amazingly, he has condescended to our need. God has spoken "at many times and in various ways" (Hebrews 1:1). The ancient prophets, his commissioned spokesmen, relayed God's Word received through vision, dream, and other methods of direct communication. "Thus says the Lord," they would announce. "The Word of the Lord came to me, saying. . . ." "The Spirit of the Lord speaks through me, his Word is upon my tongue" (2 Samuel 23:2). Each of these men was God's own mouthpiece, and through them he made himself known to the world. Through them we hear him. The Old Testament Scriptures have God's own imprimatur. More, they are themselves *his* Word.

But God was not done—he had more to say. And as privileged and as royal as the ancient prophets were, God's fullest self-disclosure would require a still greater ambassador. Climactic revelation requires a special, unique spokesman. It requires one who is thoroughly and intimately familiar with God. Such an assignment can go to "no one less than God's very own Son" (Hebrews 1:2).¹ "He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being" (Hebrews 1:3); he is uniquely qualified for the task. Jesus Christ, the only begotten, the unique Son, is the supreme revelation of the Father (John 1:18).

It is not surprising that the Lord Jesus fulfills the prophetic office. He is uniquely qualified, and as Moses himself prophesied (Deuteronomy 18:15-19), his Word is final. Indeed, "Listen to him!" was the Father's own command (Matthew 17:5). That the words of God's Son should be heard and heeded is a matter of the utmost importance.

In fact, Jesus himself said that his Word was the Word of the Father. "My teaching is not mine but his who sent

me" (John 7:16). "the Word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me" (John 14:24). "The Words that you gave to me I have given to them" (John 17:8). Jesus understood himself to be God's special ambassador to the world. Accordingly, his teaching was marked by a unique authority (Matthew 7:28-29). His "You have heard that it was said . . . but I tell you" is either unthinkable blasphemy, or it is unique, divine self-disclosure.

All this is to say that God has spoken climactically and most fully in his Son. We have in Jesus Christ God's fullest—indeed, his final—revelation. God's chief ambassador to the world is no less than his own Son.

But if God's climactic and final revelation was in and through his Son, how does that benefit us? What good is it to us that God spoke fully and finally 2000 years ago in another world, another culture, another language? Living at this late date, have we missed out? After all, we cannot hear him speak—he has returned to glory.

This is precisely the question which Jesus was entertaining and answering in his "Upper Room Discourse" (John 14-16). It was the night before his death, and Jesus had informed his disciples of his soon departure. They were bothered by the announcement, of course. But interestingly, Jesus' instruction to them focused on the uniqueness of the person and ministry—the role—of the Holy Spirit. Of primary interest is his unique designation of the Third Person: he is "another helper" (*allon parakleton*, 14:16)—a replacement, if you will, another Jesus. He will come to be for the disciples the helper Jesus had been to them. His is the continuation of the ministry of the Lord Jesus. This "replacement" idea is emphasized in the following verses. Jesus promised, "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you" (14:18). This statement has been variously interpreted to refer to Jesus' resurrection or his second coming. But as true as both of these interpretations are,

they do not exhaust the significance of our Lord's promise. In context his point seems to be that he will return to them *via the Holy Spirit*, the "other helper." The Holy Spirit is the continuation of the ministry of Jesus. Indeed, to this point in time, he is the climax of our Lord's work.

Now these words are most often taken in reference to the Holy Spirit's ministry to all the people of Christ. There is, of course, a great sense in which that is true. By his Spirit we all are taught and led in the truth and in the ways of God (1 Thessalonians 4:9; 1 John 2:27). But Jesus' point here is much more specific than that. He is not speaking broadly of provision to all believers. He is speaking narrowly of his specific provision to his apostles, his specially commissioned ambassadors. He is providing for the continuation of his teaching ministry.

Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me. I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you (John 14:24-26).

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16:12-15).

Simply put, Jesus' teaching ministry to his apostles would not end with his departure. Rather, his teaching ministry to them would continue via his replacement, the Holy Spirit, the "other helper." He is not at all saying that

the Spirit will "teach every believer everything" or cause every believer to "remember everything which he said" or "guide every believer into all truth." No, that was not what he said, and that has not happened. His promise is to his apostles. This is the task for which he had called them. *They* will be taught "everything." The Holy Spirit will remind *them* of "everything" which Jesus had spoken. The Spirit will guide *them* into "all truth." This is the Spirit's role. Jesus' teaching ministry to his disciples was not complete when he died, but through his replacement, the Holy Spirit, he had provided for its continuation and completion.

So there is something of a parallel here. Just as the Son had come to speak for the Father, so also the Spirit would come to speak for the Son. "He will not speak on his own;" he will speak for and of Christ. This is his great role in the history of revelation. He was commissioned to ensure that these chosen men would recall all that the Lord had taught them when he was with them, to guide them into a fuller understanding of it, and to continue that teaching until it is complete. He would give them illumination, fuller revelation, and new revelation. This "other helper" would bring the climactic revelation of the Son to its culmination.

So Jesus is emphasizing not only the uniqueness of the Holy Spirit. He is stressing the uniqueness of the apostles! *They* are the repositories of God's full and final revelation. God has spoken fully and finally in no less than his Son. God's climactic Word "was declared at first through the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him" (Hebrews 2:3).

Notice this strand of thought in our Lord's high priestly prayer. "The words you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them. . . . As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. . . . My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their word" (John 17:8, 18, 20). That is, the

apostles were given a very real power of attorney. Equipped by the teaching of our Lord himself and via his Spirit, they were our Lord's commissioned spokesmen, his representatives. It is in this sense they are referred to as "the foundation" of the Church (Ephesians 2:20; cf. Revelation 21:14). Perhaps if it were not for Protestant fear over the Roman Catholic abuse of Matthew 16:18, this would be the unanimous understanding of our Lord's designation of Peter as "the rock" on which he would build his Church. It is truly a marvelous promise and provision. As far as the apostles were concerned, they were weak as any other men. They were uneducated. They were very ordinary men. Yet they are given this privileged position: *they* will deliver the Word of God through the Son to the world. From God the Father, through the Son, through the Spirit, and through the apostles to the world. In this sense, the apostles are "foundational" to the Church.

We evangelicals are instinctively suspicious of tradition. Tradition—ideas, customs and beliefs "handed down" from previous generations—can be both enslaving and wrong. But here is tradition worth dying for—divine truth handed down from the Father, the Son, and the Spirit through the apostles to us. "Stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter" (2 Thessalonians 2:15). Indeed, this tradition is the very basis of our fellowship—"Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us" (2 Thessalonians 3:6). Theological and ethical instruction from the apostles is universally binding. Indeed, it is "from God to us."

So then we have advanced yet another step—the uniqueness of Christ; the uniqueness of the Holy Spirit; the uniqueness of the apostles—and, therefore, the uniqueness

of the New Testament Scriptures. How and where did the Holy Spirit lead these men into "all truth"? How and where did he remind them of and explore the significance of our Lord's teaching? In John 21:24, the Gospel of John identifies John's "witness" to the Lord Jesus with his own writing. And it is perhaps significant that the provisions which Jesus specified form an apt description of the New Testament Scriptures. The Spirit would "remind" the apostles of what Jesus did and said; we have that in the New Testament Gospels. He would "lead them into all truth" and show them the fuller significance of what Jesus had said and done; this is what is proclaimed in the Acts and expounded in the Epistles. And he would "show them things to come;" we have this in the prophecies of the Epistles and in the book of Revelation. God's Word to us reached its climax in his Son, and this we have reduced to writing in the pages of our New Testament. It is not the "red letters" only. The whole of it taken together is God's fullest Word to us.

This is a very significant fact for us. Most Christians ask at some time, How can we know the New Testament is the Word of God? How can we be sure? How can we know it is truth? How can we know it is accurate? Must we rely on an inner witness? Must we rely on the Church? Archaeology? Religious tradition? No, as helpful as these are, we have something much better. We have Christ's own word on it. He chose and commissioned these men for exactly this purpose. He invested them with his own authority. He sent them his Spirit to teach and guide them infallibly. The apostles' witness to Christ and his teaching and work would not be their own invention or even relying merely on their own memory. No. It is the very Word of the Son himself. Such is our Lord's promise.

Accordingly, when we read of the Scriptures coming to us by the inspiration of the Spirit, we should not think of the Holy Spirit acting on his own. He came to further the

teaching of Christ. This also is how we should think when we read of “the law of Christ”—it is not the red letters only but the entire body of writings given by the Spirit through the apostles.

And this is the repeated claim of the apostles themselves. They do not merely preach the Gospel; they do so “by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven” (1 Peter 1:12). Their word was in fact the Word of God (1 Thessalonians 2:13). More specifically, the apostles’ words are to be regarded as the very Word of Christ. “Anyone who claims to be a prophet, or to have spiritual powers, must acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 14:37). Paul’s doctrine came by the revelation of Christ (Galatians 1:14ff, et al.). His detailed exhortations are “in the Lord Jesus” and “through the Lord Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 4:1-2ff). His commands are “in the name of the Lord Jesus” (2 Thessalonians 3:6; cf. 3:12). Indeed, the apostles’ words are themselves “the Words of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Timothy 6:3). This is perhaps most graphically illustrated in the book of Revelation, written by the apostle John. Over and again he reminds us that what he writes to us, the church, he writes from the Lord Jesus. The Lord Jesus appears and tells him, “What you see, write in a book” (Revelation 1:11). “To the angel of the church at Ephesus, write . . .” (2:1 etc.). “I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, ‘Write . . .’” (14:13). “Then he said to me, ‘Write . . .’” (19:9). “He who sat on the throne . . . said to me, ‘Write . . .’” (21:5). The words of the apostles bear a unique authority. They form the basis of fellowship and the standard of truth (2 Thessalonians 2:15; 3:14) precisely because they speak for Christ; they carry on and deliver to us God’s final Word through his Son.

A very natural and necessary corollary of this is that the New Testament writings are God’s *final* and therefore *sufficient* Word. The apostles were given “all truth” (John

16:13), and we dare not add to it (Revelation 22:18). They bring God’s self-disclosure to its completion. It is “once for all” (Jude 3) and must now be held in trust (1 Timothy 6:20; 2 Timothy 1:14). The Church is the custodian of the truth, not the giver of new truth. The truth has been deposited into our hands, and it is ours faithfully to preserve and hand down to the next generation. “What you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well” (2 Timothy 2:2). We do not need continuing revelation—it would be superfluous. We already possess “all truth.” The full deposit has been made. What each new generation needs is a fresh confrontation with this truth which has been once for all revealed. What has been given is *enough*. It is sufficient to guide every man and woman of God safely and clearly into precisely *all* that God requires of them (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

This why our Bible is such a significant book. It is not just another book. It is not one book among others. It is not even one of a select few. It is unique.

Further, this is why we say our Bible is an *authoritative* book. It bears the stamp of divine authority. Is it the writings of men? Yes, but it is also the Word of God. And so the Church does not stand above it; it stands above the Church. It demands that we subject all teaching to *it* and that we never subject it to anything (1 John 4:1ff; Galatians 1:6-8). No church, no new religious sect, no creed, no consensus of scholars can improve on or refute what has come from God to us. It is the final court of appeal. Our doctrinal beliefs may well change, but if they do it must only be in order to come into conformity to this book. It must rule supreme.

Do you see what a privilege it is to have such a wonderful treasure? Just try to imagine life without it! Well, you don’t have to imagine—just look at our world! Our society

has ignored it and rejected it. Our society has no standard of truth, no measure of right and wrong. This is why we have to debate such (to us) obvious issues like euthanasia, abortion, and homosexuality. If our world is characterized by anything, it is characterized by confusion and moral uncertainty. The people of this world are “like sheep having no shepherd.” In contrast to them we have such confidence and clear direction in truth and matters of right and wrong that the world accuses us of being arrogant! “Everything is so simple for you, isn’t it?” they say. Well, in this regard at least, yes, things are simple for us. But that is not due to any brilliance on our part. It is just that we have received God’s full revelation in his Son. It is not arrogance at all—we have submitted our minds and lives to what he has said, and having done so, life is simple. Issues are clear. We are not left wondering what is right and what is wrong—these things are given to us from God himself.

This is why once a church surrenders its loyalty to the Scriptures it immediately begins a rapid tailspin downward into chaos and confusion. When matters of truth are decided by majority opinion rather than by Christ’s lordship, and when his prophetic and kingly offices are denied, confusion inevitably follows.

God’s full and final Word came 2000 years ago in another culture, another language, another world, and to another people. But thankfully, it did not die there. Before his departure God’s Son made full provision for us today. His Word from the Father would faithfully be given to the apostles via the Holy Spirit, “the other helper.” God’s Word has come, and God’s Word remains.

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Notes

1. The writer to the Hebrews expresses this thought graphically. “Son” (*huio*) lacks the definite article, a construction which emphasizes the character or quality of the noun in question. Hence, the expanded translation given above. See the discussion in Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 245. The sense of the statement is that in contrast to “the prophets,” the one who is the very Son of God—indeed, the one who is “greater” and “more excellent” (v.4)—speaks with climactic and eclipsing significance.