

PART TWO

GOD'S REVELATION

FOUR

God's Universal Revelation

Chapter Objectives

After completing the reading of this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. To recognize the nature of revelation and separate general from special revelation.
2. To identify the modes of general revelation.
3. To comprehend the importance of general revelation.
4. To appreciate the significance of personal human responsibility in response to general revelation.
5. To develop an understanding of the implications of general revelation.

Chapter Summary

The study of God's revelation of himself to humanity has been classified in two ways: general revelation and special revelation. The general revelation of God has been found in three areas: nature, history, and humanity. Theologians concerned with the comprehensiveness of general revelation have developed what is known as natural theology. This theology studies the way in which God's existence is known outside the biblical source, specifically through the use of reason. There is general revelation

without natural theology, but the effect of sin prevents the unbeliever from coming to the knowledge of God. The salvation of the individual through God's general revelation can only be measured by faith.

Study Questions

- In what areas do we find God's general revelation?
- Describe and evaluate the assumptions of natural theology.
- What makes natural theology ineffective in bringing the Christian message to the unbeliever?
- How is humanity involved in the general revelation of God outside special revelation?

Chapter Outline

The Nature of Revelation
The Modes of General Revelation
The Reality and Efficacy of General Revelation
 Natural Theology
 A Critique of Natural Theology
 Examination of Relevant Passages
 General Revelation, But Without Natural Theology
General Revelation and Human Responsibility
Implications of General Revelation

The Nature of Revelation

Because humankind is finite and God is infinite, we cannot know God unless he reveals himself to us, that is, unless he manifests himself to humans in such a way that they can know and fellowship with him. There are two basic classifications of revelation. On the one hand, general revelation is God's communication of himself to all persons at all times and in all places. Special revelation, on the other hand, involves God's particular communications and manifestations of himself to particular persons at particular times, communications and manifestations which are available now only by consulting certain sacred writings.

General revelation refers to God's self-manifestation through nature, history, and the inner being of the human person. It is general in two aspects: its universal availability (it is accessible to all persons at all times) and the content of the message (it is less particularized and detailed than special revelation). A number of questions need to be raised. One concerns the genuineness of the revelation. Is it really there? Further, we need to ask regarding the efficacy of this revelation. If it exists, what can be made of it? Can one construct a "natural theology," a knowledge of God from nature?

The Modes of General Revelation

The traditional modes of general revelation are three: nature, history, and the constitution of the human being. Scripture itself proposes that there is a knowledge of God available through the created physical order. The psalmist says, "The heavens are telling the glory of God" (Ps. 19:1). And Paul says, "Ever since the creation of the world [God's] invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So [humans] are without excuse" (Rom. 1:20). These and numerous other passages, such as the "nature psalms," suggest that God has left evidence of himself in the world he has created. The person who views the beauty of a sunset and the biology student dissecting a complex organism are exposed to indications of the greatness of God.

The second mode of general revelation is history. If God is at work in the world and is moving toward certain goals, it should be possible to detect the trend of his work in events that occur as part of history. An example often cited of God's revelation in history is the preservation of the people of Israel. This small nation has survived over many centuries within a basically hostile environment, often in the face of severe

opposition. Anyone who investigates the historical records will find a remarkable pattern. Some persons have found great significance in individual events of history, for instance, the evacuation of Dunkirk and the battle of Midway in World War II. Individual events, however, are more subject to differing interpretations than are the broader, longer-lasting trends of history, such as the preservation of God's special people.

The third mode of general revelation is God's highest earthly creation, humans themselves. Sometimes God's general revelation is seen in the physical structure and mental capacities of humans. It is, however, in their moral and spiritual qualities that God's character is best perceived. Humans make moral judgments, that is, judgments of what is right and wrong. This involves something more than our personal likes and dislikes, and something more than mere expediency. We often feel that we ought to do something, whether it is advantageous to us or not, and that others have a right to do something which we may not personally like.

General revelation is also found in humankind's religious nature. In all cultures, at all times and places, humans have believed in the existence of a reality higher than themselves, and even of something higher than the human race collectively. While the exact nature of the belief and worship practice varies considerably from one religion to another, many see in this universal tendency toward worship of the holy the manifestation of a past knowledge of God, an internal sense of deity, which, although it may be marred and distorted, is nonetheless still present and operating in human experience.

The Reality and Efficacy of General Revelation

Natural Theology

Regarding the nature, extent, and efficacy of general revelation, there are some rather sharply contrasting views. One position which has had a long and conspicuous history within Christianity maintains not only that there is a valid,

objective revelation of God in such spheres as nature, history, and human personality, but that it is actually possible to gain some true knowledge of God from these spheres—in other words, to construct a natural theology apart from the Bible.

Certain assumptions are involved in this view. One is, of course, that God actually has made himself known in nature and that pat-

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terns of meaning are objectively present even if no one perceives, understands, and accepts this revelation. Moreover, nature is basically intact—it has not been substantially distorted by anything that has occurred since the creation. In short, the world we find about us is basically the world as it came from the creative hand of God, and as it was intended to be.

A second major assumption of natural theology is the integrity of the person perceiving and learning from the creation. Neither the natural limitations of humanity nor the effects of sin and the fall prevent one from recognizing and correctly interpreting the handiwork of the Creator.

There are other assumptions as well. One is that there is a congruity between the human mind and the creation about us. The order of the human mind is basically the same as the order of the universe. The mind is capable of drawing inferences from the data it possesses, since the structure of its thinking processes coheres with the structure of what it knows. The validity of the laws of logic is also assumed. Natural theologians assiduously avoid paradoxes and logical contradictions, considering them something to be removed by a more complete logical scrutiny of the issues under consideration. They regard a paradox as a sign of intellectual indigestion; had it been more completely chewed, it would have disappeared.

The core of natural theology is the idea that it is possible, without a prior commitment of

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faith to the beliefs of Christianity, and without relying upon any special authority, such as an institution (the church) or a document (the Bible), to come to a genuine knowledge of God on the basis of reason alone. Reason here refers to the human capacity to discover, understand, interpret, and evaluate the truth.

Perhaps the outstanding example of natural theology in the history of the church is the massive effort of Thomas Aquinas. According to Thomas, all truth belongs to one of two realms. The lower realm is the realm of nature, the higher the realm of grace. While the claims pertaining to the upper realm must be accepted on authority, those pertaining to the lower realm may be known by reason.

Thomas contended that he could prove certain beliefs by pure reason: the existence of God, the immortality of the human soul, and the supernatural origin of the Catholic church. More specific elements of doctrine—such as the triune nature of God—could not be known by unaided reason, but must be accepted on authority. These are truths of revelation, not truths of reason. Reason rules the lower level, while the truths on the upper level are matters of faith.

One of the traditional arguments for the existence of God is the cosmological proof. Thomas has three or possibly even four versions of this proof. The argument proceeds somewhat as follows: In the realm of our experience, everything that we know is caused by something else. There cannot, however, be an infinite regress of causes, for if that were the case, the whole series of causes would never have begun. There must, therefore, be some uncaused cause (unmoved mover) or necessary being. And this we (or all people) call God. Anyone looking honestly at the evidence must reach this conclusion.

Another argument frequently employed, and found in Thomas as well, is the teleological argument. This focuses particularly upon the phenomenon of orderliness or apparent purpose in the universe. Thomas observes that various parts of the universe exhibit behavior which is adaptive or which helps bring about desirable ends. When such behavior is displayed by human beings, we recognize that

they have consciously willed and directed themselves toward that end. Some of the objects in our universe, however, cannot have done any purposive planning. Certainly rocks and atmosphere have not chosen to be as they are. Their ordering according to a purpose or design must come from somewhere else. Some intelligent being must, therefore, have ordered things in this desirable fashion. And this being, says Thomas, we call God.

Sometimes the whole universe is considered in the teleological argument. In such cases the universe is often compared to some mechanism. For example, if we were to find a watch lying on the sand, we would immediately recognize it as a watch, for all of its parts are ideally suited to the purpose of recording and displaying the time. We would certainly not say, "What a remarkable coincidence!" We would recognize that some able person(s) must have planned and brought about the amazing way in which each part fits in with the other parts. Similarly, the way in which each part of nature meshes so well with every other part cannot be dismissed as pure chance. Someone must have designed and constructed digestive systems, eyes, properly balanced atmospheres, and much else in our world. All of this argues for the existence of a supreme Designer, a wise and capable Creator. There must be a God.

These are two major arguments which have historically been employed in developing a natural theology. Two others which appear in the history of philosophy and theology, although perhaps less prominently than the cosmological and the teleological arguments, are the anthropological and the ontological.

The anthropological argument sees some of the aspects of human nature as a revelation of God. In Immanuel Kant's formulation (in the *Critique of Practical Reason*) it appears somewhat as follows: We all possess a moral impulse or a categorical imperative. Following this impulse by behaving morally is sometimes not well rewarded within this life, however. Being good does not always pay! Why should one be moral then? There must be some basis for ethics and morality, some sort of reward, which in turn involves several factors—immortality and an un-

dying soul, a coming time of judgment, and a God who establishes and supports values, and who rewards good and punishes evil. Thus, the moral order (as contrasted with the natural order) requires the existence of God.

All of these are empirical arguments. They proceed from observation of the universe by sense experience. The major *a priori* or rational argument is the ontological argument. This is a pure-thought type of argument. It does not require one to go outside one's own thinking. In the *Proslogion* Anselm formulated what is undoubtedly the most famous statement of the ontological argument: God is the greatest of all conceivable beings. Now a being which does not exist cannot be the greatest of all conceivable beings (for the nonexistent being of our conceptions would be greater if it had the *attribute* of existence). Therefore, by definition, God must exist.

There have been several responses to the ontological argument, many of which follow Kant's contention that, in effect, existence is not an attribute. A being that exists does not have some attribute or quality lacked by a similar being which does not exist. If I imagine a dollar and compare it with a real dollar, there is no difference in their essence, in what they are. The only difference is in whether they are. There is a logical difference between the sentence "God is good" (or loving, or holy, or just) and the sentence "God is." The former predicates some quality of God; the latter is a statement of existence. The point here is that existence is not a necessary predicate of the greatest of all conceivable beings. Such a being may exist—or it may not. In either case its essence is the same.

A Critique of Natural Theology

Despite natural theology's long and halloved history, its present effects do not seem overly impressive. If the arguments are valid and are adequately presented, any rational person should be convinced. Yet numerous philosophers have raised criticisms against the proofs, and many theologians have joined them. Why should any Christian be opposed to an effort to convince non-Christians of the truth of Christianity, or at least of the existence of God? The

answer is that use of these proofs may actually work to disadvantage if one's desire is to make the most effective presentation possible of the claims of Christ. If the proofs are inadequate, then the unbeliever, in rejecting the proofs, may also reject the Christian message, assuming that these proofs are the best grounds that can be offered for its acceptance.

Some of the problems with the arguments relate to assumptions which they contain. Thomas held as virtually an axiom, or a first truth known intuitively, that there cannot be an infinite regress of causes. But numerous persons today would disagree. A linear sequence of causes is not the only way to view causation. Some would question the necessity of asking about ultimate causation. Even if one does ask, however, there is the possibility of a circle of causes, with each cause within the closed system causing another. Similarly, the assumption that motion has to have a cause or explanation is not universally held today. Reality may well be dynamic rather than static.

There is also criticism of the procedure of extending the argument from the observable to that which goes beyond experience. In the case of the watch found in the sand, we have something which can be verified by sense experience. We can actually check with the company whose name appears (coincidentally?) on the watch, and inquire as to whether they manufactured it. Furthermore, we recognize that the watch is similar to other watches which we have seen before. Thus, we can extrapolate from past experience. In the case of the world, however, we do not have something which can be so easily verified by other sense experience. How many worlds have we observed being created? The assumption is that the universe is a member of a class of objects (including such things as watches and cameras) to which we can compare it, and thus we can make rational judgments about its design. This, however, must be established, not assumed, if the argument from the analogy of the watch is to succeed.

A further problem was alluded to earlier. Suppose one succeeds in proving, by a valid argument, that this world must have had a cause. One cannot, however, conclude from this that

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such a cause must be infinite. One can affirm only that there was a cause sufficient to account for the effect.¹ That one can lift a 100-pound weight does not warrant the conclusion that he can lift any more than that. Similarly, one cannot prove the existence of an infinite Creator from the existence of a finite universe. A further argument is needed to prove that the sufficient cause of the universe is the God of Christianity and, indeed, that the gods which constitute the conclusions of Thomas's several arguments are all the same being. If we are to have a natural theology, this must be argued on the basis of our human reason (without resort to some other authority).

The teleological argument has come in for special criticism. Since Charles Darwin, the usual appeal to the intricacy and beauty of the organic realm has not carried a great deal of persuasiveness for those who accept the theory of organic evolution. They believe changes in characteristics have arisen through chance variations called mutations. Some of these were advantageous and some were disadvantageous. In the struggle for survival occasioned by the fecundity of nature, any characteristic which enables a species to survive will be transmitted, and those branches of the species which lack this characteristic will tend to die out. Thus, the process of natural selection has produced the remarkable qualities which the teleological argument claims point to a design and a Designer. To be sure, this criticism of the teleological argument has its shortcomings (e.g., natural selection cannot explain away the inorganic adaptation observed in the universe), but the point is simply that those persons who accept evolution disagree with Thomas's assertion that there is a compelling and necessary character to the teleological argument.

The teleological argument also encounters the problem of what might be termed the "dys-teleological." If the argument is to be truly empirical, it must, of course, take into account the whole sweep of data. Now the argument pro-

ceeds on the basis of seeming indications of a wise and benevolent God controlling the creation. But there are some disturbing features of the world as well, natural catastrophes, diseases, and the cruelty and injustice inflicted by humans upon their fellows. If God is all-powerful and completely good, how can these things be? It is possible by emphasizing these features of the universe to construct an argument for either the nonexistence of God or the existence of a nongood God. Perhaps the teleological argument would then turn out to be an argument, not for the existence of God, but of the devil. When these considerations are taken into account, the teleological argument appears less than impressive.

Examination of Relevant Passages

We need now to examine more closely several key passages dealing with the issue of general revelation, and attempt to see exactly what they say. We will then draw the meanings of these several passages together into a coherent position on the subject.

Of the many nature psalms, all conveying the same basic meaning, Psalm 19 is perhaps the most explicit:

1. The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
 2. Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they display
knowledge.
 3. There is no speech or language
where their voice is not heard.
 4. Their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.
- [NIV]

These verses clearly assert that created nature tells forth God's glory.

Romans 1–2 is the other major passage dealing with general revelation. The particularly significant portion of chapter 1 is verses 18–32, which emphasizes the revelation of God in nature, whereas 2:14–16 seems especially to elaborate the general revelation in human personality. The theme of the epistle is enunciated in 1:16–17: in the gospel the righteousness of

1. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, section 11; Gordon H. Clark, *A Christian View of Men and Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), p. 29.

God is revealed from faith to faith. This righteousness of God in providing salvation, however, presupposes the wrath of God revealed from heaven against all human ungodliness and wickedness (v. 18). Paul is concerned to indicate how this wrath of God can be just. The answer is that the people on whom God's wrath is visited have the truth but suppress it by their unrighteousness (v. 18b). God has plainly shown them what can be known about him. This self-manifestation has continued since the creation of the world, being perceived in the things that God has made. God's invisible qualities of eternal power and divinity are clearly perceived, and consequently the wicked are without excuse (v. 20). They had known God but did not honor or thank him; rather, their minds were darkened and they became futile in their thinking (vv. 21–22).

The language of this passage is clear and strong. It is hard to interpret expressions like "what can be known about God" and "has shown" (v. 19) as pointing to anything other than an objectively knowable truth about God. Similarly, "although they knew God" (v. 21) and "the truth about God" (v. 25) indicate possession of genuine and accurate knowledge.

The second chapter continues the argument. The point here seems to be that all, Gentile and Jew alike, are condemned: the Jews because they fail to do what they know the law to require; the Gentiles because, even without having the law, they also know enough to make them responsible to God for their actions, yet they disobey. When they do by nature what the law requires, they are showing that what the law requires is written on their hearts (vv. 14–15). Thus, whether having heard the law or not, all people know God's truth.

Acts 14:15–17 also deals with the issue of general revelation. The people of Lystra had thought Paul and Barnabas were gods. They began to worship them. In attempting to divest the people of this idea, Paul pointed out that they should turn to the God who had made heaven and earth. Paul then observed that even while God had allowed the nations to walk in their own ways, he had left a witness of himself to all peoples, by doing good, providing rain

and fruitful seasons, and satisfying their hearts with food and gladness. The argument appears to relate to God's witness to himself in nature and (perhaps even more so) in history.

The final passage of particular significance for our purposes is Acts 17:22–31. Here Paul appears before a group of philosophers—the Athenian Philosophical Society as it were—on the Areopagus. Two points are of particular significance in Paul's presentation. First, Paul had noticed an altar "to an unknown god" in the Athenians' place of worship. He proceeded to proclaim this god to them. The god whom they sensed from their speculations, without having had special revelation, was the same God whom he knew from special manifestation. Second, he quoted an Athenian poet (v. 28). The significant item here is that a pagan poet had been able to come to a spiritual truth without God's special revelation.

General Revelation, But Without Natural Theology

When we begin to draw these several passages together, the position proposed by John Calvin appears most reasonable. Basically, this is the view that God has given us an objective, valid, rational revelation of himself in nature, history, and human personality. It is there for anyone who wants to observe it. General revelation is not something read into nature by those who know God on other grounds; it is already present, by the creation and continuing providence of God.

Paul asserts, however, that humankind does not clearly perceive God in the general revelation. Sin—we are thinking here of both the fall of the human race and our continuing evil acts—has a double effect upon the efficacy of the general revelation. On the one hand, sin has marred the witness of the general revelation. The created order is now under a curse (Gen. 3:17–19). Paul speaks in Romans 8:18–25 about the creation's having been subjected to futility (v. 20); it waits for its liberation (vv. 19, 21, 23). As a result, its witness is somewhat refracted. While it is still God's creation and thus continues to witness to him, it is not quite what it was when it came from the hand of the Mak-

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er. It is a spoiled creation. The testimony to the Maker is blurred.

The more serious effect of sin and the fall is upon humans themselves. Scripture speaks in several places of the blindness and darkness of human understanding. In Romans 1:21 Paul says that people knew God but rejected this knowledge, and blindness followed. In 2 Corinthians 4:4 Paul attributes this blindness to the work of Satan: "In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God." Although Paul is here referring to ability to see the light of the gospel, this blindness would doubtless affect the ability to see God in the creation as well.

General revelation evidently does not enable the unbeliever to come to the knowledge of God. Paul's statements about general revelation (Rom. 1–2) must be viewed in the light of what he says about sinful human beings (Rom. 3—all

God has given us an objective, valid, rational revelation of himself in nature, history, and human personality. It is there for anyone who wants to observe it.

are under sin's power; none is righteous) and the urgency of telling people about Christ (Rom. 10:14): "But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?" Thus in Paul's mind the possibility of constructing a full-scale natural theology seems seriously in question.

What is necessary, then, is what Calvin calls "the spectacles of faith." Calvin draws an analogy between the condition of the sinner and persons who have a sight problem.² When the latter look at an object, they see it but indistinctly. It is blurry to them. But when they put on spectacles, they can see clearly. Similarly,

2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book 1, chapter 6, section 1.

sinners do not recognize God in the creation. But when they put on the spectacles of faith, their sight improves, and they can see God in his handiwork. When we are exposed to the special revelation found in the gospel and respond, our mind is cleared through the effects of regeneration, enabling us to see distinctly what is there. We then are able to recognize in nature what we have more clearly seen in the special revelation.

It is worth noting that Scripture nowhere suggests that the evidences within the general revelation constitute a formal argument for the existence of God. There is an assertion that God is seen in his handiwork, but this is scarcely a formal proof of his existence. And it is notable that when Paul made his presentation and appeal to the Athenians, some believed, some rejected, and some expressed interest in hearing more on another occasion (Acts 17:32–34). Thus the conclusion that there is an objective general revelation, but that it cannot be used to construct a natural theology, seems to fit best the full data of Scripture on the subject.

General Revelation and Human Responsibility

But what of the condemnation of humankind, spoken of by Paul in Romans 1–2? If it is just for God to condemn human beings, and if they can become guilty without having known God's special revelation, does that mean that humans without special revelation can do what will enable them to avoid the condemnation of God? In Romans 2:14 Paul says: "When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law." Is Paul suggesting that they could have fulfilled the requirements of the law? But that is not possible even for those who have the law (see Gal. 3:10–11 as well as Rom. 3). Paul also makes clear in Galatians 3:23–24 that the law was not a means of justifying us, but a guide to make us aware of our sin and to lead us to faith by bringing us to Christ.

Now the internal law which the unbeliever has performs much the same function as does

the law which the Jew has. From the revelation in nature (Rom. 1), a person ought to conclude that there exists a powerful eternal God. And from the revelation within (Rom. 2), a person should realize that one does not live up to the standard. The content of the moral code held will vary in different cultural situations. All persons, however, have an inner compulsion that there is something to which they ought to adhere; and they should reach the conclusion that they are not fulfilling that standard. In other words, the knowledge of God which all humans have, if they do not suppress it, should bring them to the conclusion that they are guilty in relationship to God.

What if we were to throw ourselves upon the mercy of God, not knowing on what basis that mercy was provided? Would we not then in a sense be in the same situation as were the Old Testament believers? The doctrine of Christ and his atoning work had not been fully revealed to them. Yet they knew that there was provision for the forgiveness of sins, and that they could not be accepted on the merits of any works of their own. They had the form of the gospel without its full content. And they were saved. Now if the god known in nature is the same as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (as Paul seems to assert in Acts 17:23), then it would seem that persons who come to a belief in a single powerful God, who despair of any works-righteousness to please this holy God, and who throw themselves upon the mercy of this good God, would be accepted as were the Old Testament believers. The basis of acceptance would be the work of Jesus Christ, even though the persons involved are not conscious that this is how provision has been made for their salvation.³ We should note that the basis of salvation was apparently the same in the Old Testament as in the New. Salvation has always been appropriated by faith (Gal. 3:6-9); this salvation rests upon Christ's deliverance of us from the law (vv. 10-14, 19-29).

What inference are we to draw, then, from Paul's statement in Romans 2:1-16? Is it con-

ceivable that one can be saved by faith without having the special revelation? Paul seems to be laying open this theoretical possibility. Yet it is merely a theoretical possibility. That anyone actually experiences salvation without having special revelation is highly questionable. Paul suggests in Romans 3 that no one does. And in chapter 10 he urges the necessity of preaching the gospel (the special revelation) so that people may believe. Thus it is apparent that in failing to respond to the light of general revelation which they have, people are fully responsible, for they have truly known God, but have willfully suppressed that truth. Thus in effect the general revelation serves, as does the law, merely to make guilty, not to make righteous.

Implications of General Revelation

1. There is a common ground or a point of contact between the believer and the nonbeliever, or between the gospel and the thinking of the unbeliever. All persons have a knowledge of God. Although it may be suppressed to the extent of being unconscious or unrecognizable, it is nonetheless there, and there will be areas of sensitivity to which the message may be effectively directed as a starting point. It is therefore neither necessary nor desirable to fire the message at the hearer in an indiscriminate fashion.

2. There is a possibility of some knowledge of divine truth outside the special revelation. We may understand more about the specially revealed truth by examining the general revelation. This should be considered a supplement to, not a substitute for, special revelation. Sin's distortion of human understanding of the general revelation is greater the closer one gets to the relationship between God and humankind. Thus, sin produces relatively little obscuring effect upon the understanding of matters of physics, but a great deal with respect to matters of psychology and sociology. Yet it is at those places where the potential for distortion is greatest that the most complete understanding is possible.

3. God is just in condemning those who have never heard the gospel in the full and formal sense. No one is completely without

3. For a fuller statement of this possibility, see Millard J. Erickson, "Hope for Those Who Haven't Heard? Yes, but . . ." *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 2 (1975): 122-26.

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opportunity. All have known God; their not having effectually perceived him is a result of their having suppressed the truth. Thus all are responsible. This increases the motivation of missionary endeavor, for no one is innocent.

4. General revelation serves to explain the worldwide phenomenon of religion and religions. All persons are religious, because all have a type of knowledge of God. From this indistinct and perhaps even unrecognizable revelation have been constructed religions which unfortunately are distortions of the true biblical religion.

5. Since both creation and the gospel are intelligible and coherent revelations of God, there are harmony between the two and a mutual reinforcement of one by the other. The biblical revelation is not totally distinct from what is known of the natural realm.

6. Genuine knowledge and genuine morality in unbelieving (as well as believing) human beings are not their own accomplishment. Truth arrived at apart from special revelation is still God's truth. Knowledge and morality are not so much discovery as they are "uncovery" of the truth God has structured into his entire universe, both physical and moral.

FIVE

God's Particular Revelation

Chapter Objectives

At the conclusion of this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. To define and identify the need for God's special revelation to humans.
2. To identify three characteristics of special revelation, including personal, anthropic, and analogical.
3. To comprehend and restate the modes of God's special revelation through historical events, divine communication, and the presence of God in Christ.
4. To distinguish between propositional and personal revelation and identify the significance of each.
5. To affirm the importance of Scripture as God's special revelation to humanity.

Chapter Summary

People need a more personal understanding of God than is available through nature and general history. God has provided particular revelation of himself. The modalities that God uses include historical events, divine speech, and the incarnation of God in Christ. Theologians have disagreed as to whether special revelation is propositional or per-

sonal. The Bible provides both cognitive and affective knowledge of God.

Study Questions

- What is the nature of special revelation?
- Name and describe three characteristics of special revelation. What does each contribute to our understanding of special revelation?
- Through what three means has God chosen to reveal himself? How does each contribute to our understanding of special revelation?
- Why is the incarnation the most complete modality of special revelation?
- How would you compare and contrast personal and propositional revelation? Which is more important and why?

Chapter Outline

The Definition and Necessity of Special Revelation
The Style of Special Revelation
 The Personal Nature of Special Revelation
 The Anthropic Nature of Special Revelation
 The Analogical Nature of Special Revelation
The Modes of Special Revelation
 Historical Events
 Divine Speech
 The Incarnation
Special Revelation: Propositional or Personal?
Scripture as Revelation

The Definition and Necessity of Special Revelation

By special revelation we mean God's manifestation of himself to particular persons at definite times and places, enabling those persons to enter into a redemptive relationship with him. The Hebrew word for "reveal" is *galah*. A common Greek word for "reveal" is *apokalypsiō*. Both express the idea of uncovering what was concealed. The Greek *phaneroō*, which especially conveys the idea of manifesting, is also frequently used.

Why was special revelation necessary? The answer lies in the fact that humans had lost the relationship of favor which they had with God prior to the fall. It was necessary for them to come to know God in a fuller way if the conditions of fellowship were once again to be met. This knowledge had to go beyond the initial or general revelation which was still available to them, for now in addition to the natural limitation of human finiteness, there was also the moral limitation of human sinfulness. After the fall humankind was turned away from God and in rebellion against him; their understanding of spiritual matters was obscured. So their situation was a more complicated matter than had

originally been the case, and more complete instruction was consequently needed.

Note that the objective of special revelation was relational. The primary purpose of this revelation was not to enlarge the general scope of knowledge. The knowledge *about* was for the purpose of knowledge *of*. Information was to lead to acquaintance; consequently, the information revealed was often quite selective. For example, we know relatively little about Jesus from a biographical standpoint. We are told nothing about his appearance, his characteristic activities, his interests, or his tastes. Details such as are ordinarily found in biographies were omitted, because they are not significant for faith. The merely curious are not accommodated by the special revelation of God.

A further introductory word is needed regarding the relationship of special to general revelation. It is commonly assumed that special revelation is a postfall phenomenon necessitated by human sinfulness. It is frequently considered *remedial*.¹ Of course, it is not possible for us to know the exact status of the relationship between God and humankind before the

1. Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Biblical Idea of Revelation," in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1951), p. 74.

fall. We simply are not told much about it. Adam and Eve may have had such an unclouded consciousness of God that they were constantly aware of him everywhere, in their own internal experience and in their perception of nature. If so, this consciousness of him could be thought of as general revelation. There is no indication that such was the case, however. The account of God's looking for Adam and Eve in the Garden subsequent to their sin (Gen. 3:8) gives the impression that this was one in a series of special encounters which occurred. Further, the instructions given to humankind (Gen. 1:28) regarding their place and activity in the creation suggest a particular communication from Creator to creature; it does not seem that these instructions were merely read off from observation of the created order. If this is the case, special revelation antedated the fall.

When sin entered the human race, however, the need for special revelation became more acute. The direct presence of God, the most immediate and complete form of special revelation, was lost. In addition, God now had to speak regarding matters which were previously not of concern. The problems of sin, guilt, and depravity had to be resolved; means of atonement, redemption, and reconciliation had to be provided. And now sin diminished human comprehension of general revelation, thus lessening its efficacy. Therefore, special revelation had to become remedial with respect to both human knowledge of and relationship to God.

It is common to point out that general revelation is inferior to special revelation, both in the clarity of the treatment and the range of subjects considered. The insufficiency of general revelation therefore required the special revelation. The special revelation, however, requires the general revelation as well.² Without the general revelation, we would not possess the concepts regarding God which enable us to know and understand the God of the special revelation. Special revelation builds upon general revelation. The relationship between them is in some ways parallel to that which Immanuel Kant found between the cat-

egories of understanding and sense perception: "Concepts without percepts are empty; percepts without concepts are blind." The two

Special revelation was necessary because the human race had lost the relationship of favor which they had with God prior to the fall.

are harmonious. Only if the two are developed in isolation from one another does there seem to be any conflict between them. They have a common subject matter and perspective, yielding a harmonious and complementary understanding.

The Style of Special Revelation

The Personal Nature of Special Revelation

We need to ask about the style of special revelation, the nature or fashion of it. It is, first of all, personal. A personal God presents himself to persons. This is seen in a number of ways. God reveals himself by telling his name. Nothing is more personal than one's name. When Moses asked who he should say had sent him to the people of Israel, Jehovah responded by giving his name, "I AM WHO I AM [OR I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE]" (Exod. 3:14). Moreover, God entered into personal covenants with individuals (Noah, Abraham) and with the nation of Israel. The Psalms contain numerous testimonies of personal experience with God. And the goal of Paul's life was a personal acquaintance with God: "that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death" (Phil. 3:10).

The whole of Scripture is personal in nature. What we find is not a set of universal truths, like the axioms of Euclid in geometry, but rather a series of specific or particular statements about concrete occurrences and facts. Neither is Scripture a formal theological presentation, with arguments and counterarguments, such as one would find in a theological textbook. Nor

2. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

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are there systematized creedal statements. There are elements of creedal affirmation, but not a thoroughgoing intellectualization of Christian belief.

There is little information about matters not directly concerned with God's redemptive working and his relationship with humankind. Cosmology, for example, does not receive the scrutiny sometimes found in other religions. The Bible does not digress into matters of merely historical concern. It does not fill in gaps in the knowledge of the past. It does not concentrate on biographical details. What God reveals is primarily himself as a person, and especially those dimensions of himself that are particularly significant for faith.

The Anthropic Nature of Special Revelation

The God who is revealed is, however, a transcendent being. He lies outside our sensory experience. The Bible claims that God is unlimited in his knowledge and power; he is not subject to the confines of space and time. Consequently the revelation must involve a condescension on God's part (in the good sense of that word). We cannot reach up to investigate God and would not understand even if we could. So God has revealed himself by a revelation in *anthropic* form. This should not be thought of as anthropomorphism as such, but as simply a revelation coming in human language and human categories of thought and action.³

This anthropic character entails the use of human languages common at the time. Koine Greek was once believed to be a special, divinely created language since it is so different from classical Greek. We now know, of course, that it was simply the vernacular language. Idioms of the day appear in the Scripture. And it utilizes ordinary ways of describing nature, of measuring time and distance, and so on.⁴

The revelation is also anthropic in the sense that it often came in forms which are part of ordinary, everyday human experience. Dreams,

for example, were a frequent means used by God to reveal himself. Yet few experiences are as common to humankind as are dreams. It was not the particular type of experience employed, but rather the unique content supplied and the unique utilization of this experience which distinguished revelation from the ordinary and natural. The same is true of the incarnation. When God came to earth, he used the modality of an ordinary human being. Sometimes artists have tried to set Jesus' humanity apart from that of other persons by portraying him with a halo or some other visible sign of distinctiveness. But apparently Jesus carried no visible sign of distinctiveness. Most persons took him for an ordinary, average human being, the son of Joseph the carpenter. He came as a human, not an angel or a being clearly recognizable as a god.

To be sure, there were revelations which clearly broke with typical experience. The voice of the Father speaking from heaven (John 12:28) was one of these. The miracles were striking in their effect. Yet much of the revelation was in the form of natural occurrences.

The Analogical Nature of Special Revelation

God draws upon those elements in our universe of knowledge that can serve as a likeness of or partially convey the truth in the divine realm. His revelation employs analogical language. When a term is used analogically in two clauses, there is always at least some univocal element (i.e., the meaning of the term is in at least one sense the same in both clauses), but there are differences as well, as when we say that Jeff runs the 100-yard dash and that the Chicago and Northwestern commuter train runs between Chicago and Elmhurst.

Whenever God has revealed himself, he has selected elements which are univocal in his universe and ours. Langdon Gilkey has pointed out that, in the orthodox view, when we say that God acts, we have the very same meaning in mind as when we say that a human acts.⁵ When

3. Bernard Ramm, *Special Revelation and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), pp. 36-37.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

5. Langdon Gilkey, "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language," *Journal of Religion* 41 (1961): 196.

we say that God stopped the Jordan River, we have the very same thing in mind as when we say that the Army Corps of Engineers stopped a river from flowing. The acts of God are occurrences within a space-time universe. The death of Jesus was an event observably the same as that of James, John, Peter, Andrew, or any other human. And when the Bible says that God loves, it means just the same sort of qualities that we refer to when we speak of humans loving (in the sense of *agapē*): a steadfast, unselfish concern for the welfare of the other person.

As we are here using the term *analogical*, we mean "qualitatively the same"; in other words, the difference is one of degree rather than of kind or genus. God is powerful as humans are powerful, but much more so. When we say that God knows, we have the same meaning in mind as when we say that humans know—but while humans know something, God knows everything. We cannot grasp how much more of each of these qualities God possesses, or what it means to say that God has our knowledge amplified to an infinite extent. Having observed only finite forms, we find it impossible to grasp infinite concepts. In this sense, God always remains *incomprehensible*. It is not that we do not have knowledge of him, and genuine knowledge at that. Rather, the shortcoming lies in our inability to encompass him within our knowledge. Although *what* we know of him is the same as his knowledge of himself, the degree of our knowledge is much less.

What makes this analogical knowledge possible is that it is God who selects the components which he uses. Unlike human beings, God is knowledgeable of both sides of the analogy. If humans by their own natural unaided reason seek to understand God by constructing an analogy involving God and humankind, the result is always some sort of conundrum, for they are in effect working with an equation containing two unknowns. For instance, if one were to argue that God's love is to our love what God's being is to our being, it would be tantamount to saying $x/2 = y/5$. Not knowing the relationship between God's being (or nature, or essence) and that of humanity, we cannot construct a meaningful analogy. God, on the other

hand, knowing all things completely, therefore knows which elements of human knowledge and experience are sufficiently similar to the divine truth that they can be used to help construct a meaningful analogy.

The Modes of Special Revelation

We now turn to examine the actual modes or means or modalities by which God has revealed himself: historical events, divine speech, and the incarnation.

Historical Events

The Bible emphasizes a whole series of divine events by which God has made himself known. From the perspective of the people of Israel, a primary event was the call of Abraham, to whom they looked as the father of their nation. The Lord's provision of Isaac as an heir, under most unlikely conditions, was another significant divine act. God's provision in the midst of the famine during the time of Joseph benefited not only the descendants of Abraham, but the other residents of the whole area as well. Probably the major event for Israel, still celebrated by Jews, was the deliverance from Egypt through the series of plagues culminating in the Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea. The conquest of the Promised Land, the return from captivity, even the captivity itself, were God's self-manifestation. The birth of Jesus, his wondrous acts, his death and particularly his resurrection, were God at work. In the creation and expansion of the church God was also at work bringing his people into being.

All of these are acts of God and thus revelations of his nature. Those which we have cited here are spectacular or miraculous. The acts of God are not limited to such events, however. God has been at work both in these greater occurrences and also in the more mundane events of the history of his people.

Divine Speech

The second major modality of revelation is God's speech. A very common expression in the Bible and especially in the Old Testament is the statement, "The word of the LORD came to me,

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saying, . . ." (e.g., Jer. 18:1; Ezek. 12:1, 8, 17, 21, 26; Hos. 1:1; Joel 1:1; Amos 3:1). The prophets had a consciousness that their message was not of their own creation, but was from God. In writing the Book of Revelation, John was attempting to communicate the message which God had given to him. The writer to the Hebrews noted that God had spoken often in times past, and now had particularly spoken through his Son (Heb. 1:1-2). God does not merely demonstrate through his actions what he is like; he also speaks, telling us about himself, his plans, his will.

We may be inclined to think that God's speech is really not a modality at all. It seems so direct. Yet we should note that it is necessarily a modality, for God is spiritual and thus does not have bodily parts. Since speech requires certain bodily parts, it cannot be an unmediated communication from God. Furthermore, it always comes in some human language, the language of the prophet or apostle, whether that is Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek. Yet God presumably does not have a language in which he speaks. Thus, the use of language is an indication that God's speech is mediated rather than direct revelation.⁶

Divine speech may take several forms.⁷ It may be an audible speaking. It may be a silent, inward hearing of God's message, like the subvocal process in which slow readers engage (they "hear" in their heads the words they are reading). It is likely that in many cases this was the mode used. Often this inaudible speech was part of another modality, such as a dream or vision. In these instances, the prophet heard the Lord speaking to him, but presumably anyone else present at the time heard nothing. Finally, there is "concurrent" inspiration—revelation and inspiration have merged into one. As the authors of Scripture wrote, God placed within their minds the thoughts that he wished communicated. This was not a case of the message's already having been revealed, and the Holy Spirit's merely bringing these matters to remembrance, or directing the writers to thoughts with which they were already familiar.

6. Ramm, *Special Revelation*, p. 54.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

God created thoughts in the minds of the writers as they wrote. The writers could have been either conscious or unconscious of what was happening. In the latter case, they may have felt that the ideas were simply dawning upon them. Although Paul occasionally indicates that he "thinks" he has the Spirit of God (e.g., 1 Cor. 7:40), there are other times when he is more definite that he has received his message from the Lord (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:23). There are also some cases, such as the letter to Philemon, where Paul does not indicate that he is conscious of God's directing his writing, although God was doubtless doing so.

Quite frequently, the spoken word of God was the interpretation of an event. While this event was usually something past or contemporary with the writing, there were times when the interpretation preceded the event, as in predictive prophecy. The contention being advanced here, despite some strong recent disagreements, is that not only the event but also the interpretation was revelation from God; the interpretation was not merely the insight or product of the reflection of a biblical writer. Without this specially revealed interpretation, the event itself would often be opaque and thus quite mute. It would be subject to various interpretations, and the explanation given by the Scripture might then be merely an erroneous human speculation. Take such a central event as the death of Jesus. If we knew that this event had occurred, but its meaning had not been divinely revealed to us, we might understand it in widely differing ways, or find it simply a puzzle. It might be regarded as a defeat, which is the position the disciples apparently held immediately after Jesus' death. Or it might be considered a sort of moral victory, a martyr dying for his principles. Without the revealed word of explanation we could only guess that Jesus' death was an atoning sacrifice. We must conclude that the interpretation of certain events is a modality of revelation as genuine as that of God's acts in history.

The Incarnation

The most complete modality of revelation is the incarnation. The contention here is that

Jesus' life and speech were a special revelation of God. We may again be inclined to think that this is not a modality at all, that God was directly present in unmediated form. But since God does not have human form, Christ's humanity must represent a mediation of the divine revelation. This is not to say that his humanity concealed or obscured the revelation. Rather, it was the means by which the revelation of deity was conveyed. Scripture specifically states that God has spoken through or in his Son. Hebrews 1:1-2 contrasts this with the earlier forms of revelation, and indicates that the incarnation is superior.

Here revelation as event most fully occurs. The pinnacle of the acts of God is to be found in the life of Jesus. The miracles, his death, and the resurrection are redemptive history in its most condensed and concentrated form. Here too is revelation as divine speech, for the messages of Jesus surpassed those of the prophets and apostles. Jesus even dared to place his message over against what was written in the Scriptures, not as contradicting, but as going beyond or fulfilling them (Matt. 5:17). When the prophets spoke, they were bearers of a message from God and about God. When Jesus spoke, it was God himself speaking.

Revelation also took place in the very perfection of Jesus' character. There was a godlikeness about him which could be discerned. Here God was actually living among humans and displaying his attributes to them. Jesus' actions, attitudes, and affections did not merely mirror the Father. They showed that God was actually living on earth. The centurion at Calvary, who presumably had seen many persons die of crucifixion, apparently saw something different in Jesus, which caused him to exclaim, "Truly this was the Son of God!" (Matt. 27:54). Peter, after the miraculous catch of fish, fell on his knees and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:8). These were people who found in Jesus a revelation of the Father.

Here revelation as act and revelation as word come together. 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. John could make the

amazing statement, "That which was from the beginning . . . we have heard . . . we have seen with our eyes . . . we have looked upon and touched with our hands" (1 John 1:1). And Jesus could say, "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

Special Revelation: Propositional or Personal?

It is necessary at this point to speak briefly of neoorthodoxy, which views revelation not as the communication of information (or propositions), but as God's presentation of himself. According to neoorthodoxy, God does not tell us anything about himself; rather, we come to know him through encounter with him. Revelation, then, is not propositional; it is personal. To a large extent, our view of faith will reflect our understanding of revelation.⁸ If we regard revelation as the communication of propositional truths, we will view faith as a response of assent, of believing those truths. If, on the other hand, we regard revelation as the presentation of a person, we will correspondingly view faith as an act of personal trust or commitment. According to this latter view, theology is not a set of doctrines that have been revealed. It is the church's attempt to express what it has found in God's revelation of himself.

The neoorthodox approach presents at least a couple of problems. The first is to establish a basis upon which faith can rest. Advocates of both views—that revelation is personal, and that it is propositional—recognize the need for some basis of faith. The question is whether the nonpropositional view of revelation provides a sufficient basis for faith. Can the advocates of this view be sure that what they encounter is really the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? In order to trust someone, we must have some knowledge about that person.

That there must be belief before there can be trust is evident from our own experiences. Suppose I have to make a bank deposit in cash, but

8. John Baillie, *The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), pp. 85-108.

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am unable to do so in person. I must ask someone else to do this for me. But whom will I ask? To whom will I entrust myself, or at least a portion of my material possessions? I will trust or commit myself to someone whom I believe to be honest. Believing in that person depends upon believing something *about* him. I will probably select a good friend whose integrity I do not question. Similarly, how can we trust that it is the Christian God whom we are encountering unless he tells us who he is and what he is like?

Another problem is the problem of theology itself. Those who maintain that revelation is personal are nevertheless very concerned about

Special revelation is both personal and propositional: God reveals himself by telling us something about himself.

correctly defining belief, or stating correct doctrinal understandings, while of course insisting that faith is not belief in doctrinal propositions. Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, for example, argued over such issues as the nature and status of the image of God in humankind, as well as the virgin birth and the empty tomb. Presumably, each felt he was trying to establish the true doctrine in these areas. But how are these doctrinal propositions related to, or derived from, the nonpropositional revelation? There is a problem here.

This is not to suggest that there cannot be a connection between nonpropositional revelation and propositions of truth, but that this connection has not been adequately explicated by neoorthodoxy. The problem derives from making a disjunction between propositional and personal revelation. Revelation is not *either* personal or propositional; it is *both/and*. What God primarily does is to reveal *himself*, but he does so at least in part by telling us something *about* himself.

Scripture as Revelation

If revelation includes propositional truths, then it is of such a nature that it can be pre-

served. It can be written down or *inscripturated*. And this written record, to the extent that it is an accurate reproduction of the original revelation, is also by derivation revelation and entitled to be called that.

The definition of revelation becomes a factor here. If revelation is defined as only the actual occurrence, the process or the *revealing*, then the Bible is not revelation. Revelation is something that occurred long ago. If, however, it is also the product, the result or the *revealed*, then the Bible may also be termed revelation.

A larger issue is the nature of revelation. If revelation is propositional and hence can be preserved, then the question of whether the Bible is in this derivative sense a revelation is a question of whether it is inspired, of whether it indeed preserves what was revealed. This will be the subject of the next chapter.

We should also note that this revelation is *progressive*. Some care needs to be exercised in the use of this term, for it has sometimes been used to represent the idea of a gradual evolutionary development. This is not what we have in mind. That approach, which flourished under liberal scholarship, regarded sections of the Old Testament as virtually obsolete and false; they were only very imperfect approximations of the truth. The idea which we are here suggesting, however, is that later revelation builds upon earlier revelation. It is complementary and supplementary to it, not contradictory. Note the way in which Jesus elevated the teachings of the law by extending, expanding, and internalizing them. He frequently prefaced his instruction with the expression, "You have heard . . . but I say to you." In a similar fashion, the author of Hebrews points out that God, who in the past spoke by the prophets, has in these last days spoken by a Son, who reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature (Heb. 1:1-3). The revelation of God is a process even as is redemption, and a process which moved to an ever more complete form.⁹

We have seen that God has taken the initiative to make himself known to us in a more complete way than general revelation, and has

9. Ramm, *Special Revelation*, pp. 161-87.

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done so in a fashion appropriate to our understanding. This means that lost and sinful humans can come to know God and then go on to grow in understanding of what he expects of and promises to his children. Because this reve-

lation includes both the personal presence of God and informational truth, we are able to identify God, to understand something about him, and to point others to him.

The Preservation of the Revelation: Inspiration

Chapter Objectives

At the conclusion of this chapter, you should be able to achieve the following:

1. To define inspiration of Scripture and the relation of the Holy Spirit to that process.
2. To review the ways in which Scripture indicates the nature of its own inspiration.
3. To compare and contrast theories of inspiration.
4. To measure the extent of inspiration in the Scriptures.
5. To analyze the intensiveness of inspiration within Scripture.
6. To construct a model of inspiration that integrates both the didactic material and the phenomena of Scripture.

Chapter Summary

One of the topics that is hotly debated today is the degree to which Scripture is inspired by God. Inspiration is necessary because it confirms the nature of God's special revelation through Scripture. An important part of biblical

theology is the formulation of a theory regarding the extent to which the Bible is inspired. A variety of theories are scrutinized and evaluated. While in the proper sense inspiration is of the writers, in the derivative sense we may also say that the writings themselves are inspired.

Study Questions

- Why is inspiration so important to the authority of Scripture?
- In what ways does the Bible witness to its divine origins?
- Compare and contrast the five theories of inspiration.
- How would you summarize the characteristics that should be included in an appropriate model of inspiration?

Chapter Outline

Definition of Inspiration
The Fact of Inspiration
Theories of Inspiration
The Extent of Inspiration
The Intensiveness of Inspiration
A Model of Inspiration

Definition of Inspiration

By the inspiration of Scripture we mean that supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit upon the Scripture writers which rendered their writings an accurate record of the revelation or which resulted in what they wrote actually being the Word of God.

If, as we have contended in the preceding chapter, revelation is God's communication to humankind of truth that they need to know in order to relate properly to him, then it should be apparent why inspiration also is necessary. While revelation benefits those who immediately receive it, that value might well be lost for those beyond the immediate circle of revelation. Since God does not repeat his revelation for each person, there has to be some way to preserve it. It could, of course, be preserved by oral retelling or by being fixed into a definite tradition, and this certainly was operative in the period which sometimes intervened between the occurrence of the initial revelation and its inscripturation. Certain problems attach to this, however, when long periods of time are involved, for oral tradition is subject to erosion and modification. Anyone who has ever played the parlor game in which the first person whispers a story to the second, who

whispers it to the next person, and so on until the story has been retold to all the players, has a good idea of how easily oral tradition can be corrupted. And so does anyone who has observed the way in which rumors spread. While the unusual tenacity of the Oriental memory and the storyteller's determination to be faithful to the tradition should not be underestimated, it is apparent that something more than oral retelling is needed.

While revelation is the communication of divine truth from God to humankind, inspiration relates more to the relaying of that truth from the first recipient(s) of it to other persons, whether then or later. Thus, revelation might be thought of as a vertical action, and inspiration as a horizontal matter. We should note that although revelation and inspiration are usually thought of together, it is possible to have one without the other. There were cases of inspiration without revelation. The Holy Spirit in some instances moved Scripture writers to record the words of unbelievers, words which certainly were not divinely revealed. Some Scripture writers may well have written down matters which were not specially revealed to them, but were pieces of information readily available to anyone who would make the inquiry. The genealogies, both in the Old Testament and in the

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New Testament (the listing of Jesus' lineage), may well be of this character. There also was revelation without inspiration: instances of revelation which went unrecorded because the Holy Spirit did not move anyone to write them down. John makes this very point in John 21:25, when he says that if everything that Jesus did were written down, "I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." If, as we asserted in the previous chapter, all of Jesus' words and actions were the words and actions of God, the Spirit was apparently very selective in what he inspired the biblical authors to report.

The Fact of Inspiration

We begin by noting that throughout Scripture there is the assumption or even the claim of its divine origin, or of its equivalency with the actual speech of the Lord. This point is sometimes spurned on the grounds of its being circular. There is a dilemma which any theology (or any other system of thought for that matter) faces when dealing with its basic authority. Either it bases its starting point upon itself, in which case it is guilty of circularity, or it bases itself upon some foundation other than that upon which it bases all its other articles, in which case it is guilty of inconsistency. Note, however, that we are guilty of circularity only if the testimony of Scripture is taken as settling the matter. But surely the Scripture writer's own claim should be taken into consideration as part of the process of formulating our hypothesis of the nature of Scripture. Other considerations will of course be consulted when we evaluate the hypothesis. What we have here is somewhat like a court trial. Defendants are permitted to testify in their own behalf. This testimony is not taken as settling the matter, however; that is, after hearing the defendant's plea of "not guilty," the judge will not immediately rule, "I find the defendant not guilty." Additional testimony is called for and evaluated, in order to determine credibility. But the defendant's testimony is admitted.

One other item needs to be observed in answering the charge of circularity. In consulting

the Bible to determine the authors' view of Scripture, one is not necessarily presupposing its inspiration. One may consult it merely as a historical document which informs us that its authors considered it the inspired Word of God. In this case one is not viewing the authority of the Bible as its own starting point. There is circularity only if one begins with the assumption of the inspiration of the Bible, and then uses that assumption as a guarantee of the truth of the Bible's claim to be inspired. One is not guilty of circularity if the Scripture writers' claim is not presented as final proof. It is permissible to use the Bible as a historical document and to allow it to plead its own case.

There are several ways in which the Bible gives witness of its divine origin. One of these is the view of New Testament authors regarding the Scriptures of their day, which we would today term the Old Testament. Second Peter 1:20-21 is a cardinal instance: "First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." Here Peter is affirming that the prophecies of the Old Testament were not produced by the will or decision of a human being. Rather they were moved by the

Throughout Scripture there is the assumption of its equivalency with the actual speech of the Lord.

Spirit of God. The impetus which led to the writing was from the Holy Spirit.

A second reference is that of Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16: "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." This is part of a passage in which Paul is exhorting Timothy to continue in the teachings which he has received. Paul assumes Timothy is familiar with the "sacred writings" (v. 15) and urges him to continue in them since they are divinely inspired (or more correctly, "God-spined" or "God-breathed"). The impression here is that

they are divinely produced, just as God breathed the breath of life into humankind (Gen. 2:7). They therefore carry value for building up believers into maturity so that they may be "complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:17).

When we turn to the early church's preaching, we find a similar understanding of the Old Testament. In Acts 1:16 Peter says, "Brethren, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David. . .," and then proceeds to quote from Psalms 69:25 and 109:8 regarding the fate of Judas. It is notable here that Peter not only regards the words of David as authoritative, but actually affirms that God spoke by the mouth of David. David was God's "mouthpiece," so to speak. The same thought, that God spoke by the mouth of the prophets, is found in Acts 3:18, 21, and 4:25. The earliest preaching of the church, then, identifies "it is written in the Scripture" with "God has said it."

This fits well with the testimony which the prophets themselves gave. Again and again they declared, "Thus says the LORD." Jeremiah said: "These are the words which the LORD spoke concerning Israel and Judah" (30:4). Amos declared: "Hear this word that the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel" (3:1). And David said: "The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me, his word is upon my tongue" (2 Sam. 23:2). Statements like these, which appear over and over again in the prophets, indicate that they were aware of being "moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21).

Finally, we note the position that our Lord himself held regarding the Old Testament writings. In part, we may infer this from the way he related to the view of the Bible held by his dialogical opponents, the Pharisees. (This was also the view held by most Jews of that day.) He never challenged or corrected their view of the nature of the Scripture. He merely disagreed with them regarding the interpretations which they had placed upon the Bible, or the traditions which they had added to the content of the Scriptures themselves. In his discussions and disputes with his opponents, he repeatedly quoted from the Scriptures. In his threefold

temptation, he responded to Satan each time with a quotation from the Old Testament. He spoke of the authority and permanence of the Scripture: "scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35); "till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Matt. 5:18). Two objects were regarded as sacred in the Israel of Jesus' day, the temple and the Scriptures. He did not hesitate to point out the transiency of the former, for not one stone would be left upon another (Matt. 24:2). There is, therefore, a striking contrast between his attitude toward the Scriptures and his attitude toward the temple.¹ Clearly, he regarded the Scriptures as inspired, authoritative, and indestructible.

Theories of Inspiration

We may conclude from the foregoing that the uniform testimony of the Scripture writers is that the Bible has originated from God and is his message to humanity. This is the fact of the Bible's inspiration; we must now ask what it means. It is here that differences in view begin to occur.

1. The intuition theory makes inspiration largely a high degree of insight. Inspiration is the functioning of a special gift, perhaps almost like an artistic ability, but nonetheless a natural endowment, a permanent possession. The Scripture writers were religious geniuses. Yet their inspiration was essentially no different from that of other great religious and philosophical thinkers, such as Plato, Buddha, and others. The Bible then is great religious literature reflecting the spiritual experiences of the Hebrew people.²

2. The illumination theory maintains that there was an influence of the Holy Spirit upon the authors of Scripture, but that it involved only a heightening of their normal powers, an increased sensitivity and perceptivity with regard to spiritual matters. It was not unlike the effect of

1. Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), p. 441.

2. James Martineau, *A Study of Religion: Its Sources and Contents* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1889), pp. 168-71.

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stimulants sometimes taken by students to heighten their awareness or amplify the mental processes. Thus, the work of inspiration is different only in degree, not in kind, from the Spirit's work with all believers. The result of this type of inspiration is increased ability to discover truth.³

3. The dynamic theory emphasizes the combination of divine and human elements in the process of inspiration and of the writing of the Bible. The work of the Spirit of God was in directing the writer to the thoughts or concepts he should have, and allowing the writer's own distinctive personality to come into play in the choice of words and expressions. Thus, the person writing gave expression to the divinely directed thoughts in a way that was uniquely characteristic of him.⁴

4. The verbal theory maintains that the influence of the Holy Spirit extended beyond the direction of thoughts to the selection of words used to convey the message. The work of the Holy Spirit was so intense that each word is the exact word which God wants used at that point to express the message. Ordinarily, great care is taken to insist that this is not dictation, however.⁵

5. The dictation theory is the teaching that God actually dictated the Bible to the writers. Passages where the Spirit is depicted as telling the author precisely what to write are regarded as applying to the entire Bible. This means that there is no distinctive style attributable to the different authors of the biblical books. The number of people who actually hold this view is considerably smaller than the number to whom it is ascribed—most adherents of the verbal view do take great pains to dissociate themselves from the dictation theorists. There are, however, some who accept this designation of themselves.⁶

3. Auguste Sabatier, *Outlines of a Philosophy of Religion* (New York: James Pott, 1916), p. 90.

4. Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1907), pp. 211–22.

5. J. I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), p. 79.

6. John R. Rice, *Our God-breathed Book—The Bible* (Murfreesboro, Tenn.: Sword of the Lord, 1969), pp. 192, 261–80. Rice accepts the term *dictation* but disavows the expression *mechanical dictation*.

The Extent of Inspiration

We must now pose the question of the extent of inspiration, or, to put it somewhat differently, of what is inspired. Is the whole of the Bible to be thus regarded, or only certain portions?

One easy solution would be to cite 2 Timothy 3:16, "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable. . . ." There is a problem, however, in that there is an ambiguity in the first part of this verse. The Greek text may be translated, "All scripture is God-breathed and profitable," or, "All God-breathed scripture is also profitable." If the former rendering is adopted, the inspiration of all Scripture would be affirmed. If the latter is followed, the sentence would emphasize the profitability of all God-breathed Scripture. From the context, however, one cannot really determine what Paul intended to convey. (What does appear from the context is that Paul had in mind a definite body of writings known to Timothy from his childhood. It is unlikely that Paul was attempting to make a distinction between inspired and uninspired Scripture within this body of writings.)

Can we find additional help on this issue in two other texts previously cited—2 Peter 1:19–21 and John 10:34–35? At first glance this seems not to succeed, since the former refers specifically to prophecy and the latter to the law. It appears from Luke 24:25–27, however, that "Moses and all the prophets" equals "all the scriptures," and from Luke 24:44–45 that "the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms" equals "the scriptures." In John 10:34, when Jesus refers to the law, he actually quotes from Psalm 82:6. And Peter refers to the "prophetic word" (2 Peter 1:19) and every "prophecy of scripture" (v. 20) in such a way as to lead us to believe that the whole of the collection of writings commonly accepted in that day is in view. It appears that "law" and "prophecy" were often used to designate the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Can this understanding of inspiration be extended to cover the books of the New Testament as well? This problem is not so easily solved. We do have some indications of belief

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that what these writers were doing was of the same nature as what the writers of the Old Testament had done. One explicit reference of a New Testament author to the writings of another is 2 Peter 3:16. Here Peter refers to the writings of Paul and alludes to the difficulty of understanding some things in them, which, he says, "the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures." Thus Peter groups Paul's writings with other books, presumably familiar to the readers, which were regarded as Scripture. Moreover,

Jesus and the New Testament writers regarded every word, syllable, and punctuation mark of the Old Testament as significant.

John identified what he was writing with God's word: "We are of God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and he who is not of God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error" (1 John 4:6). He makes his own words the standard of measurement. Paul wrote that the gospel received by the Thesalonians had come by the Holy Spirit (1 Thess. 1:5), and had been accepted by them as what it really was, the word of God (2:13). It should be clear that these New Testament writers regarded the Scripture as being extended from the prophetic period to their own time.

The Intensiveness of Inspiration

We must next ask about the matter of the intensiveness of the inspiration. Was it only a general influence, perhaps involving the suggesting of concepts, or was it so thoroughgoing that even the choice of words reflects God's intention?

When we examine the New Testament writers' use of the Old Testament, an interesting feature appears. We sometimes find indication that they regarded every word, syllable, and punctuation mark as significant. At times their whole argument rests upon a fine point in the text that they are consulting. For example, in Matthew 22:32, Jesus' quotation of Exodus 3:6,

"I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob," the point depends upon the tense of the verb, which leads him to draw the conclusion, "He is not God of the dead, but of the living." In verse 44, the point of the argument hangs upon a possessive suffix, "The Lord said to my Lord." In this case Jesus expressly says that when David spoke these words, he was "inspired by the Spirit." Apparently David was led by the Spirit to use the particular forms he did, even to the point of a detail as minute as the possessive in "my Lord."

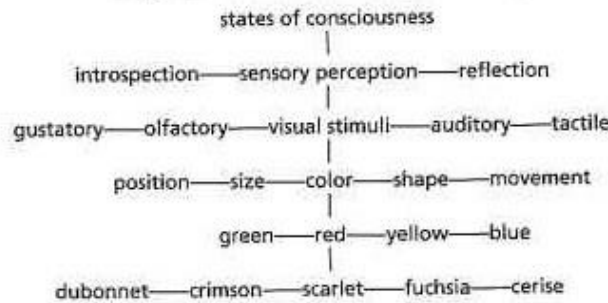
One other argument regarding the intensiveness of inspiration is the fact that New Testament writers attribute to God statements in the Old Testament which in the original form are not specifically ascribed to him. A notable example is Matthew 19:4-5, where Jesus asks, "Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said . . .?" He then proceeds to quote from Genesis 2:24. In the original, however, the statement is not attributed to God. It is just a comment on the event of the creation of woman from man. But the words of Genesis are cited by Jesus as being what God said; Jesus even puts these words in the form of a direct quotation. Evidently, in the mind of Jesus anything that the Old Testament said was what God said.

In addition to these specific references, we should note that Jesus often introduced his quotations of the Old Testament with the formula, "It is written." Whatever the Bible said he identified as having the force of God's own speech. It was authoritative. This, of course, does not speak specifically to the question of whether the inspiring work of the Holy Spirit extended to the choice of words, but it does indicate a thoroughgoing identification of the Old Testament writings with the word of God. One would infer that the inspiration of the Scripture was so intense that it extended even to the choice of particular words.

A Model of Inspiration

When formulating a theory of inspiration, it is necessary to recognize the two basic methods which may be employed. The first method is a

Figure 1. Levels of Specificity



didactic approach which places its primary emphasis upon what the biblical writers actually say about the Bible and the view of it which is revealed in the way they use it. This method is represented in the writings of Benjamin B. Warfield and the "Princeton School" of theology.⁷ The second approach is to look at what the Bible is like, to analyze the various ways in which the writers report events, to compare parallel accounts. This characterizes the method of Dewey Beegle, who developed a theory of inspiration based primarily upon the phenomena of Scripture.⁸

If we are to maintain both methods, it will be necessary to find some way of integrating them. We will give primary consideration to the didactic material. This means concluding that inspiration extends even to the choice of words (i.e., inspiration is verbal). We will define just what that choice of words means, however, by examining the phenomena.

We suggest that what the Spirit may do is to direct the thoughts of the Scripture writer. The direction effected by the Spirit, however, is quite precise. God being omniscient, it is not gratuitous to assume that his thoughts are precise, more so than ours. This being the case, there will be within the vocabulary of the writer one word that will most aptly communicate the thought God is conveying (although that word

in itself may be inadequate). By creating the thought and stimulating the understanding of the Scripture writer, the Spirit will lead him in effect to use one particular word rather than any other.

While God directs the writer to use particular words (precision) to express the idea, the idea itself may be quite general or quite specific. This is what linguist Kenneth Pike has called the dimension of magnification.⁹ One cannot expect that the Bible will always display maximum magnification or a great deal of detail. It will, rather, express just that degree of detail or specificity that God intends, and, on that level of magnification, just that concept which he intends. This accounts for the fact that sometimes Scripture is not so detailed as we might expect or desire. Indeed, there have been occasions when the Holy Spirit, to serve the purpose of a new situation, moved a Scripture writer to reexpress a concept on a more specific level than its original form.

Figure 1 will help to illustrate what we have in mind. This figure depicts various levels of specificity or detail or magnification. The dimension of specificity involves vertical movement on the chart. Suppose the concept under consideration is the color red. This idea has a particular degree of specificity, no more and no less. It is neither more specific (e.g., scarlet) nor less specific (e.g., color). It occurs in a particular location on the chart—both vertically on the generality-specificity axis, and horizontally on

7. Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Biblical Idea of Inspiration," in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1951), pp. 131-65.

8. Dewey Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), pp. 175-97.

9. Kenneth L. Pike, "Language and Meaning: Strange Dimensions of Truth," *Christianity Today*, 8 May 1961, p. 28.

its given level of specificity (i.e., red, versus yellow or green). In another instance one may have either more or less detail in a picture (a higher or lower degree of magnification, in Pike's terminology), and a sharper or fuzzier focus. At a less precise focus, of course, the detail will become blurry or even get lost. These two dimensions (detail and focus) should not be confused, however. If the idea is sufficiently precise, then only one word in a given language, or in the vocabulary of a given writer, will adequately communicate and express the meaning.

It is our contention here that inspiration involved God's directing the thoughts of the writers, so that they were precisely the thoughts that he wished expressed. At times these thoughts were very specific; at other times they were more general. It is also our contention that inspiration was verbal, extending even to the choice of words. It was not merely verbal, however, for at times thoughts may be more precise than the words available. Such, for example, was probably the case with John's vision on Patmos, which produced the Book of Revelation.

At this point the objection is generally raised that inspiration extending to the choice of words necessarily becomes dictation. Answering this charge will force us to theorize regarding the process of inspiration. Here we must note that the Scripture writers, at least in every case where we know their identity, were not novices in the faith. They had known God, learned from him, and practiced the spiritual life for some time. God therefore had been at work in their lives for some time, preparing them through a wide variety of family, social, educational, and religious experiences for the task they were to perform. In fact, Paul suggests that he was chosen even before his birth (Gal. 1:15). And through all of the experiences of, say, the fisherman Peter, God was creating the kind of personality and worldview that would later be employed in the writing of Scripture. Luke's vocabulary resulted from his education and his whole broad sweep of experience; in all of this God had been at work preparing him for his task.

It was possible, therefore, for a Scripture writer who had been given only a suggestion of a new direction, but who had known God for a

long time, to "think the thoughts of God." To give a personal example: a secretary had been with a church for many years. At the beginning of my pastorate there, I dictated letters to her. After a year or so, I could tell her the general tenor of my thinking and she could write my letters, using my style. By the end of the third year I could simply hand her a letter which I had received and ask her to reply, since we had discussed so many issues connected with the church that she actually knew my thinking on most of them. It is possible—without dictation—to know just what another person wants to say. Note, however, that this assumes a closeness of relationship and a long period of acquaintance. So a Scripture writer, given the circumstances which we have described, could—without dictation—write God's message just as God wanted it recorded.

Inspiration is herein conceived of as applying to both the writer and the writing. In the primary sense, it is the writer who is the object of the inspiration. As the writer pens the Scripture, however, the quality of inspiredness is communicated to the writing as well. It is inspired in a derived sense.¹⁰ This is much like the definition of revelation as both the revealing and the revealed (see p. 58). We have observed that inspiration presupposes an extended period of God's working with the writer. This involves not only the preparation of the writer, but also the preparation of the material for his use. While inspiration in the strict sense probably does not apply to the preservation and transmission of this material, the providence which guides this process should not be overlooked.

Because the Bible has been inspired, we can be confident of having divine instruction. The fact that we did not live when the revelatory events and teachings first came does not leave us spiritually or theologically deprived. We have a sure guide. And we are motivated to study it intensively, since its message is truly God's word to us.

10. It should be observed that 2 Peter 1:20-21 refers to the authors, while 2 Timothy 3:16 refers to what they wrote. Thus the dilemma of whether inspiration pertains to the writer or the writing is shown to be a false issue.

SEVEN

The Dependability of God's Word: Inerrancy

Chapter Objectives

After you have completed your study of this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. To cite several different conceptions of inerrancy and comprehend the meaning of each perspective.
2. To appraise the value of inerrancy for developing a theology as it relates to the church.
3. To seek to resolve the problems of the actual phenomena of Scripture as they relate to inerrancy.
4. To designate principles and illustrations to define inerrancy.
5. To characterize issues that have developed around inerrancy.

Chapter Summary

Inerrancy is the doctrine that the Bible is fully truthful in all of its teachings. Theologians have argued over the levels to which the Bible is inerrant. If the Bible is not inerrant, then our knowledge of God may be inaccurate and unreliable. Inerrancy is a corollary to the full inspiration of the Bible. While detailed scientific

descriptions or mathematically exact statements are not possible, inerrancy means that the Bible, when judged by the usage of its time, teaches the truth without any affirmation of error.

Study Questions

- What does it mean to say absolute, full, or limited inerrancy?
- What is the epistemological importance of inerrancy?
- Considering the discrepancies between parallel passages in Scripture, is there reason to discard inerrancy altogether?
- Briefly define inerrancy.
- What are the three issues concerning inerrancy, and what is the author's response to them?

Chapter Outline

Various Conceptions of Inerrancy
The Importance of Inerrancy
 Theological Importance
 Historical Importance
 Epistemological Importance
Inerrancy and Phenomena
Defining Inerrancy
Ancillary Issues

The inerrancy of Scripture has recently been a topic of heated debate among conservative Christians. This is the doctrine that the Bible is fully truthful in all of its teachings. To those in the broader theological community, this seems an irrelevant issue, a carry-over from an antiquarian view of the Bible. To many evangelicals, however, it is an exceedingly important and even crucial issue. It therefore requires a careful examination. In a real sense, it is the completion of the doctrine of Scripture. For if God has given special revelation of himself and inspired servants of his to record it, we will want assurance that the Bible is indeed a dependable source of that revelation.

Various Conceptions of Inerrancy

The term *inerrancy* means different things to different people. As a matter of fact, there is frequent contention over which position properly deserves to be called by that name. It is therefore important to summarize briefly some of the current positions on the matter of inerrancy.

1. Absolute inerrancy holds that the Bible, which includes rather detailed treatment of matters both scientific and historical, is fully true. The impression is conveyed that the biblical writers intended to give a considerable

amount of exact scientific and historical data. Thus, apparent discrepancies can and must be explained. For example, the description of the molten sea in 2 Chronicles 4:2 indicates that its diameter was 10 cubits while the circumference was 30 cubits. However, as we all know, the circumference of a circle is π (3.14159) times the diameter. If, as the biblical text says, the molten sea was circular, there is a discrepancy here, and an explanation must be given.¹

2. Full inerrancy also holds that the Bible is completely true. While the Bible does not primarily aim to give scientific and historical data, such scientific and historical assertions as it does make are fully true. There is no essential difference between this position and absolute inerrancy in terms of their view of the religious/theological/spiritual message. The understanding of the scientific and historical references is quite different, however. Full inerrancy regards these references as phenomenal; that is, they are reported the way they appear to the human eye. They are not necessarily exact; rather, they are popular descriptions, often involving general references or approximations. Yet they are cor-

1. Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), pp. 165–66.

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rect. What they teach is essentially correct in the way they teach it.²

3. Limited inerrancy also regards the Bible as inerrant and infallible in its salvific doctrinal references. A sharp distinction is drawn, however, between nonempirical, revealed matters on the one hand, and empirical, natural references on the other. The scientific and historical references in the Bible reflect the understanding current at the time the Bible was written. The Bible writers were subject to the limitations of their time. Revelation and inspiration did not raise the writers above ordinary knowledge. God did not reveal science or history to them. Consequently, the Bible may well contain what we would term errors in these areas. This, however, is of no great consequence. The Bible does not purport to teach science and history. For the purposes for which the Bible was given, however, it is fully truthful and inerrant.³

The Importance of Inerrancy

Why should the church be concerned about inerrancy at all? Some suggest that inerrancy is an irrelevant, false, or distracting issue. For one thing, "inerrant" is a negative term. It would be far better to use a positive term to describe the Bible. Further, inerrancy is not a biblical concept. In the Bible, erring is a spiritual or moral matter rather than intellectual. Inerrancy distracts us from the proper issues. By focusing our attention upon minutiae of the text and spurring us to expend energy in attempts to resolve minor discrepancies, this concern for inerrancy distracts us from hearing what the Bible is really trying to tell us about our relationship to God. Finally, this issue is harmful to the church. It creates disunity among those who otherwise have a great deal in common. It

2. Roger Nicole, "The Nature of Inerrancy," in *Inerrancy and Common Sense*, ed. Roger Nicole and J. Ramsey Michaels (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), pp. 71-95.

3. Daniel P. Fuller, "Benjamin B. Warfield's View of Faith and History," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 11 (1968): 75-83.

makes a major issue out of what should be a minor matter at most.⁴

In view of these considerations, would it not be better to disregard the issue of inerrancy and "get on with the matters at hand"? In answer we note that there is a very practical concern at the root of much of the discussion about inerrancy. A seminary student who was serving as student pastor of a small rural church summarized well the concern of his congregation when he said, "My people ask me, 'If the Bible says it, can I believe it?'" Whether the Bible is fully truthful is a matter which is of importance to us theologically, historically, and epistemologically.

Theological Importance

Jesus, Paul, and other major New Testament figures regarded and employed details of the Scripture as authoritative. This argues for a view of the Bible as completely inspired by God, even to the selection of details within the text. If this is the case, certain implications follow. If God is omniscient, he must know all things. He cannot be ignorant of or in error on any matter. Further, if he is omnipotent, he is able to so affect the biblical author's writing that nothing erroneous enters into the final product. And being a truthful or veracious being, he will certainly desire to utilize these abilities in such a way that humans will not be misled by the Scriptures. Thus, our view of inspiration logically entails the inerrancy of the Bible. Inerrancy is a corollary of the doctrine of full inspiration. If, then, it should be shown that the Bible is not fully truthful, our view of inspiration would also be in jeopardy.

Historical Importance

The church has historically held to the inerrancy of the Bible. While there has not been a fully enunciated theory until modern times, nonetheless there was, down through the years of the history of the church, a general belief in the complete dependability of the Bible. Whether this belief entailed precisely what con-

4. David Hubbard, "The Irrelevancy of Inerrancy," in *Biblical Authority*, ed. Jack Rogers (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1977), pp. 151-81.

temporary inerrantists mean by the term *inerrancy* is not immediately apparent. Whatever the case, we do know that the general idea of inerrancy is not a recent development.

We should note what have tended to be the implications for other areas of doctrine whenever biblical inerrancy has been abandoned. There is evidence that where a theologian, a school, or a movement begins by regarding biblical inerrancy as a peripheral or optional matter and abandons this doctrine, it frequently then goes on to abandon or alter other doctrines which the church has ordinarily considered quite major, such as the deity of Christ or the Trinity. Since history is the laboratory in which theology tests its ideas, we must conclude that the departure from belief in complete trustworthiness of the Bible is a very serious step, not only in terms of what it does to this one doctrine, but even more in terms of what happens to other doctrines as a result.⁵

Epistemological Importance

The epistemological question is simply, How do we know? Since our basis for knowing and holding to the truth of any theological proposition is that the Bible teaches it, it is of utmost importance that the Bible be found truthful in all of its assertions. If we should conclude that certain propositions (historical or scientific) taught by the Bible are not true, the implications for theological propositions are far-reaching. To the extent that evangelicals abandon the position that everything taught or affirmed by Scripture is true, other bases for doctrine will be sought. This might well be either through the resurgence of a philosophy of religion or, what is more likely given the current "relational" orientation, through basing theology upon behavioral sciences, such as psychology of religion. But whatever the form that such an alternative grounding takes, there will probably be a shrinking of the list of tenets, for it is difficult to establish the Trinity or the virgin birth of Christ

5. Richard Lovelace, "Inerrancy: Some Historical Perspectives," in *Inerrancy and Common Sense*, ed. Nicole and Michaels, pp. 26–36.

upon either a philosophical argument or the dynamics of interpersonal relationships.

Inerrancy and Phenomena

Our belief in the inerrancy of the Scriptures is not based on an examination of the nature of all of the Bible, but on the teaching of the biblical authors regarding its inspiration. That teaching tells us only that the Bible is fully truthful. It does not tell us just exactly what the nature of its errorlessness is, or in exactly what way the Bible teaches errorlessly. For that, we must look at the actual phenomena of Scripture.

There are a number of types of problematic passages. For instance, the biblical account contains apparent discrepancies with references in secular history and with the claims of science. There are also contradictions between parallel passages in Scripture, such as in the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles in the Old Testament, and in the Gospels in the New Testament. These contradictions include matters of chronology, numbers, and other details. There are even seeming ethical discrepancies at points. An idea of the various kinds of problems can be gained by comparing Mark 6:8 with Matthew 10:9–10 and Luke 9:3; Acts 7:6 with Exodus 12:40–41; 2 Samuel 10:18 with 1 Chronicles 19:18; 2 Samuel 24:1 with 1 Chronicles 21:1; and James 1:13 with 1 Samuel 18:10.

How are these problems to be dealt with? Several different approaches have been taken. Benjamin B. Warfield, among others, maintained that the doctrinal teaching of biblical inerrancy is in itself such a strong consideration that the phenomena can virtually be ignored.⁶ Some theologians, such as Dewey Beegle, contend that the problematic phenomena require us to abandon belief in biblical inerrancy.⁷ Yet others, such as Louis Gaussen, attempt to eliminate the troublesome phenomena by harmo-

6. Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Real Problem of Inspiration," in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1951), pp. 219–20.

7. Dewey Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), pp. 195–97.

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nizing all the differences,⁸ some of their explanations seem to be rather artificial.

None of these approaches is fully satisfactory as a solution. Rather, we would be wisest to follow the way of moderate harmonization.⁹ In such an approach, the problems are resolved where available information yields a plausible explanation. With respect to some of the problems, however, we simply lack sufficient information to understand completely. Yet we can continue to hold to inerrancy on the basis of the Bible's own claims, knowing that if we had all the data, the problems would vanish.

Defining Inerrancy

We may now state our understanding of inerrancy: The Bible, when correctly interpreted in light of the level to which culture and the means of communication had developed at the time it was written, and in view of the purposes for which it was given, is fully truthful in all that it affirms. This definition reflects the position of full inerrancy, which, as we pointed out in the opening portion of this chapter, lies between absolute inerrancy and limited inerrancy. It is now necessary to elaborate and expound upon this definition. It is not our intention here to attempt to deal with all of the problems. Rather, we will note some principles and some illustrations which will help us to define inerrancy more specifically and to remove some of the difficulties.

1. Inerrancy pertains to what is affirmed or asserted rather than what is merely reported. The Bible reports false statements made by ungodly persons. The presence of these statements in the Scripture does not mean they are true; it only guarantees that they are correctly reported. The same judgment can be made about certain statements of godly men who were not speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Stephen, in his speech in Acts 7, may not have been inspired, although he was filled with the

Holy Spirit. Thus, his chronological statement in verse 6 is not necessarily free from error. It appears that even Paul and Peter may on occasion have made incorrect statements. When, however, something is taken by a biblical writer, from whatever source, and incorporated in his message as an affirmation, not merely a report, then it must be judged as truthful. This does not guarantee the canonicity of the book quoted. Nonbelievers, without special revelation or inspiration, may nonetheless be in possession of the truth. Just because one holds that everything within the Bible is truth, it is not necessary to hold that all truth is within the Bible. Thus, Jude's references to two noncanonical books (vv. 9, 14–15) do not necessarily create a problem, for one is not required thereby to believe either that Jude affirmed error, or that Enoch and the Assumption of Moses are divinely inspired books which ought to be included within the canon of the Old Testament.

The question arises, Does inerrancy have any application to moods other than the indicative? The Bible contains questions, wishes, and commands as well as assertions. These, however, are not ordinarily susceptible to being judged either

The Bible's assertions are fully true when judged in accordance with the purpose for which they were written.

true or false. Thus inerrancy seems not to apply to them. However, within Scripture there are assertions or affirmations (expressed or implied) that someone asked such a question, expressed such a wish, or uttered such a command. While the statement, "Love your enemies!" cannot be said to be either true or false, the assertion, "Jesus said, 'Love your enemies!'" is susceptible to being judged true or false. And as an assertion of Scripture, it is inerrant.

2. We must judge the truthfulness of Scripture in terms of what the statements meant in the cultural setting in which they were expressed. We should judge the Bible in terms of the forms and standards of its own culture. For example, we should not expect that the standards of exactness

8. Louis Gaussen, *The Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures* (Chicago: Moody, 1949).

9. Everett Harrison, "The Phenomena of Scripture," in *Revelation and the Bible*, ed. Carl Henry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1959), pp. 237–50.

in quotation to which our age of the printing press and mass distribution is accustomed would have been present in the first century. We ought also to recognize that numbers were often used symbolically in ancient times, much more so than is true in our culture today. The names parents chose for their children also carried a special meaning; this is rarely true today. The word *son* has basically one meaning in our language and culture. In biblical times, however, it was broader in meaning, almost tantamount to "descendant." There is a wide diversity, then, between our culture and that of biblical times. When we speak of inerrancy, we mean that what the Bible affirms is fully true in terms of the culture of its time.

3. The Bible's assertions are fully true when judged in accordance with the purpose for which they were written. Here the exactness will vary (the specificity of which we wrote earlier) according to the intended use of the material. Suppose a hypothetical case in which the Bible reported a battle in which 9,476 men were involved. What then would be a correct (or infallible) report? Would 10,000 be accurate? 9,000? 9,500? 9,480? 9,475? Or would only 9,476 be a correct report? The answer is that it depends upon the purpose of the writing. If the report was an official military document which an officer was to submit to his superior, the number must be exact. That would be the only way to ascertain whether there were any deserters. If, on the other hand, the intent of the account was simply to give some idea of the size of the battle, then a round number like 10,000 would be adequate, and in this setting correct. The same is true regarding the molten sea of 2 Chronicles 4:2. If the aim in giving the dimensions was to provide a plan from which an exact duplicate could be constructed, then it is important to know whether it was built with a diameter of 10 cubits or a circumference of 30 cubits. But if the purpose was merely to communicate an idea of the size of the object, then the approximation given by the chronicler is sufficient and may be judged fully true. We often find such approximations in the Bible.

Giving approximations is a common practice in our own culture. Suppose that a person's actual gross income last year was \$50,118.82. And suppose that he is asked what his gross income for last

year was and he replies, "Fifty thousand dollars." Has he told the truth, or has he not? That depends upon the situation and setting. If the question is asked by a friend in an informal social discussion of the cost of living, he has told the truth. But if the question is asked by an Internal Revenue agent conducting an audit, then he has not told the truth.

That the purpose of writing must be considered when judging whether something is true applies not only to the use of numbers, but also to such matters as the chronological order in historical narratives, which was occasionally modified in the Gospels. In some cases a change in words was necessary in order to communicate the same meaning to different persons. Thus Luke has "Glory in the highest" where Matthew and Mark have "Hosanna in the highest"; the former would make better sense to Luke's Gentile readership than would the latter. Even expansion and compression, which are used by preachers today without their being charged with unfaithfulness to the text, were practiced by biblical writers.

4. Reports of historical events and scientific matters are in phenomenal rather than technical language. That is, the writer reports how things appear to the eye. A commonly noted instance of this practice has to do with the matter of the sun rising. When the weatherman on the evening news says that the sun will rise the next morning at 6:37, he has, from a strictly technical standpoint, made an error, for it has been known since the time of Copernicus that the sun does not move—the earth does. Yet there is no problem with this popular expression. Indeed, even in scientific circles the term *sunrise* has become something of an idiom; though scientists regularly use the term, they do not take it literally. Similarly, biblical reports make no effort to be scientifically exact; they do not attempt to theorize over just what actually occurred when, for example, the walls of Jericho fell, or the Jordan River was stopped, or the axhead floated. The writer simply reported what was seen, how it appeared to the eye.

5. Difficulties in explaining the biblical text should not be prejudged as indications of error. It has already been suggested that we should not attempt to set forth a definite solution to problems

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too soon. It is better to wait for the remainder of the data to come in, with the confidence that if we had all the data, the problems could be resolved. In some cases, the data may never come in. There is encouragement to be found, however, in the fact that the trend is toward the resolution of difficulties as more data come in. Some of the severe problems of a century ago, such as the unknown Sargon mentioned by Isaiah (20:1), have been satisfactorily explained, and without artificial contortions. And even the puzzle of the death of Judas seems now to have a workable and reasonable solution.

According to Matthew 27:5, Judas committed suicide by hanging himself; Acts 1:18, however, states that "falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out." The specific Greek word in Acts that caused the difficulty regarding the death of Judas is *prēnēs*. For a long period of time it was understood to mean only "falling headlong." Twentieth-century investigations of ancient papyri, however, have revealed that this word has another meaning in Koine Greek. It also means "swelling up."¹⁰ It is now possible to hypothesize an end of Judas's life which seems to accommodate all of the data. Having hanged himself, Judas was not discovered for some time. In such a situation the visceral organs begin to degenerate first, causing a swelling of the abdomen characteristic of cadavers that have not been properly embalmed (and even of those which have been embalmed, if the process is not repeated after several days). And so, "swelling up [Judas] burst open in the middle and his bowels gushed out." While there is no way of knowing whether this is what actually took place, it seems to be a workable and adequate resolution of the difficulty. We must continue to work at resolving all such tensions in our understanding of the Bible.

Ancillary Issues

1. Is inerrancy a good term, or should it be avoided? There are certain problems which at-

10. G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1937), p. 377.

tach to it. One is that it tends to carry the implication of extreme specificity, which words like correctness, truthfulness, trustworthiness, dependability, and, to a lesser extent, accuracy do not connote. However, because the term *inerrancy* has become common, it probably is wise to use it. On the other hand, it is not sufficient simply to use the term, since, as we have seen, radically different meanings are attached to it by different persons. The statement of William Hordern is appropriate here as a warning: "To both the fundamentalist and the non-conservative, it often seems that the new conservative is trying to say, 'The Bible is inerrant, but of course this does not mean that it is without error.'¹¹ We must carefully explain what we mean when we use the term so there is no misunderstanding.

2. We must also define what we mean by error. If this is not done, the meaning of inerrancy will be lost. If there is an "infinite coefficient of elasticity of language," so that the word *truth* can simply be stretched a bit more, and a bit more, and a bit more, eventually it comes to include everything, and therefore nothing. We must be prepared, then, to indicate what would be considered an error. Statements in Scripture which plainly contradict the facts (or are contradicted by them) must be considered errors. If Jesus did not die on the cross, if he did not still the storm on the sea, if the walls of Jericho did not fall, if the people of Israel did not leave their bondage in Egypt and depart for the Promised Land, then the Bible is in error.

3. The doctrine of inerrancy applies in the strict sense only to the originals, but in a derivative sense to copies and translations, that is, to the extent that they reflect the originals. This view is often ridiculed as a subterfuge, and it is pointed out that no one has seen the inerrant autographs.¹² Yet, as Carl Henry has pointed out, no one has seen the errant

11. William Hordern, *New Directions in Theology Today*, vol. 1, *Introduction* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), p. 83.

12. Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility*, pp. 156-59.

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originals either.¹³ We must reaffirm that the copies and the translations are also the Word of God, to the degree that they preserve the original message. When we say they are the Word of God, we do not have in mind, of course, the original process of the inspiration of the biblical writer. Rather, they are the Word of God in a derivative sense which attaches to the product. So it was possible for Paul to write

13. Reported in Harrison, "Phenomena of Scripture," p. 239.

to Timothy that all Scripture is inspired, although undoubtedly the Scripture that he was referring to was a copy and probably also a translation (the Septuagint) as well.

In a world in which there are so many erroneous conceptions and so many opinions, the Bible is a sure source of guidance. For when correctly interpreted, it can be fully relied upon in all that it teaches. It is a sure, dependable, and trustworthy authority.

EIGHT

The Power of God's Word: Authority

Chapter Objectives

After completing the study of this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. To define the word *authority* and restate the definition of authority under the parameters of religion.
2. To identify the ways in which the meaning of Scripture is established through the divine origin and authorship of the Holy Spirit.
3. To distinguish between the objective and subjective components of authority.
4. To explain the relationship between the Bible and reason in reference to meaning.
5. To compare the two types of authority concerning the Bible, both historical and normative.

Chapter Summary

As creator and source of all truth, God has the right to command belief and obedience from all human beings. Although in some cases God exercises authority directly, he normally uses other means such as communicating his message to human beings. This occurs in the Bible. The Holy Spirit illuminates and applies the teaching of the Bible to both the

human understanding and the heart. All Scripture is historically authoritative, that is, it tells us correctly what occurred and what God expected from specific persons at particular times and places. Some of Scripture is also normatively authoritative. That means that those parts of Scripture are to be applied and obeyed in the same fashion in which they were originally given.

Study Questions

- For what reasons is the Holy Spirit needed if we are to understand the Bible and be certain of its truth?
- What is the importance of 1 Corinthians 2:14 in relation to the Holy Spirit?
- Compare and contrast the objective and subjective components of authority.
- How are biblical hermeneutics and apologetics involved in the relationship between Scripture and reason?

Chapter Outline

Religious Authority
The Internal Working of the Holy Spirit
Objective and Subjective Components of Authority
The Bible and Reason
Historical and Normative Authoritativeness

Religious Authority

By authority we mean the right to command belief and/or action. This is a subject arousing considerable controversy in our society today. External authority is often refused recognition and obedience in favor of accepting one's own judgment as final. There is even a strong antie-establishmentarian mood in the area of religion, where individual judgment is often insisted upon. For example, many Roman Catholics are questioning the traditional view of papal authority as being infallible.

On the subject of religious authority, the crucial question is, Is there some person, institution, or document possessing the right to prescribe belief and action in religious matters? In the ultimate sense, if there is a Supreme Being higher than humans and everything else in the created order, he has the right to determine what we are to believe and how we are to live. This volume proposes that God is the ultimate authority in religious matters. He has the right, both by virtue of who he is and what he does, to establish the standard for belief and practice. With respect to major issues he does not exercise authority in a direct fashion, however. Rather, he has delegated that authority by creating a book, the Bible. Because it conveys his

message, the Bible carries the same weight God himself would command if he were speaking to us personally.

The Internal Working of the Holy Spirit

Revelation is God's making his truth known to humankind. Inspiration guarantees that what the Bible says is just what God would say if he were to speak directly. One other element is needed in this chain, however. For the Bible to function as if it is God speaking to us, the Bible reader needs to understand the meaning of the Scriptures, and to be convinced of their divine origin and authorship. This is accomplished by an internal working of the Holy Spirit, illuminating the understanding of the hearer or reader of the Bible, bringing about comprehension of its meaning, and creating a certainty of its truth and divine origin.

There are a number of reasons why the illumination or witness of the Holy Spirit is needed if we are to understand the meaning of the Bible and be certain of its truth. (Neither the church nor human reason will do.) First, there is the ontological difference between God and humans. God is transcendent; he goes beyond our categories of understanding. He can never be

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fully grasped within our finite concepts or by our human vocabulary. He can be understood, but not comprehensively. These limitations are inherent in human beings. They are not a result of the fall or of individual human sin, but of the Creator-creature relationship.

The second reason the special working of the Holy Spirit is needed is that we require certainty with respect to divine matters. On the subject of (spiritual and eternal) life and death,

As the expression of God's will, the Bible
possesses the right
to define what we are to believe on
religious matters
and how we are to conduct ourselves.

it is necessary to have more than mere probability. Our need for certainty is in direct proportion to the importance of what is at stake; in matters of eternal consequence, we need a certainty that human reasoning cannot provide. If one is deciding what automobile to purchase, or what kind of paint to apply to his home, listing the advantages of each of the options will usually suffice. (The option with the most advantages frequently proves to be the best.) If, however, the question is whom or what to believe with respect to one's eternal destiny, the need to be certain is far greater.

A third reason for the internal working of the Holy Spirit is the limitations which result from the sinfulness of the human race. In Matthew 13:13–15 and Mark 8:18 Jesus speaks of those who hear but never understand and see but never perceive. Their condition is depicted in vivid images throughout the New Testament. Their hearts have grown dull, their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes they have closed (Matt. 13:15). They know God but do not honor him as God, and so they have become futile in their thinking and their senseless minds are darkened (Rom. 1:21). Romans 11:8 attributes their condition to God, who "gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that should not see and ears that should not hear." Consequently, "their eyes are darkened" (v. 10). All of these

references, as well as numerous other allusions, argue for the need of some special work of the Spirit to enhance human perception and understanding.

In 1 Corinthians 2:14 Paul tells us that the unregenerate person (one who neither perceives nor understands) has not received the gifts of the Spirit of God. In the original we find the word *dechomai*, which signifies not merely to "receive" something, but rather to "accept" something, to welcome it, whether a gift or an idea.¹ The unregenerate do not accept the gifts of the Spirit because they find the wisdom of God foolish, and are unable to understand it because it must be spiritually discerned or investigated. The problem, then, is not merely that unbelievers are unwilling to accept the gifts and wisdom of God, but that, without the help of the Holy Spirit, the unregenerate are unable to understand them.

In the context of 1 Corinthians 2:14 there is corroborating evidence that we cannot understand without the Spirit's aid. Verse 11 says that only the Spirit of God comprehends the things of God. Paul also indicates in 1:20–21 that the world cannot know God through its wisdom, for God has made foolish the wisdom of this world. Indeed, the wisdom of the world is folly to God (3:19). The gifts of the Spirit are imparted in words taught not by human wisdom but by the Spirit (2:13). From all of these considerations it appears that Paul is not saying that unspiritual persons understand but do not accept. Rather, they do not accept, at least in part, because they do not understand.

But this condition is overcome when the Holy Spirit begins to work within us. Paul speaks of having the eyes of the heart enlightened—the verb form used here suggests that something has been done and remains in effect (Eph. 1:18). In 2 Corinthians 3 he speaks of the removal of the veil placed upon the mind (v. 16) so that one may behold the glory of the Lord (v. 18). The New Testament refers to this enlightenment in various other ways: circumci-

1. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 4th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 176.

sion of the heart (Rom. 2:29), being filled with spiritual wisdom and understanding (Col. 1:9), the gift of understanding to know Jesus Christ (1 John 5:20), hearing the voice of the Son of God (John 10:3). What previously had seemed to be foolish (1 Cor. 1:18; 2:14) and a stumbling block (1 Cor. 1:23) now appears to the believer as the power of God (1 Cor. 1:18), as secret and hidden wisdom of God (1:24; 2:7), and as the mind of Christ (2:16).

What we have been describing here is a one-time work of the Spirit—regeneration. It introduces a categorical difference between the believer and the unbeliever. There is also, however, a continuing work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer, a work particularly described and elaborated by Jesus in his message to his followers in John 14–16:

1. The Holy Spirit will teach believers all things and bring to their remembrance all that Jesus had taught them (14:26).
2. The Holy Spirit will witness to Jesus. The disciples will also be witnesses to Jesus, because they have been with him from the beginning (15:26–27).
3. The Holy Spirit will convict (*elenchō*) the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment (16:8). This particular word implies rebuking in such a way as to bring about conviction, as contrasted with *epitimaō*, which may suggest simply an undeserved (Matt. 16:22) or ineffectual (Luke 23:40) rebuke.²
4. The Holy Spirit will guide believers into all the truth. He will not speak on his own authority, but will speak whatever he hears (John 16:13). In the process, he will also glorify Jesus (16:14).

Note in particular the designation of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth (14:17). John's account of what Jesus said does not refer to the Holy Spirit as the true Spirit, but the Spirit of truth. This may represent nothing more than the literal translation of an Aramaic expression into Greek, but more likely signifies that the

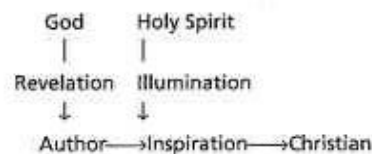
very nature of the Spirit is truth. He is the one who communicates truth. The world is not able to receive (*lambanō*, simple reception, as opposed to *dechomai*, acceptance) him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. Believers, on the other hand, know him, because he abides with them and will be in them.

Let us summarize the role of the Spirit as depicted in John 14–16. He guides into truth, calling to remembrance the words of Jesus, not speaking on his own, but speaking what he hears, bringing about conviction, witnessing to Christ. This work seems to be not so much a new ministry, or the addition of new truth not previously made known, but rather an action of the Holy Spirit in relationship to truth already revealed. Thus the Holy Spirit's ministry involves elucidating the truth, bringing belief and persuasion and conviction, but not new revelation.

Objective and Subjective Components of Authority

There is, then, as illustrated in Figure 2, what Bernard Ramm has called a *pattern* of authority.³ The objective Word, the written, inspired Scripture, together with the subjective word, the inner illumination and conviction of the Holy Spirit, constitutes the authority for the Christian.

Figure 2. The Pattern of Authority



Scholastic orthodoxy of the seventeenth century virtually maintained that the authority is the Bible alone. In some cases this also has been the position of American fundamentalism of the twentieth century. Those who hold this position see an objective quality in the Bible that automatically brings one into contact with God.

2. Richard Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), pp. 13–15.

3. Bernard Ramm, *The Pattern of Religious Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968).

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Reading the Bible daily is thought to confer a value, in and of itself. The old adage, "an apple a day keeps the doctor away," has a theological parallel: "a chapter a day keeps the devil away." A potential danger here is that the Bible may become almost a fetish.⁴

On the other hand, there are some groups which regard the Holy Spirit as the chief authority for the Christian. Certain charismatic groups, for example, believe that special prophecy is occurring today. New messages from God are being given by the Holy Spirit. In most cases these messages are regarded as explaining the true meaning of certain biblical passages. Thus,

The objective Word, the written,
inspired Scripture, together with the
subjective word, the inner illumination
and conviction of the Holy Spirit,
constitutes the authority
for the Christian.

the contention is that while the Bible is authoritative, in practice its meaning would often not be found without special action by the Holy Spirit.⁵

Actually, it is the combination of these two factors that constitutes authority. Both are needed. The written Word, correctly interpreted, is the objective basis of authority. The inward illuminating and persuading work of the Holy Spirit is the subjective dimension. Together, the two yield a maturity that is necessary in the Christian life—a cool head and warm heart (not a cold heart and hot head). As one

4. A. C. McGiffert, *Protestant Thought Before Kant* (New York: Harper, 1961), p. 146.

5. In one church a decision was to be made on two proposed plans for a new sanctuary. One member insisted that the Lord had told him that the church should adopt the plan calling for the larger sanctuary. His basis was that the ratio between the number of seats in the larger plan and the number in the smaller plan was five to three, exactly the ratio between the number of times that Elisha told Joash he should have struck the ground and the number of times he actually struck it (2 Kings 13:18–19). The church eventually separated over disagreement on this and similar issues.

pastor put it in a rather crude fashion: "If you have the Bible without the Spirit, you will dry up. If you have the Spirit without the Bible, you will blow up. But if you have both the Bible and the Spirit together, you will grow up."

The Bible and Reason

At this point arises a question concerning the relationship between biblical authority and reason. Is there not the possibility of some conflict here? Ostensibly the authority is the Bible, but various means of interpretation are brought to bear upon the Bible to elicit its meaning. If reason is the means of interpretation, is not reason, rather than the Bible, the real authority, since it in effect comes to the Bible from a position of superiority?

Here a distinction must be drawn between legislative authority and judicial authority. In the federal government, the houses of Congress produce legislation, but the judiciary (ultimately the Supreme Court) decides what the legislation means. They are separate branches of government, each with its own appropriate authority.

This seems to be a good way to think of the relationship between Scripture and reason. Scripture is our supreme legislative authority. It gives us the content of our belief and of our code of behavior and practice. Reason does not tell us the content of our belief. It does not discover truth. When we come to determine what the Scripture means, however, and, at a later stage, assess whether it is true, we must utilize the power of reasoning. We must employ the best methods of interpretation or hermeneutics. And then we must decide whether the Christian belief system is true by rationally examining and evaluating the evidences. This we term apologetics. While there is a dimension of the self-explanatory within Scripture, Scripture alone will not give us the meaning of Scripture. There is therefore no inconsistency in regarding Scripture as our supreme authority in the sense that it tells us what to do and believe, and employing various hermeneutical and exegetical methods to determine its meaning.

Historical and Normative Authoritativeness

One other distinction needs to be drawn and elaborated. It concerns the way in which the Bible is authoritative for us. The Bible is certainly authoritative in telling us what God's will was for certain individuals and groups within the biblical period. The question being considered here is, Is what was binding upon those people also binding upon us?

It is necessary to distinguish between two types of authority: historical and normative. The Bible informs us as to what God com-

manded of the people in the biblical situation and what he expects of us. Insofar as the Bible teaches us what occurred and what the people were commanded in biblical times, it is historically authoritative. But is it also normatively authoritative? Are we bound to carry out the same actions as were expected of those people? Here one must be careful not to identify too quickly God's will for those people with his will for us. It will be necessary to determine what is the permanent essence of the message, and what is the temporary form of its expression. It is quite possible for something to be historically authoritative without being normatively authoritative.