

·CHRISTIAN FOUNDATIONS·

HOLY
SCRIPTURE

REVELATION, INSPIRATION
& INTERPRETATION

DONALD G. BLOESCH

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THE MEANING OF REVELATION

I became a minister according to the divine office which was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints.

COLOSSIANS 1 : 25 - 26

Our senses are so feeble that we could never understand a single word that God says to us, unless we are illumined by his Holy Spirit; for carnal men cannot comprehend heavenly things.

JOHN CALVIN

The Word of God is that which shows, impresses, and brings the mind of God into our hearts.

PHILIPP SPENER

The mere letter in which the promise is put profiteth you nothing; it is the spirit of the promise; it is the life of the Spirit running through the veins of the promise that alone can profit you.

CHARLES H. SPURGEON

The Scriptures proceed not by conversion of God's word into a literature but by taking up of a literature to be a vehicle of God's word.

C. S. LEWIS

The babble of voices that constitutes modern theology is painfully evident in the radically different ways people understand revelation. Much of the older Christian tradition interpreted revelation as a higher form of knowledge that builds on and completes the natural knowledge of God. In this perspective, which dominated both Catholic and Protestant scholasticism, revelation is the divine disclosure of information concerning the nature of God and his will and purpose for the

world. It is both rational and propositional and thereby stands in direct continuity with ordinary knowledge. It exceeds the compass of human reason, but it does not contradict the canons of human rationality itself. In the older orthodoxy, which still attracts a considerable following, Scripture is the document of revelation, and its propositions constitute the content of revelation. Carl Henry puts it well: "The Holy Bible is a rational revelation of the nature of God and his will for fallen man."¹

The concept of revelation has been decisively altered in both neo-Protestant and neo-Catholic theology.² In Schleiermacher's theology revelation becomes the communication of the Universe to the sensitive conscience. Elton Trueblood understands revelation as an immediate experience of the divine.³ For Gregory Baum revelation constitutes a heightened human awareness that enables one to see the world in a new light.⁴ Karl Rahner rejects the "purely extrinsic concept of revelation," which conceives it as a divine intervention in human history from the outside. Instead it is "the transcendental experience of the absolute and merciful closeness of God, even if this cannot be conceptually expressed . . . by everyone."⁵ Revelation yields not new knowledge but a new consciousness. This mystical outlook is also shared by John Macquarrie, for whom the revelatory experience consists not in entering an I-Thou encounter but in being grasped by the power of being.⁶

In contradistinction to this mystical or experientialist understanding, another group of theologians associates revelation with history. For Wolfhart Pannenberg revelation is the light that is gleaned from the unfolding of universal history. G. Ernest Wright equates revelation with God's mighty deeds in sacred history.⁷ Our knowledge of God in this perspective is indirect, for it is the result of faithful reflection on the movement of God in history.

In neo-orthodoxy revelation was interpreted as a divine-human encounter that takes place preeminently in the personal history of Jesus Christ and then in our personal histories insofar as we participate in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. It is not to be reduced to a body of propositions that are directly accessible to human reason; instead it

is the action of God disclosing himself to the believing person in conjunction with the hearing of the gospel. The knowledge of revelation is one of personal acquaintance rather than propositional truth. According to Emil Brunner such knowledge is not on a par with general knowledge but "can only be heard and expressed in the form of an I-Thou communication."⁸

Although open to the insights of existentialist and neo-orthodox theologies, I have sought to retain the conceptual character of revelation even while subordinating it to personal self-disclosure. As I see it, revelation is God's self-communication through his selected instrumentality, especially the inspired witness of his prophets and apostles.⁹ This act of self-communication entails not only the unveiling of his gracious and at the same time awesome presence but also the imparting of the knowledge of his will and purpose for humankind. This knowledge is conceptual as well as existential and can be formulated but never possessed or mastered in propositions.

I can agree with Thomas Finger when he describes revelation as "always moving, always personally challenging, always overflowing any event or formulation."¹⁰ Even the propositions of the Bible are not yet revelation when they are only "comprehended as cognitive assertions."¹¹ Revelation is indeed cognitive, but it is much more than this. It is an act of communication by which God confronts the whole person with his redeeming mercy and glorious presence. It therefore involves not only the mind but also the will and affections.

The Word of God is not to be reduced to objective rational statements: it is God in action, God speaking and humans hearing. But this is an inward hearing that itself belongs to the miracle of revelation. As Luther phrased it, "I do not know it and do not understand it, but sounding from above and ringing in my ears I hear what is beyond the thought of man."¹²

My position stands in continuity with that of the Reformers as well as that of modern theologians like Barth and Brunner. It seeks to do justice to both the dynamic character of revelation and its intelligible character. For Calvin the Word of God was not essentially a proposition-

al formula but "the hand of God stretching itself out to act powerfully through the apostle in every way,"¹³ indeed a "violent force" that "urges us . . . to give obedience to it."¹⁴ Revelation is being grasped by the power of the resurrected Christ and set in a completely new direction.

Revelation as Truth and Event

In the Scriptures revelation is truth and event at the same time. It is not static truth but truth that happens, truth that creates. In Second Isaiah we read: "Things now past I once revealed long ago, they went out from my mouth and I proclaimed them; then suddenly I acted and they happened" (Is 48:3 JB). In the Old Testament the word uttered by God (Hebrew *dabar*) can mean both word and act. It is a word filled with meaning and power: "He sends out His command to the earth; His word runs very swiftly" (Ps 147:15 NKJ; cf. Is 9:8).

Revelation is a "meeting" between God and the believer whereby God speaks and we hear. The "spoken word" is a metaphor containing two elements: personal encounter and the impartation of knowledge. The Hebrew word *galah* is used to refer both to God's self-manifestation and the communication of his message. In the New Testament revelation is both unveiling (Greek *apokalypsis*) and manifestation (*phaneroō*, *phanerōsis*). It is also associated with *epiphaneia*, which denotes the appearance of divinity in earthly history. Revelation entails both divine presence and divine meaning.

God speaks directly and indirectly in the Bible. He speaks in pivotal events in history but occasionally directly to people in dreams and visions. He also speaks in the human conscience, and thus we find God within as well as without. I do not agree with Pannenberg, who denies a "direct self-revelation of God." What he upholds is "an indirect self-revelation in the mirror of his historical actions."¹⁵

History is the occasion, not the source of revelation. But history also furnishes the ingredients of revelation. The events of sacred history are not simply the medium of revelation but the material of revelation (Kenneth Hamilton). The content of what is revealed is not an ineffable

experience of a transphenomenal reality but the divine significance of actual happenings in history.

The event of revelation has two poles: the historical and the experiential. Revelation is God speaking and the human being responding through the power of God's Spirit. God speaks not only in the Bible but also in the human heart. Revelation is the conjunction of divine revealing action and human response. The external knowledge of Scripture is united with the internal knowledge given by the Holy Spirit. When God pierces us with the arrows of his love, we carry his words thrust deep into our inner being.¹⁶ Revelation occurs when the same Spirit who spoke by the mouth of the prophets and apostles finds entry into our hearts, convincing us that "they rendered faithfully what they had been told to say by God."¹⁷

Revelation happened in a final and definitive form in the apostolic encounter with Jesus Christ. But revelation happens again and again in the experience of the Spirit of Christ. We might say that "God's self-revelation is completed *in* the knowledge that we have of Him."¹⁸

Revelation focuses on Jesus Christ, but this decisive event was not isolated. It presupposes a revelatory history, which was a preparation for it and in which it was received. This is the "sacred history" that the Bible mirrors. It is possible therefore to speak of cumulative revelation and levels of revelation. The climax of revelation is the historical Jesus Christ, but some light concerning Christ was already given to the patriarchs and prophets of Israel.

Does revelation have a determinative or conceptual content? The fashion in modern theology is to empty revelation of its conceptual or rational element, to portray it as an absolute mystery that overwhelms rather than enlightens the believer. According to Schleiermacher, "Ideas and principles are all foreign to religion."¹⁹ William Temple's aphorism, "Revelation is not in propositions, but in events," has become a cliché in much contemporary theology.²⁰ Revelation is sometimes reduced to an I-Thou encounter, which indicates a confrontation of wills rather than an impartation of knowledge. Martin Buber said: "Man receives,

and he receives not a specific 'content' but a Presence, a Presence as power."²¹ Otto Weber concludes that " 'truth' and 'revelation' are not to be understood so much noetically as factually and existentially."²² For Bultmann the definitive point was that the Word of God is "an event in time—not that it conveys eternal truth."²³ Revelation, he claimed, is in the subjective understanding rather than in objective history. We are given a new self-understanding, not knowledge of the will and purpose of God.²⁴ Similarly, Tillich contended that "no definition of the contents of revelation is possible."²⁵ This same existentialist orientation is found in Ernst Fuchs, for whom revelation is a language event that involves not the communication of concepts but a call to action.²⁶

Revelation is indeed an act, but is it not also a truth, *the* truth—about God and the world as well as about ourselves?²⁷ We are told that "grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (Jn 1:17). Revelation certainly takes the form of encounter, but it includes knowledge of the significance of this encounter. It is the speech of God as well as the act of God. It is a *datum* (information) as well as a *dandum* (event). Calvin described Christ as being "clothed with his promises." In the words of the Westminster Confession: "It has pleased God to reveal Himself and to declare His will unto the Church" (1.1), this will being identified by the Reformers as the law and the gospel. What is revealed is not simply the radiance and power of the gospel but the *message* of the gospel.

I maintain that there is a built-in interpretation of the truth of faith within the Bible that is normative for us. This knowledge is not a comprehension of the totality of things, as in idealism, but a concrete understanding of a unique and definite occurrence.²⁸ The Bible describes it as a secret wisdom available only to people of faith, a wisdom or knowledge that has a particular content (1 Cor 2:6-7; Rom 11:33; Eph 1:17; Jas 3:17; 2 Pet 3:15). It is not simply the state of being grasped by the power of being (Tillich) but an illumination that enables the mind to discern specific truths revealed by God.

Yet the law and the gospel cannot be equated with objective propositions either in the creeds of the church or in Holy Scripture. They

indicate the divinely given meaning of these propositions, a meaning that is never at the disposal of natural reason. To be sure, the divine promise and the divine command come to us through objective statements and words. But they always connote much more than a surface understanding of the text in question. These objective statements are not themselves revelation but the vehicle and outcome of revelation.

The propositions in the Bible are the result of revelation, the concrete embodiment of revelation. I agree with Bernard Ramm that the phrase *propositional revelation* is ambiguous, because revelation comes to us in a myriad of literary forms.²⁹ Yet I subscribe to the intent of this phrase—that revelation is intelligible and conceptual. It is more felicitous to say with Thomas F. Torrance that revelation is “dialogical,” for this term combines the personal and the propositional.

The Word of God exists for us only when God is actually speaking and we are actually receiving his Word. Hans Urs von Balthasar puts it well: “What God says to us is his truth, not ours; it becomes ours only when he utters and gives it us, and we conform to it. For that reason it becomes a judgment on us in so far as we do not submit to God but rebel against him.”³⁰

God’s revelation is his commandment and his promise, and these come to us in the form of written commandments and written testimonies. Yet they cannot be confined to what is objectively written, since their meaning-content includes their significance for those who hear God’s Word in every new situation.

God’s Word is absolute, but when it is appropriated and formulated by us it becomes relative. Our understanding and interpretation are only approximations of the Word of God. This is also true of the prophetic and apostolic interpretation in the Bible. Human beings even as people of faith can never claim to have the absolute or synoptic perspective, but they can claim to know the One who is himself the fount and ground of all meaning. This does not mean that we necessarily have a mistaken view of God’s purposes—only that we have an incomplete view. We cannot hold the Word of God in our hands or in our minds, but God can

enter our minds and unite his action with our action. He is not an objectified datum generally available to human understanding, but he can make himself an object for our understanding (Barth) so that we can really know and thereby truly believe, even though we cannot fully comprehend.

Interpretations of the Word of God can be handed down by the church from one generation to another, but none of us can actually know the Word of God until God personally reveals himself to us. When God speaks we will know it, for his word is "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword" (Heb 4:12). The knowledge of God's Word is never merely conceptual knowledge but also existential knowledge. It is a knowledge more of the heart than of the head, more of the affection than of the intellect (Calvin).³¹ It is a knowledge that causes men and women to tremble (cf. Is 66:2; Jer 23:9). It reduces the human being to nothingness but at the same time fills the person of faith with assurance and joy so that a new life is possible. It brings people freedom not to realize themselves along an ego-building trail of self-deception but to realize a holy vocation of being witnesses and ambassadors of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The knowledge of God given in revelation has many sides. It is conceptual because it enlightens our mind concerning the nature and purpose of God. It is existential because it affects the whole of human existence. It is personal because it involves a dialogue between two subjects. It is spiritual because it opens our inner eyes to a transcendent dimension of reality.

The knowledge of God is never ours until we are confronted by the creative, transforming power of God that seizes us and points us in a new direction. The psalmist graphically describes the encounter with divine reality: "Deep calls to deep at the sound of Thy waterfalls; All Thy breakers and Thy waves have rolled over me" (Ps 42:7 NASB). This knowledge is so wonderful that it is beyond our grasp; we can never reach it by our own power or exertion (Ps 139:6). Yet it can break into our lives from the beyond and become ours if only for a moment, but

then we must seek for it again and again. Faith does not simply rest on understanding but strives for an ever greater understanding, even though acutely aware that the full picture of reality can never be ours on this side of death.

Existentialist theology can be appreciated for its critique of a rationalism that claims to know too much about God and the world. Yet existentialism leads directly into agnosticism and finally into atheism if it severs itself completely from essentialism, that is, from the hope of knowing reality in itself. Tillich maintained that "there cannot be a truth in human minds which is divine truth in itself."³² For both Tillich and Bultmann God can never become an object for human knowledge and action, since this would make faith conceptual. They failed to see that God, though hidden from human perception, can nevertheless impress his truth on our minds. We cannot objectify God, but God can objectify himself and thereby make his truth available to us.

Revelation in history is only partial and fragmentary. People of faith look forward to the vision of God beyond history when we shall know even as we are known. Indeed, revelation in the biblical sense has an unmistakable eschatological thrust. The prophet is told: "Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it. For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false" (Hab 2:2-3 NIV; cf. Hos 2:19ff.; Jer 31:31ff.). Revelation refers to that future event when God fully discloses himself in judgment and salvation (cf. Rom 8:18-19; 1 Cor 3:13; 1 Pet 1:5).

Torrance powerfully enunciates the eschatological character of revelation:

While God has made His Word audible and apprehensible with our human speech and thought, refusing to be limited by their inadequacy in making Himself known to us, He nevertheless refuses to be understood merely from within the conceptual framework of our natural thought and language but demands of that framework a logical reconstruction in accordance with His Word. Hence a theology faithful to what God has revealed and done in Jesus Christ must

involve a powerful element of apocalyptic, that is epistemologically speaking, an eschatological suspension of logical form in order to keep our thought ever open to what is radically new.³³

Torrance goes on to contend that "the concrete universal cannot be netted by empirical means, any more than it can be caught through the analytical methods of formal logic."³⁴ Christ must break into our reasoning processes and remold them if we are ever to begin to know him as he knows us.

The full meaning and impact of the Word made flesh, of God becoming mortal in human history, is veiled not only to the natural understanding but also to the understanding of faith and awaits a new disclosure by God at the end of history. Now we walk by faith as pilgrims seeking a homeland. We have sufficient light to take us through this present darkness, but we will not know as we are known until the day of redemption, when the realities of the kingdom of God will be revealed to the whole world. This kingdom, which is now invisible, will become visible for all to see: faith will be taken up into sight, understanding will become knowledge, hope will be translated into joy.

Because revelation in its fullness lies at the very end of history, some theologians prefer to speak of *revealing* truths in the Bible rather than *revealed* truths (Gabriel Fackre). That is, light in its fullness eludes us, but the Bible can give us more light than we already possess. The truths of revelation are not the final truth, but they open us to the final truth, they give us a glimpse of the transcendent beyond history. I can empathize with this position, for I am acutely conscious of the relativity of all truth that has a historical and cultural matrix. Yet we must not surrender the claim of Christian faith that in the Bible we are presented with real truth, with truth that is absolute and unconditional because it is God's truth. Against evangelical rationalism, however, I maintain that we mortals can know this truth only conditionally and relatively. Theology is not "the crystallization of divine truth into systematic form,"³⁵ but a very human witness to divine truth, a witness that remains tentative and open-ended because historical understanding is not tran-

scendent knowledge, faith is not sight. The truth in the Bible is revealed because it has a divine source, but it is at the same time partial and broken because it has a historical matrix. It throws light on the human situation, but light that is adequate only for our salvation and the living of a righteous life, not for comprehensive understanding. As biblical Christians we are neither gnostics (fully enlightened) nor agnostics but pilgrims who nevertheless have a compass (the Word of God) that can guide us to our destination.

Revelation and the Bible

The paramount question in discussions on divine revelation is, How is revelation related to the Bible? In my perspective the original reception of revelation is a component part of revelation. The biblical writers and their writings participated in the event of revelation. Yet revelation is not to be equated with the objective verbal representation of this reception. It is the difference between "thought-in-encounter" and "thinking-about-it" (Brunner).³⁶

We need to acknowledge that the Holy Spirit guided the prophets in their reflection, but their articulation of this reflection is at least one step removed from the revelation itself. Their witness points to revelation, but it also mediates revelation, since the Spirit acts through the persons and words that he inspires.

The content of the Bible is indeed God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, but this content comes to us in the form of a historical witness to this event or constellation of events. To know this content we need to get beyond "the right human thoughts about God" to "the right divine thoughts about men" (Barth).³⁷

The biblical witness is binding because the prophets and apostles were ear- and eyewitnesses to what God did for us in the sacred history culminating in Jesus Christ. Moreover, these persons were guided by the Holy Spirit in their reflection and in their writing, and their writings now function as the vehicle of the Holy Spirit.

In our reading of the Bible and in our hearing of the biblical message,

we become, through the miraculous action of the Holy Spirit, contemporaneous with the moment of revelation. We experience the power and impact of the gospel directly through the word that we hear. In another sense, however, our experience of Jesus Christ is indirect, since it is mediated through the outward means of preaching and hearing.

The Bible is not in and of itself the revelation of God but the divinely appointed means and channel of this revelation. It comprises the sacred writings that give us "the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Jesus Christ" (2 Tim 3:15 NASB). In Paul's epistle to the Romans, "the revelation of the mystery" of the gospel is clearly distinguished from "the prophetic Scriptures" through which this mystery is made known (Rom 16:25-26 NKJ). In Colossians the mystery that constitutes the Word of God is identified with "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (1:25-27). The distinction between the Word of God and the words of Scripture is also evident in Psalm 119:18 (GNB): "Open my eyes, so that I may see the wonderful truths in your law."

The Word of God transcends the human witness, and yet it comes to us only in the servant form of the human word. God's Word is not a spiritual idea or ideal of which the human word is only a sign. Maximus the Confessor betrayed a Platonic thrust when he distinguished between the "spirit" and the "flesh" of Scripture and then advocated abandoning what is corruptible and cleaving to that which is wholly incorruptible.³⁸

There is indeed an inseparable connection between the revealed Word of God or the "mind of Christ" and the Bible. We can even speak of a unity or identity of witness and revelation, but it is an indirect identity, not a property of the witness but a matter of divine grace. I hold that the Word of God or the truth of revelation is embedded in Scripture because Scripture is encompassed by the presence of the Spirit of Christ. It is possible to argue that there is a direct identity between the substance or matter of the Bible and the transcendent Word and an indirect identity between the letter (*gramma*) and the Word. There is an inseparable relation but not an absolute identity between God's Word and the scriptural witness (cf. Ex 4:14-16; Ps 139:6; 1 Pet 1:10; 1 Cor 7:12, 25).

When the letter is separated from the Spirit who brings us life and salvation, it becomes a written code that kills (2 Cor 3:6).

Barth argued cogently that while there is not an *identity* or *coalescence* between the written Word of God and the revealed Word (as in a major strand of Protestant orthodoxy), there is nevertheless a *correspondence* by virtue of the inspiring work of the Spirit. Yet this correspondence is imperceptible to reason; it can be grasped only by faith. My own preference is to speak of a *conjunction* between the Word of God and sacred Scripture by the action of the Spirit. What we hear is not simply an echo or reverberation of the Word of God but the very Word of God who speaks in and with the biblical preacher—not by necessity but by an act of free grace.

The scriptural writings are not stenographic notes of God's audible voice. They constitute a human witness that becomes at the same time a divine witness through the revealing action of God on the writers, the writings and the readers. It is possible to read the Scriptures, even memorize them, and still fail to perceive the mystery of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ (Jn 5:39).

If we make an absolute identity between the words of the Bible and the Word of God, then every command in Scripture becomes a universal or absolute command. We would then have divine sanction to put witches to death (cf. Ex 22:18). I cannot accept James Packer's view that "the biblical writers' thoughts" are, "strictly and precisely, the communicated thoughts of God."³⁹ Not every idea expressed in Scripture is the "mind of Christ," but every idea can become the vehicle of the mind of Christ.

The Bible is an instrumental norm for faith but not an absolute norm. Yet it is a real norm and not one that can be summarily dismissed. It communicates binding truth but truth that is not at our disposal. I reject the position of Auguste Sabatier: "As soon as the distinction is made in our consciousness between the word of God and the letter of holy Scripture, the first becomes independent of all human form and of all external guarantee."⁴⁰ This may be true for some theologians, but to

old to it in an absolute fashion manifestly contradicts the wisdom of the Reformers as well as the fathers of the church.

The proclamation of the church is likewise an instrumental norm and must be distinguished from the Word of God itself. Yet the sermonic witness, if it is grounded in Scripture, is inseparable from the Word of God. Paul rejoiced that when the Thessalonians received the Word of God, they accepted it "not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers" (1 Thess 2:13). In 1 Peter 1:25 "the good news which was preached to you" is identified with the Word of God. The Second Helvetic Confession is unequivocal: "The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God" (chap. 1).⁴¹ The sermon is distinct from the Word but inseparably connected with it.

One might say that the Bible is the Word of God in a formal sense—as a light bulb is related to light. The light bulb is not itself the light but its medium. The light of God's truth is ordinarily shining in the Bible, but it is discerned only by the eyes of faith. Even Christians, however, do not see the light in its full splendor. It is refracted and obscured by the form of the Bible, but it nonetheless reaches us if we have faith.

Warfield gave the helpful illustration of light (the divine Word) filtering through a stained-glass window in a cathedral.⁴² I wish to carry it further. I see the light of the sun illuminating the biblical figures or pictures on the window. But these pictures are also flawed by blemishes and shadows, reminding us of their participation in the real world of decay and death. It is up to the biblical exegete to distinguish between the overall picture or story and markings that are only incidental to this story.

Some conservatives (for example, John Warwick Montgomery), trying to show the inseparable unity of the Bible and revelation, have seized on Marshall McLuhan's dictum that the medium is the message. The medium is indeed part of the message, but it is an instrument, not the source, of the message. I hold that the message of revelation is explicit in some parts of the Bible and implicit in others. All parts bear witness to it, for there is nothing superfluous in the Bible, as even Schleier-

macher acknowledged on rare occasions.

Yet our final authority is not what the Bible says but what God says in the Bible. To be sure, God says what his witnesses say, but he says much more. Indeed, some things that his witnesses say fall short of the full picture that God invites us to see (cf. I Pet 1:10–11).

This point is made poignantly clear by Gregory of Nyssa:

I have heard the Divinely inspired Scriptures disclose marvellous things about the transcendent Nature—yet what are they compared with that Nature Itself? For even if I were capable of grasping all that the Scripture says, yet that which is signified is more. . . . So it is also with the words said about God in Holy Scripture, which are expounded to us by men inspired by the Holy Spirit. If measured by our understanding, they are indeed exalted above all greatness; yet they do not reach the majesty of the truth.⁴³

The qualitative transcendence of divine truth over the earthen vessels by which it is made known was an abiding theme of the magisterial Reformers. Calvin often described the Word of God as the heavenly doctrine of Scripture, and Scripture as the garment in which Christ comes to us. Indeed, “the highest proof of Scripture derives in general from the fact that God in person speaks in it.”⁴⁴ Luther made a distinction between the inner and outer word: the latter is the Scripture and the former the revelation of Christ. Thus the Bible is the cradle wherein Christ is laid and the swaddling clothes in which Christ is wrapped. Or the Word of God is the water that comes to us through the pipes (the written witness). For Heinrich Bullinger it is the teaching of the apostles that “is the doctrine of God and the very true word of God.”⁴⁵ Scripture, he said, is called the Word of God not because of the printed letter or the human voice that can be comprehended by the flesh but “because the meaning, which speaks through the human voice or is written with pen and ink on paper, is not originally from men, but is God’s word, will and meaning.”⁴⁶

Many Anabaptists also drew this distinction between the Word of God and the Bible. Hans Denck wrote in 1528: “I hold Holy Scripture above

human treasures, but not so high as the Word of God, which is living, powerful and eternal; . . . for it is as God himself is, Spirit and not letter."⁴⁷ Bernhard Arnold, founder of the Bruderhof, depicted the Word of God as living before the Bible was even written.⁴⁸

This critical demarcation between spirit and letter is also characteristic of the Puritans and Pietists. Richard Sibbes regarded "the word of God" as "ancienter than the Scripture," which is "but that *modus*, that manner of conveying the word of God."⁴⁹ According to John Goodwin, Christian faith is based not on any book or books but on the gracious counsels of God concerning the salvation of the world by Jesus Christ, which indeed are represented and declared both in Translations and Originals, but are essentially distinct . . . from both."⁵⁰ For Philipp Spener, the luminary of German Pietism, the Bible contains an outer word (the printed page) and an inner Word (the understanding given by the Holy Spirit).⁵¹ "The Word of God is that which shows, impresses, and brings the mind of Christ into our hearts."⁵² Similarly, Charles Spurgeon cautioned that the mere letter in which the promise is put profits us nothing: "It is the spirit of the promise; it is the life of the Spirit running through the veins of the promise that alone can profit you."⁵³

For Jonathan Edwards "God's Word is really *God's* Word when it is accompanied by the Spirit dwelling in the human heart; when unaccompanied by the Spirit it is simply another natural, human word."⁵⁴ In his view the human words of Scripture effect faith not by their own power but by a divine cause operative in them.

Accepting Scripture both as the Word of God and as the carrier and vehicle of the Word, Abraham Kuyper, nineteenth-century Dutch Calvinist evangelical, placed the accent on its instrumental character. His break with rationalism was decisive: "At no single point of the way is there place . . . for a support derived from demonstration or reasoning."⁵⁵ He spoke of the inspiration of the biblical writers and the content of their witness but disclaimed the magical rendition of sentences. He was critical of both subjectivistic Pietism and barren scholastic orthodoxy. The latter lost sight of the fact that "the inspiring motive for

theology must always come from the subject."⁵⁶

This same reluctance to identify Scripture and the Word of God was discernible in the evangelical Holiness preacher Joseph Smith. According to Delbert Rose,

Smith cautiously distinguished between the Word of God and the Scriptures. The Word of God existed prior to and in some instances apart from the Scripture for centuries, and even Jesus' words . . . were not in written form at first. . . . Having the *body* of Scripture without the Spirit who inspired them is to be without the Word of God. To have the Word of God one must have both the letter of Scripture and the living Spirit illuminating that letter to the believing mind.⁵⁷

One can see that Barth's typology of the three forms of the Word of God—the living Word, the written Word and the proclaimed Word—rests on solid Christian and evangelical tradition. This very distinction originated during the Reformation with Bullinger.⁵⁸ Barth insisted that only when the written or proclaimed word is united with the revealed Word does it become revelation. At the same time he affirmed something like a perichoresis between the forms of the Word of God, for the living Word, Jesus Christ, encompasses both Scripture and the sermon based on Scripture.⁵⁹ As I have indicated in a previous volume, this typology should be extended to include the inner word, the voice of conscience, for this too when united with Jesus Christ becomes an infallible criterion for faith and practice.⁶⁰

With considerable acumen George Eldon Ladd defined revelation as an event plus the inspired interpretation.⁶¹ My one criticism is that he left out the third necessary ingredient: inward illumination. Revelation has three facets: historical, propositional and experiential. The culmination of revelation, says Daniel Stevick, "is not a book but a believing person, not sentences but the new society in Christ."⁶² Revelation reaches its goal in the life history of the reader and hearer. There is no revelation apart from the incarnate Word and the written Word. But likewise revelation does not exist unless the Holy Spirit brings the meaning and impact of this Word to bear on human beings, and this means

the creation of a holy community—the fellowship of love.

The Bible is both the revelation and the means and bearer of revelation. It is revelation cast in written form and the original witness to revelation.⁶³ It is a component of revelation and a vehicle of revelation. It objectively contains revelation in the sense that its witness is based on revelation, but it becomes revelation for us only in the moment of decision, in the awakening to faith. Scripture is not simply a pointer to revelation (as Torrance sometimes describes it) but a carrier of revelation. Scripture is the mediate source of revelation, but only Jesus Christ is the original or eternal source.

Truth and Error in Protestant Orthodoxy

Protestant orthodoxy signified a valiant attempt to conserve the truths rediscovered in the Reformation by bringing philosophical resources to the aid of faith. Already in the sixteenth century Philipp Melanchthon tried to show that Aristotle could help the Christian articulate the formative principles of faith and ethics. In his *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* Melanchthon declared that "Aristotle wrote concerning civil morals so learnedly that nothing further concerning this need be demanded."⁶⁴ In sixteenth-century orthodoxy, reason was still for the most part subordinated to revelation. In the seventeenth century reason acquired growing importance as an instrument for interpreting scriptural truth. It was never the primary norm, but it now functioned as a secondary norm. In the eighteenth century it became an independent norm for many theologians.

While trying to remain true to *sola Scriptura*, Protestant orthodoxy could at the same time seek rational and empirical supports for faith. The Bible and human reason came to function as dual authorities for the Christian. The certainty of faith was transposed into an intellectual certainty. The witness of the Spirit in our hearts was not enough: evidence was garnered to show that the affirmations of Scripture corresponded to reality. Faith was presented in a manner calculated to appeal "to the mind's desire for symmetry, harmony, and comprehensive-

ness."⁶⁵ Method in theological thinking bore the unmistakable imprint of Descartes and Leibniz: certainty came to be contingent on clarity and precision.⁶⁶ The proofs for the existence of God, the plausibility of the biblical miracles and the trustworthiness of the biblical narratives were all elevated into prominence in theology.⁶⁷

A rationalistic thrust had already appeared in Calvin, who saw miracles and prophecy as giving confirmation to the truth of the gospel. He also appealed to reason as well as to Scripture, even claiming that "the Lord has instituted nothing that is at variance with reason."⁶⁸ This did not prevent him from recognizing that reason in its fallen state is misdirected and cannot prepare the way for faith. Only when we exceed the capacity of our understanding and rise above ourselves can we apprehend the truth of faith.⁶⁹ "In regard to divine truth . . . human discernment is so defective and lost that the first step of advancement in the school of Christ is to renounce it."⁷⁰

Luther could also appeal to natural wisdom, though his main emphasis was on revealed wisdom. Human beings in their fallen state can know something of the moral law of God, even have a sense of the power and holiness of God, but this knowledge only makes them ripe for idolatry. For both Reformers the natural knowledge of God renders us inexcusable before God; it does not prepare the way for faith.

On the whole, Protestant orthodoxy did not naively equate the Bible and revelation, though its language sometimes left this impression.⁷¹ Some theologians distinguished between the external *forma* (the letter of Scripture) and the internal *forma* (the gospel).⁷² Similarly, a distinction was drawn between the form and matter of the Bible, the first indicating the writing or *gramma* of Scripture and the second the saving message of Christ.⁷³ Due acknowledgment was often given to the ineradicable gulf between God's own wisdom (*theologia archetypa*) and the human or earthly reflection of this wisdom (*theologia ektypa*).⁷⁴ Orthodox theologians also differentiated between the historical and normative authority of Scripture. Only that which Scripture commands and proclaims has normative authority. What is described as having hap-

found in history has historical authority.

In the mainstream of Protestant orthodoxy the Bible is the *norma normans non normata*. It judges tradition but cannot be judged by tradition. Here the later theologians were entirely in conformity with the reformers. Yet they still tended to equate the Bible as a book with revelation. This view was less evident in the early stages of Reformed orthodoxy, which generally used "the Word of God" in a wider sense than simply the Scriptures to indicate, according to Heinrich Hepppe, "all that God had spoken to the fathers in diverse ways and in latter times by his Son."⁷⁵ Later orthodoxy came to see the Bible as a transcript from God, thus detracting from the mystery of revelation.

Although a static concept of revelation gradually gained predominance over a dynamic concept, this was not true for all of orthodoxy. Matthias Flacius Illyricus (d. 1575) posited a *Sache* or content that constitutes the heart and center of Scripture and for the sake of which Scripture exists.⁷⁶ David Hollaz distinguished between what God has revealed (the absolute principle) and the scriptural witness to this (the relative principle).⁷⁷ Francis Turretin identified revelation with the divine wisdom to which Scripture directs us.⁷⁸ Peter Martyr entertained a similar view.⁷⁹

The mainstream of Protestant orthodoxy from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century generally held to the correlation of Spirit and Word. At the same time, it was customary to see the Bible as the source of revealed truth and the Spirit as the instrument by which this truth is known. Calvin maintained that the Spirit of God is himself the source of revealed truth and the Bible the instrument by which the Spirit makes it known. Interestingly Charles Hodge contended in the first chapter of his *Systematic Theology* that the Holy Spirit's role is limited to the application of the rule of faith, not to the shaping of this rule.⁸⁰

In the later orthodoxy (eighteenth-twentieth centuries), which fuses into modern fundamentalism, the rationalist note becomes still more evident. The spirit of Enlightenment rationalism was readily apparent in Jean-Alphonse Turretin (d. 1737), who never used the phrase *testi-*

monium Spiritus Sancti, insisting that any reasonable person could be convinced of the divine origin of Scripture by objective proofs.⁸¹ Warfield described revelation as “the correlate of understanding” having “as its proximate end . . . the production of knowledge.”⁸² Gordon Clark does not hesitate to speak of “verbal revelation”; his adherence to innate ideas is incontestably closer to the Age of Reason than to the Reformation.⁸³ According to William Shedd, theology aims for a knowledge that is “free from contradictions.”⁸⁴ In Bernard Ramm’s judgment, the modern evangelical stress on propositional revelation is another version of Hegel’s myth of pure language, which eliminates any distance between a concept in the mind and spoken words.⁸⁵

This kind of rationalism stands in patent contradiction to Calvin’s description of the relation of faith and reason:

The Gospel towers over the insight of the human mind so that those who are considered intellectually of the first rank may look as high as they like, but they never reach its eminence. . . . The duller the human mind is for understanding the mysteries of God, and the greater its uncertainty, the surer is our faith, which is supported by the revelation of the Spirit of God.⁸⁶

Barth gave this astute critique of later Protestant orthodoxy:

The earnestness and zeal of the study now quite newly devoted to the Bible hardly needs stressing; it should, however, also be noted that it was not so much a case of man being open to the Bible as of the Bible having to be open to men at any price; man did not so much allow the Bible to be master as think that he should and could obtain quite definite instructions, powers and blessings from it.⁸⁷

Against later orthodoxy and fundamentalism, I hold that the words of the Bible are revelatory but not revealed; they conform to the revelation and convey the revelation through the Spirit. The propositions in the Bible are the result of revelation, the concrete embodiment of revelation and the vehicle of revelation. I agree with Küng that propositions of faith are not directly God’s word but “at best God’s word attested and mediated by man’s word: perceptible and transmissible by human propo-

ings."⁸⁸ We do not hold to faith in propositions but to propositions of faith.

In fundamentalism "revelation is turned into a thing, an object, a thing-in-itself; it is packaged, externalized—'inscriptured.'"⁸⁹ A. W. Tozer was severely critical of those who teach that "if you learn the text you've got the truth."⁹⁰ They "see no beyond and no mystic depth, no mysterious heights, nothing supernatural or divine. . . . They have the text and the code and the creed, and to them that is the truth."⁹¹

Rationalistic orthodoxy fails to grasp the dynamic, inaccessible nature of revelation. God's Word cannot be frozen in the pages of Scripture just as it cannot be packaged or manipulated by the clerics of the church. Our final authority is not the Bible as a book or the Bible in and of itself but the Bible penetrated by the Spirit and discerned by Spirit-filled people.

Revelation does not consist of revealed truths that are objectively "there" in the Bible but rather in God's special act of condescension and the opening of our eyes to the significance of this act. Revelation is not exclusively objective but objective-subjective (cf. Is 53:1; 55:11; Eph 1:18; 2 Pet 1:19-21). Can there be a sound unless there is someone to hear it?

I heartily agree with Carl Henry that God reveals himself not only in acts but also in words. But does God reveal words and statements, and, if so, are they identical with the biblical words? Is there not a qualitative distance between the speech of God and the writing of humans? E. Stanley Jones reminds us that the Word became flesh, not printer's ink. Yet in a secondary sense the Word does also become printer's ink in that the word of truth must be inscribed before it is adequately received in human history. I affirm not only the Word incarnate but the Word inscribed.

We need to hold on to a double truth: the Bible is both God's testimony about himself and the human writers' inspired testimony about God (Sigmund Mowinckel).⁹² God becomes incarnate in a person, Jesus Christ, not in words. The Bible is not the incarnate word of God, but it

is the document of the revelation of God's word.

Like orthodox Protestants, Roman Catholics are accustomed to speaking of "revealed truths." Modern Protestants prefer to speak of "revelatory events" or of "revealing truths" (Fackre). My preference is to speak of "truths of revelation"—truths that rise out of revelation and therefore presuppose a conceptual content in revelation. If revealed truth, as traditionalists understand it, is equivalent to the meaning of the event, then we have common ground. I do not hold to revealed doctrines, but I can affirm truth that is revealed and that finds itself set in the form of doctrine. The event of the resurrection is virtually the same as the truth of the resurrection, for no event in the Bible is meaningful without an inspired interpretation.

It is important to affirm both the absolute character of God's self-revelation in Christ and the relative (but not necessarily erroneous) character of this revelation as it is articulated and documented in history. I agree with the judgment of Catholic theologian Karl Adam that "even God's supernatural revelation, even all those truths . . . taught us by divine revelation . . . do not enter our consciousness in their original nature . . . but are mediated through human conceptions and notions."⁹³

Scripture is one step removed from revelation, and the sermon two steps removed. Yet through the action of the Spirit an analogical relation can be discerned between what the prophets say and what God says. The truth of revelation is objectively present in the Bible, but this truth is the invisible presence of the living Christ, which is veiled by the scriptural words as well as disclosed through them.

Brunner has given the helpful illustration of a phonograph record to make clear the paradoxical relation between the *Sache* or substance of Scripture and the outer form.⁹⁴ The voice on the record is the living Christ; the record is the biblical writing. We hear this voice only when we play the record in faith, but we also hear other sounds, background sounds, and we need to distinguish what is essential and what is marginal. Where his analogy breaks down is that the Spirit of God speaks to every person in a slightly different way. God's Word is always new,

is specific and concrete.

W. Tozer distinguished between the voice of God "which is alive and free" and the written Word of God. It is only the present voice that makes the Bible a living witness to the truth. There must also be no confusion between the kernel of truth and the outward shell.

The mind can grasp the shell but only the Spirit of God can lay hold of the internal essence. . . . We have forgotten that the essence of spiritual truth cannot come to the one who knows the external shell of truth unless there is first a miraculous operation of the Spirit within the heart.⁹⁵

Later Protestant scholasticism not only veered in the direction of a monophysite doctrine of Scripture but also of a monophysite doctrine of Christ. The humanity of Christ was swallowed up in his divinity. There was a tendency to deny or to downplay the fact that Jesus experienced real temptations or that he was drastically limited in his knowledge of the world and history. The official confessions guarded against monophysitism and the major theologians were alert to this danger, but the danger was nevertheless real.

The Bible has a real humanity as do Jesus Christ and his church, the mystical body of Christ. We cannot posit within history a pure, distilled Word of God, free from all human traces. Ragnar Bring articulates Luther's general position: "Just as Christ was a man with an earthly mother, and lived in a specific time and place, in a concrete environment colored by its time, so also God gave his Word in the Bible in a specific language, in the milieu of a particular time."⁹⁶

According to Bring we should think of the Word of God as being "in, through and under" the words of the Bible.⁹⁷ Neither the flesh of Jesus nor the pages of Scripture are to be identified with the very Word of God, but they both embody this Word. The Bible's participation in the truth of divine revelation is analogous to Jesus the man's participation in Christ as God.

The Bible is a truly human book, but it is also a divine book, a truth that has been widely disregarded in Protestant liberalism. Jesus gave the

words of the Bible an authority tantamount to his own words: "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?" (Jn 5:46-47).

The Bible participates in the transcendent Word of God—not directly but through the Spirit of God. Jesus participated in the Word of God directly and immediately. Jesus was completely transparent to God, though only to the eyes of faith. The Bible is translucent to God. Jesus was one with the Logos of God; the words of the Bible are one with the Word of God only indirectly. Jesus was and is the Word in and of himself. The biblical writing is the Word of revelation symbolically or indirectly—by the action of the Spirit. This is not to imply that the Bible does not really transmit revelation; on the contrary, it functions as an effectual sign of revelation, as a veritable means of grace, because it is encompassed by the Spirit, who brings the written record to life again and again in the event of the awakening to faith.

We can call the Bible the Word of God for several reasons. First, it brings us a message from God. Its words are the symbols and channels of the revelatory core of meaning that comes from God. Second, it is the inspired witness to revelation: it is the written Word of God. Third, it is the vehicle and carrier of revelation, the source of continuing revelation. Finally, it is the document of the final revelation and by the action of the Spirit participates in this revelation.⁹⁸ Form and content penetrate each other in Scripture and cannot be separated (Herman Bavinck). The Bible can be held to embody revelation, for the truth of revelation resides in the Bible.

We must avoid saying that the Bible is partly the Word of God and partly the word of human authors. It is both at the same time. God unites his word with the word of the text and so enables us to hear his very voice in the words of the text. I cannot say with Richard Prust that "man is the author of the words" of Scripture and God is the author of the doctrine.⁹⁹ The Bible is both a human witness to revelation and revelation itself through human words.

It is permissible to say that the Bible as the Word of God has two

natures—the human and the divine. What is accessible to the natural person is only the human side. The divine side—the content and goal of Scripture—is made available to us through faith by the action of the Spirit. Critical scholarship by itself can do little more than cast light on the Bible as a historical document. Only the Spirit can plumb the depths of the mystery that constitutes the inner unity of the Bible—the mystery of Christ and his gospel.

That the Bible contains a palpably human and therefore culturally conditioned element does not make it any less the Word of God. It is precisely because its word is fully incarnate in history, concrete and specific, that it is the Word of God. The Word of God is not a timeless idea but a historical word with power. The revelational content of Scripture is ultimately derived from God, but it is relayed to us through human language and human interpretation. God has chosen to speak and act through human instrumentality so that his Word has a historical focus as well as an eternal ground.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer expressed well my own position:

The norm for the Word of God in Scripture is the Word of God itself, and what we possess, reason, conscience, experience, are the materials to which this norm seeks to be applied. We too may say that the Word of God and the word of man are joined in Holy Scripture; but they are joined in such a way that God himself says where his Word is, and he says it through the *word of man*. The word of man does not cease to be a temporal, past word by becoming the Word of God; it is the Word of God precisely as such a historical temporal word.¹⁰⁰

Yet the Word of God is not the text itself but the divinely intended meaning of the text. This meaning is hidden in the text or, better, in the context of wider Scripture. The Word of God is the eternal wisdom of God—not to be equated with human wisdom, which is also reflected in the Bible. The wisdom of God can only be spiritually discerned (1 Cor 2:14). The text is naturally discerned. Yet it is only in and through the text that we receive the spiritual wisdom from above.

For Luther the Word of God is both more broad and more narrow than the Bible. It is more broad because the voice of Christ cannot be restricted to the Bible. Moreover, we hear this voice better through preaching than reading. It is more narrow because not all parts of the Bible portray Christ. When Luther uses “the Word of God” in the broad sense to include the law, then the Bible becomes virtually equivalent to the Word.

The Bible is a revelation not only of God's person but of God's truth. Revelation is therefore both personal and propositional, or, better, dialogical—reminding us that we are dealing with an encounter of minds as well as of wills. The Word is both personal address and idea. It is not a timeless truth or an eternal idea in the Platonic sense but an incarnate idea, a word in history. It is both the action of God and the language of God. But the language of God is hidden and veiled as well as disclosed in the human language of the Bible.

We must not say with Protestant liberals that the human language of Scripture is “reformable” in the sense of being capable of correction. But we can say that it is “reformable” in the sense of being clarified or restated. Yet our efforts to expound and clarify must never be divorced from the biblical language. We must return again and again to the language of Canaan if our clarifications are to be consistent with the original meaning given in Scripture.

Protestant orthodoxy reduces the revelatory event to the biblical witness. Existentialist theology abstracts the event of revelation from the biblical witness. My criterion is not only the event but also the biblical interpretation of this event. Yet this interpretation is not immediately accessible to us in the pages of Scripture. What is perceptible to the eyes of the scholar is conflicting or diverging interpretations. The overall interpretation, which is there implicit in the Bible (explicit in parts of the Bible), is a gift of the Spirit. The key to the true interpretation is the Holy Spirit.

The fundamentalist error is to restrict the Word of God to the Bible. The neo-orthodox error is to imply that the Word of God has only an

fundamental relation to the Bible by virtue of the fact that God time and again speaks through it. The reconstituted, critical orthodoxy that I am opposing views the Word as inseparable from the Bible, as its ground and goal. The Bible is reconceived as the divinely appointed means by which God makes his Word known to the church in every age.

Revelation in Nature and History

Is there a revelation of God in nature? Yes, but only the one who believes perceives it as revelation. The natural person misunderstands it. Fallen humanity has a general awareness of God but not a true understanding. Such knowledge is sufficient to condemn but not to save. Such people know only the wrath of God, not the love of God. Natural theology is a blind alley because it is based on a knowledge that is deceptive and distorted. Yet a theology of creation is mandatory. Once we are enlightened by the Spirit of God, we can perceive the refracted light of the glory of God in his creation. Instead of a general revelation that can furnish the groundwork for special revelation, it is more biblical to speak of a universal reflection of God in nature that only those standing within the circle of faith can appreciate.

Modern evangelicalism betrays its indebtedness to the Enlightenment by positing a general revelation that frequently forms the basis for a natural theology. In this perspective, revelation is wholly objective and static rather than objective-subjective and dynamic. Millard Erickson illustrates this position: "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. Regardless of whether anyone actually observes it, understands it, and believes it, it is nonetheless . . . objectively present."¹⁰¹ Erickson is enough of a Calvinist, however, to be convinced that human sin prevents such a revelation from setting us on the road to salvation.¹⁰² Nonetheless, his rationalism is apparent in his tacit endorsement of the view that even the resurrection of Jesus Christ "can be proved by reason, just as any other fact of history."¹⁰³

In most of the twentieth century the emphasis has been on divine

revelation in history. This is true of neo-orthodox theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr and Oscar Cullmann, neoliberals like William Temple and Wolfhart Pannenberg, and neofundamentalists like John Warwick Montgomery. Whereas biblical theologians like G. Ernest Wright referred to the mighty deeds of God in history,¹⁰⁴ Pannenberg appeals to the revelation of God in universal history.¹⁰⁵

While history is indeed the locus of God's revealing action, we must be careful not to view history as the source of our knowledge of God. History is not the basis of divine truth but the occasion or medium by which this truth is known. Faith has its immediate roots in history, but its ultimate roots are in eternity. We must not say with Pannenberg and Gordon Kaufman that the ultimate arbiter of theological validity is the movement of history itself.¹⁰⁶ This could mean that particular history will be interpreted in the light of universal history. In my perspective all of history can be adequately understood only from the vantage point of eternity, which breaks into history at one particular point or series of points—the events leading up to and culminating in Jesus Christ.

Historical knowledge of the human Jesus is not sufficient to yield the revelational meaning of his life and work. When Peter confessed Jesus as the Son of God, his Lord replied: "Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (Mt 16:17).

Christian faith is thoroughly historical, for the revelation of God takes place in a particular history, but it is much more than historical. It signifies the illumination of both history and nature from the vantage point of eternity. I cannot agree with Pannenberg, who maintains that history is the foundation of faith and not simply the condition for faith. Barth had these cautionary words: "Whoever says history is not yet saying revelation, nor Word of God as the Reformers called the Bible, nor the subject to which man must submit himself with no possibility of becoming its master."¹⁰⁷

If faith is severed from history we could end in idealism or mysticism. If faith is grounded in history we could end in relativism or naturalism. Divine actuality and historical facticity need to be united in our contin-

ing inquiry concerning the fact of Jesus Christ (Thomas F. Torrance), but they must never be confused with one another.

Revelation and Reason

The enigmatic relationship between revelation and reason revolves around a number of questions. Is there a point of contact between revelation and reason, God and humanity? Is God the Wholly Other or the ground and depth of humanity? Does revelation fulfill or supplement human reason, or does it abrogate reason? Does grace fulfill or build on nature, or does it radically alter nature?

We are created in the image of God and therefore reflect his power and goodness. The image of God is not a participation in the divine essence but a relationship that must be cultivated and strengthened. Because the imago Dei has been defaced by sin, we are alienated from God even while being inescapably related to him.

The human race is separated from God not only by ontological fate but also by historical guilt. In order for God to be known, he must make himself known, and he has done this once for all times in the incarnation of his Son, Jesus Christ. But only those with eyes to see and ears to hear can discern the light that shines in Christ to the whole world.

Revelation is not esoteric (Ps 119:130; Is 45:19), but it is also not open to general reasonableness (Is 6:9-10; Jn 8:43, 47). God reveals himself only to those who turn to him in repentance and faith, and even then we know God only partially and brokenly, for the human mind is incapable of discerning the depths and heights of infinity.

In our empirical climate today it is easy to make perceptibility the criterion for truth. But what we perceive is the phenomenal world, not the noumenal, which transcends the reach of human perception and imagination. The truth of revelation is inaccessible to the empirical eye; only the eye of faith or an illuminated reason can discern it. The apostle's prayer for the Ephesians was "that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incom-

parably great power for us who believe" (Eph 1:18 NIV). In the words of Luke's Gospel: "He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures" (Lk 24:45 NKJ).

Reason can be enlisted in the service of revelation, but it cannot establish the truth of revelation. It can reflect on the meaning of revelation, but it cannot prepare the way for revelation. It can be seized by the Word of God and used for his glory, but it cannot of itself lay hold of God's Word or directly contribute to his glory.

Revelation contradicts not rationality but rationalism. It can bring reason into its service, but it strongly opposes autonomous or disobedient reason. Faithful reasoning is a sign that revelation has found its way into the inner recesses of our being. It does not presuppose that the sinner on the basis of his or her resources has discovered or gained possession of the treasure of God's grace and mercy.

Is there a point of contact (*Anknüpfungspunkt*) between fallen humanity and divine revelation? This was the question that divided Barth and Brunner in 1934, and I am closer to the former than the latter, who posited a capacity within the human person for revelation. One may readily acknowledge that outwardly there is a point of contact—with the interpreted message of revelation, the sermonic proclamation. One must be able to understand the words of the preacher before beginning to comprehend the meaning of the message. But this is a sociological, not a theological, point of contact. The meaning or truth of revelation can be discerned only through the power of the Spirit. We must be given new eyes to contemplate the heavenly mysteries that hitherto had dazzled us (Calvin).

There is a point of contact, but it is none other than God's Spirit, who implants faith within us, thereby enabling us to understand and believe. I do not affirm a "capacity for revelation" within humanity, as Brunner expressed it. There is a formal point of contact, which is best seen as sociological or psychological, not theological. But there is no material point of contact, that is, a power or light resident in humanity that enables us to apprehend the truth that God reveals to us. It is possible

lack of a point of contact between Christians and non-Christians, who both share a common existential situation and in many cases a common language and culture. But there is no point of contact between the transcendent meaning of the Word of God and the gropings of the human imagination.

The truth of faith is intelligible but not comprehensible. It is knowable but incommensurable—resisting comparison with other truths. It is available through the power of the Spirit but impenetrable by the human mind. It can be received by reason but not possessed or mastered by it. It includes mystery, expressed in the form of paradox, that defies rational penetration; yet this truth can be acknowledged and acclaimed by reason. It cannot be fully assimilated into a rational system, for the love of Christ surpasses all human knowledge (Eph 3:19).

Revelation does not contradict the structure of reason, but it opposes the direction of human reasoning. It also transcends the horizon of reason: " 'Things beyond our seeing, things beyond our hearing, things beyond our imagining' . . . these it is that God has revealed to us through the Spirit" (1 Cor 2:9-10 NEB). Revelation not only expands our horizon but brings us a wholly new horizon, a radically new perspective on life and the world. Grace brings us the foundation for a new nature; it does not simply build on the nature that already exists. The old nature must not be cultivated or elevated but crucified (Rom 6:6; Gal 5:24).¹⁰⁸

As an act of incomparable grace, God's revelation brings us a new purpose, a new direction, new desires, a new goal, a new heart. The psalmist implores, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me" (Ps 51:10). Jeremiah deftly expresses the radical character of the new life: "I will give them a different heart and different behavior so that they will always fear me, for the good of themselves and their children after them" (Jer 32:39 JB). Barth reiterated this note: "If God's Law is written on his heart, if his heart is circumcised, if he acquires a new and different heart, this means that he himself, in so far as this has a decisive bearing on his whole being and act, becomes another man."¹⁰⁹ "When a man becomes a Christian, his natural origin

in the procreative will of his human father is absolutely superseded and transcended."¹¹⁰ Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus is a classic example—someone who was once a militant unbeliever becomes a zealous defender of the faith through being personally confronted by the risen Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 9:1-18; 22:1-16).¹¹¹

Revelation by its very nature is salvific, for its goal is the conversion of the sinner. It is correlative not simply with knowledge but with the new being in Christ. This does not mean, however, that revelation necessarily eventuates in salvation—only that the human subject is introduced to salvation. Our eyes may be opened to the glory of God in Christ, but in the folly of sin we can close our eyes once again, we can sin against the Holy Spirit, and forfeit the salvation assured to us by virtue of divine election.

If the biblical text were itself revelation, then human reason could directly apprehend and even critique the Word of God. The Word of God is not, however, the surface meaning of the text but its revelational meaning—the text understood in the light of the clarification provided by the Holy Spirit, which brings home to us its christological and soteriological significance.

It should be readily apparent that my stand is in contradiction to a biblicism that bases the authority of the Bible on its divine perfection as a supernatural book. The authority of Scripture is then located in its form as an inspired book rather than in its content—the saving message of the cross and resurrection of Christ. In the biblicist view the divine inspiration and factual inerrancy of the Bible guarantee the truth of its message, and faith is directed first of all to the Bible as a sacred object rather than to Christ, the Lord and content of the Scriptures. With Luther and Calvin I affirm that the authority of Scripture is self-authenticating by virtue of its divine content—the heavenly gospel—and the object of faith is from first to last Christ himself.¹¹²

Appendix A: Conflict in Theological Method

My own position becomes more intelligible when seen against the back-

end of the age-old debate on theological method. I shall here present a methodology of theological method that shows where the great theologians have stood on this issue.

First, there are those who make the confession "I believe because it is absurd" (*credo quia absurdum est*). One believes not simply despite the evidence of reason but because reason finds the object of faith absurd or unintelligible. That the gospel is folly to the wise is a sign not of its falsity but of its truthfulness. The presumption of reason must be overcome before faith can begin to employ reason in its service. Faith is here understood as being against reason—yet this is always fallen or sinful reason. Once reason is humbled it can be used in the service of the glory of God. Yet even a faithful or enlightened reason will find the gospel paradoxical and absurd not because the gospel is irrational but because sin still resides in the Christian and will time and again bend reason to its own purposes. Faith is thus a venture in the darkness, a leap into the unknown. Theologians who could be called fideists in this sense include Tertullian, the early Luther, Kierkegaard, the early Barth and Jacques Ellul.

A second group of thinkers, mainly philosophers, adhere to the adage, "I will to believe in order to find meaning in life." Here faith is portrayed as an adventure into the future or a journey into the unknown. Its object is not the gospel but an inscrutable mystery or the transcendent reality of moral law. Faith is not a gift of God but a heroic act of the will, an act that must be renewed again and again. This is not fideism so much as psychologism in that faith is interpreted mainly in psychological, not theological, terms. It is a disposition of the psyche or soul rather than the grace of God at work in the situation of preaching and hearing, bringing new life to the sinner. The focus is on the psychic benefits of faith rather than on the alteration of one's status before God. Faith is held to be heterogeneous from reason: it concerns not the realm of knowledge but what cannot be known—at least theoretically or scientifically. Faith is an act of practical reason rather than theoretical reason. Thinkers who belong in this category are Immanuel Kant, William

James, Miguel de Unamuno and Hans Vaihinger.

The next category is "I believe in order to understand" (*credo ut intelligam*). Here we venture forward in trust and commitment in the expectation that we will come to understand as new light is given to us. This position can be called a fideistic revelationalism. The object of faith is not the absurd or the absolute mystery but the wisdom of God incarnate in a particular person in history. Faith is not so much against reason as above reason. It concerns realities that transcend the compass of human reason but nevertheless have rational content. The object of faith is incomprehensible but not unintelligible. Faith seeks understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*) as it moves forward in a darkness that is steadily being illumined and dispelled by light. Faith is certain of the truth of its object even in the midst of its uncertainty concerning itself. It is not so much a leap in the dark as a walking in the light, though the element of trust and venture is still there, since this light is invisible to the empirical eye. Theologians who can be associated with this position include Augustine, Anselm, Luther, Calvin, Barth and G. C. Berkouwer.

Radically different is the rationalist option—"I understand in order to believe" (*intelligo ut credam*). This approach rests on the premise that faith is congruous with reason. A thoroughgoing rationalism is presupposed in *credo quia intelligo* (I believe because I understand). Neither of these stances necessarily rules out a decision of the will, but such a decision must be in accord with the light gained by reason and experience. Faith is conceived of as a rational commitment rather than a leap into the unknown. We should believe only what can be supported on rational grounds (Abelard). Or the path to true understanding lies in "the cooperation of divine grace and the power of reason" in the hearts of those who believe (John Scotus Erigena).¹¹³ Indeed, "true authority is nothing other than the truth that has been discovered by the power of reason and committed to writing by the holy fathers."¹¹⁴ Even when faith is seen as the beginning of the Christian pilgrimage, it is reason that brings certainty and meaning to the venture of faith. Truth cannot con-

dict truth, and thus truth discoverable by reason will reinforce rather than undercut the commitment of faith. Among theologians of a rational bent are Clement of Alexandria, John Scotus Erigena, Abelard, John Locke, Charles Hodge, Benjamin Warfield, Fernand van Steenberghe, Althart Pannenberg, Carl Henry, Gordon Clark, Edward John Carnell¹¹⁵ and Norman Geisler.

Theologians such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas affirm both *credo ut intelligam* and *credo quia intelligo*. For Augustine we cannot properly believe unless we understand what is to be believed.¹¹⁶ For Thomas reason can prepare the way for faith and also confirm the truthfulness of the affirmations of faith. We cannot induce faith by reason, but we can remove barriers to faith. Both Augustine and Thomas acknowledge that prefaith understanding does not dispose one to believe, but the latter more than the former would allow that such an understanding may facilitate faith if prevenient grace is at work in the inquirer.

The last category is "I obey in order to know." Here we find most of the great mystics of the church who emphasize that purgation must precede illumination. Faith is the result of obedience rather than of dialectical reasoning. Understanding too follows from obedience, praxis comes before logos. This position also resonates with the slogan of liberation theologians: "There can be no understanding of the gospel without the performance of the gospel." Doing the truth is prior to knowing the truth. Although this view certainly has some biblical support (Jn 3:21; 1 Jn 2:3), it overlooks the many other passages that point to the priority of being over action (Mt 7:16-20; Col 3:16-17; 1 Jn 3:9; 5:5).

Kierkegaard, a classic representative of fideism, could nevertheless make remarks that place him close to mysticism and ethicism: "The Christian thesis is not *intelligere ut credam*, nor is it *credere ut intelligam*. No, it is, Act according to the precepts and commandments of Christ, do the will of the Father—and you shall have faith."¹¹⁷

In his earlier writing Barth evidenced the influence of Kierkegaard,

describing faith as a leap into the darkness of the unknown. As he progressed in his thought, however, Barth moved away from the Kierkegaardian stance toward Augustine and Anselm. He still affirmed faith as trust and venture, but this is only one element in faith and not the decisive one. The decisive element is the presence of God himself in our venture of faith, undergirding it and directing it. In the midst of the uncertainty that accompanies faith as a human act and venture, faith proceeds on the basis of a certainty that comes directly from God. "In the uncertainty which is characteristic of this human action as it is of all others, faith takes place, so far as its object is concerned, with the firmness which it is given by this object, with a certainty as hard as steel."¹¹⁸ Psychologically considered, faith will always appear as a leap into the darkness of the unknown, but theologically faith is anchored in an illumination that pierces through this darkness. In his later years Barth was accustomed to speaking of faith as "acknowledgment" rather than "leap," though he never abandoned the existentialist thrust so conspicuous in his early writings.¹¹⁹ At the same time, his criticisms of both Luther and Kierkegaard in this area show that his affinities are with an older tradition in the church—going back to Augustine and Anselm.

In a similar fashion to the mystics and Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer acknowledged the priority of obedience over faith but regarded such obedience as a dead work of the law unless it eventuates in faith. Obedience may prepare the way for faith, but it cannot induce or generate faith. Bonhoeffer endeavored to hold the two in dialectical tension: "Only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes."¹²⁰ He was acutely aware of the danger of works-righteousness that accompanies an emphasis on obedience before faith, but he also deplored the opposite peril—cheap grace. Yet when in a later period he affirmed that before a person "can know and find Christ he must first become righteous like those who strive and who suffer for the sake of justice, truth, and humanity,"¹²¹ he seems to come dangerously close to making the Christian life of self-giving service the foundation and pivotal center of our salvation.

My own position gives priority to faith over understanding—yet faith is not an irrational leap but as a commitment involving reason as well as will. Faith is an awakening to the significance of what God in Christ has done for us, an awakening that eventuates in a commitment of the whole person to the living Christ. This commitment entails reason, will and feeling, but it is basically an act of the will. We believe against the presumption of our reason but not against the structure of our reason. We commit ourselves to that which is beyond the limits of human reason but not beyond the compass of reason itself (the *logos*). Once we have faith, we seek deeper insight into what we believe. I affirm both faith seeking understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*) and an intellect seeking direction from faith (*intellectus quaerens fidem*).¹²² Understanding must constantly return to faith just as faith constantly strives for deeper understanding. Faith is not mere opinion but a “steady and certain knowledge” (Calvin)—yet knowledge concerning realities beyond the compass of human reason. It is also only a partial knowledge that will finally be supplanted by a direct vision of God.

Faith is characterized by certainty of the promises of God, but uncertainty concerning itself. Faith excludes doubt, which is the intellectual form of sin, as well as the despair of life and of God, the very essence of sin.¹²³ Doubt and despair will invariably accompany faith because sin lives on even in the sanctified Christian, but faith opposes these instruments of death just as grace opposes sin. In faith we are lifted above our doubts and despair into the peace that passes understanding, the consolation that the storms of life cannot shake. We can go forward on our journey strengthened by the grace that undergirds our faith and makes our faith fruitful in works of service and sacrifice.

Faith is not a heroic will to believe but an obedient willing made possible by the working of the Spirit of God within us. It entails the submission as well as the illumination of reason. Faith is taking up the cross and following Christ, not embarking on a pilgrimage without a destination. Faith is not an unceasing search for God but a firm commitment to the will of God informed by an understanding of the Word

of God. Faith is certain because it takes us out of ourselves, out of our despair and anguish, into a relationship to the living Christ that cannot be severed by the powers of sin, death and the devil. Faith is advanced toward a future that is assured to us by the promises of Jesus Christ in Holy Scripture.