

# **The Doctrine of the Word of God**

(Preliminary Draft, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition)

## **Part Two: God's Word in Modern Theology Modern Views of Revelation**

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In Memory of  
Edmund P. Clowney  
(1917-2005)

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## Part Two: God's Word in Modern Theology

The rest of this book will follow the pattern of my three perspectives. In Part Two, I will discuss the views of revelation and Scripture held by mainstream liberal theologians. That is our "situational perspective," the theological situation into which we teach and preach the authority of God's word. Part Three will expound how Scripture itself defines the word, the normative perspective. Part Four will discuss the means by which God's word comes from God's lips to our hearts, the existential perspective.

### 3. Modern Views of Revelation

Following the example of Scripture, I prefer the term "word of God" to "revelation" when considering God's communication with his creatures. But the mainstream modern theology of around 1650 to the present has chosen to speak most often of "revelation," and perhaps it is best to present those modern concepts in terminology different from that emphasized in Scripture.

I shall speak of "modern" and "liberal" theology somewhat synonymously, as those types of theology that do not accept the absolute authority of the Bible. There are, of course, nuances in these terms that I cannot discuss in this summary; so I will be describing as liberal some who, like Karl Barth, prefer not to be described that way. It is usually best to describe people in the terms they have chosen to describe themselves; but that cannot be an absolute rule.

What distinguishes modern views of revelation from orthodox (to my mind biblical) views is their affirmation of human *autonomy* in the realm of knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Intellectual autonomy is the view that human beings have the right to seek knowledge of God's world without being subject to God's revelation. It first appears in the history of thought in Gen. 3's narrative of the Fall, in which Adam and Eve make their decision to disobey God's personal word to them. In their decision, they affirm their right to think autonomously, even to the point of contradicting God himself.

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<sup>1</sup> My emphasis on autonomy is very much influenced by the work of Cornelius Van Til. Herman Dooyeweerd also protested, at great length and depth, the "pretended autonomy of theoretical thought." See Dooyeweerd's *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (Lewiston, NY: Edward Mellen Press, 1997). I have some disagreements with Van Til, and more with Dooyeweerd. But I think these two thinkers deserve far more attention than they have received by the philosophical and theological communities.

The spirit of autonomy underlies every sinful decision of every human being. As I noted earlier, it is irrational in an important sense. Paul tells us in Rom. 1:18-32 that human beings know God clearly from his revelation to them in creation, but that nevertheless they choose to repress this knowledge and exchange it for a lie. How could anyone imagine that contradicting the master of the universe could be a wise decision? This foolishness mirrors the biblical paradigm of irrationality, the foolishness of Satan himself, who (again in the face of clear knowledge) tries to replace God on the throne of the universe.

In this Satanic project, man seeks to become his own Lord. He denies God's ultimate control, authority, and presence. He either denies that there is such a Lord, or he ascribes Lordship to something in creation. If he denies that there is a Lord, he embraces *irrationalism*, the view that there is no ultimate meaning in the universe. If he ascribes Lordship to something finite (i.e. idolatry), he embraces *rationalism*, the view that a Godlike knowledge can be obtained from the creation alone.

Of course, Satan and his followers embrace rationalism irrationally, for they have no right to insist that their minds are the ultimate criterion of truth. Similarly, they embrace irrationalism rationalistically, assuming the ultimate authority of their own minds. So in unbelieving thought rationalism and irrationalism are two sides of a single coin, though they actually contradict one another. That contradiction is part of the irrationality of it all. That irrationality permeates the whole fabric of human knowledge. So we can understand how the assumption of intellectual autonomy destroys knowledge.

Of course, as Rom. 1 shows, Satan and his disciples do have a clear knowledge of God, which they repress. But they have that clear knowledge of God in spite of, not because of, their commitment to autonomy. If they were consistent with their commitment to autonomy, they could not know anything at all.

We can see this spirit of autonomy in all sin. As in Gen. 3, sin assumes autonomy. It assumes that God does not exist, or that he has not given us a personal word. That is true of the sins of individuals, families, and nations. It is true of all types of sin: stealing, adultery, murder, deceit. It is also true of intellectual sin: denying the truth in the face of clear knowledge. Why should anyone imagine that the intellect could be left out? The mind is part of our being. It contributes to sin as much as our wills and feelings, as much as our arms and legs. So the spirit of autonomy appears in the history of human thought.

In the history of religion, human beings devise idols, false gods, and ascribe to them some kind of ultimacy, though pagans at their best have understood that their false gods had no ultimate control, authority, or presence. But around 600 BC, something new appears in western thought, beginning among Greek thinkers in Asia Minor. These thinkers, like Thales, Anaximenes, and Anaximander, were given a unique name, because their thought was significantly

different from the previous religious teachers and writers. The name was *philosopher*. In itself, the term is a good one, designating love of wisdom. Christians too should engage in philosophy in this sense. But the Greek philosophers received that name, not because of their general love of wisdom, but because of a unique feature of their thought. The feature was a commitment to intellectual autonomy. The philosophers rejected the authority of religion and tradition and insisted on the sole ultimate authority of human reason.

Greek philosophy fell into the paradox I have ascribed to all would-be autonomous thought, that of rationalism and irrationalism. They were rationalists, in that they embraced the ultimate authority of human reason, and irrationalists in that they denied the existence of any adequate source of order in the world. Their project, sophisticated as it became in later thinkers like Plato and Aristotle, was the impossible task of imposing a rational order on an essentially irrational world, or as they put it, categorizing matter by form.

In the early centuries after Jesus' resurrection, biblical thought came to influence the philosophical discussion. The Christian thinkers made use of Greek philosophy, but they modified it considerably by their allegiance to the biblical world view. They did not, however, break away entirely from the Greek conception. The *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) begins with a distinction between two disciplines: philosophy, which operates by "natural reason" alone, and theology, which appeals to divine revelation. In Thomas's thought, these two spheres overlapped in certain ways. But in his work there was always some confusion as to the role of revelation in the sphere assigned to natural reason. He at least suggests that intellectual autonomy is possible and legitimate in some degree and at some areas of thought.

The seventeenth century AD brought a change analogous to the birth of philosophy around 600 BC. The medieval "scholastics" like Aquinas had tried to combine biblical thought with Greek philosophy, and they had created their own Christian philosophical traditions to which all later philosophers were expected to subscribe. But as Thales rejected the traditions of the Greek priests and poets René Descartes (1596-1650) and others rejected the traditions of scholasticism.

Wanting to achieve absolute certainty, Descartes resolved to doubt anything he did not "clearly and distinctly perceive to be true." For him, all the teachings of the church, as well as the philosophical traditions, were in this sense subject to doubt. The only idea that he clearly and distinctly perceived to be true was the fact that he himself was thinking. So the famous *cogito, ergo sum*, "I think, therefore I am." From this foundational truth, Descartes proposed to erect, by logical deduction, the whole fabric of human knowledge. Among the truths in that fabric were the existence of God. Descartes did profess to be a Christian. But his philosophy and theology were built on a foundation of human autonomy which, as we have seen, is radically unbiblical.

Intellectual autonomy has been the rule in philosophy down to the present, with a few exceptions. Indeed, this principle has deeply infected theology as well.

A younger contemporary of Descartes, Baruch (or Benedict) Spinoza (1634-1677) attempted to carry on Descartes' program more consistently, by developing his philosophy in the form of a geometric system in his *Ethics* (1674). But Spinoza also applied the principle of intellectual autonomy to more explicitly theological subjects. In 1670, he published his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* in which he dealt with the nature and interpretation of Scripture and its implications for politics. In this volume, he defends freedom of thought in society by attacking superstition. He contends that the Bible, rightly interpreted, leaves reason absolutely free. Rational knowledge is just as much revelation as anything in Scripture. Prophecy cannot give knowledge of phenomena beyond that available to reason alone. Miraculous events, which contravene the laws apprehended by reason, can never take place. Spinoza denies the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and many other traditional ideas about the origin of Scripture. Essentially, he proposes that we read the Bible as any other ancient text, subjecting it to the criteria of human reason. It is God's word only in the sense that God endorses all the conclusions of reason. And of course Spinoza understands reason to be autonomous.

Spinoza's approach to Scripture (similar to that of others in the seventeenth century such as Thomas Hobbes and Richard Simon) rather quickly became the dominant view of mainstream academic theology. The Cambridge Platonists in seventeenth century England such as Cudworth and Whichcote affirmed the primacy of reason, as did the Deists, such as Cherbury and Tindal. These were the harbingers of the so-called "enlightenment" of the eighteenth century, of which Voltaire, Diderot, and Lessing are well-known representatives. In the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries, the Germans led in the field of biblical criticism, with names like H. S. Reimarus, D. F. Strauss, F. C. Baur, Julius Wellhausen, Johannes Weiss, Albert Schweitzer, and Rudolf Bultmann contributing to the liberal tradition. Today the "Jesus Seminar" in the United States (John Dominic Crossan, Robert Funk, Marcus Borg and others) makes regular headlines for its pronouncements on what can and cannot be believed in the New Testament.

Some of these are more positive, some more negative as to the historical and doctrinal value of Scripture. But I can safely say that nobody in this succession ever took seriously the central issue—the acceptability of autonomous reasoning in epistemology. Conservative scholars and churchmen did take issue with this principle, or at least they refused to accept it. But within the liberal movement itself, there was no consideration of the alternative. Intellectual autonomy was accepted as a presupposition, as something fundamental, not to be argued about. It was thought that anyone who disagreed was simply not a scholar, not qualified to do serious research.

Many did disagree and therefore maintained the authority of Scripture as the church had always done before Spinoza. We recall in this connection the names of biblical scholars E. W. Hengstenberg, J. F. K. Keil, Franz Delitzsch, Theodor Zahn, B. B. Warfield, Robert D. Wilson, Geerhardus Vos, J. Gresham Machen, George E. Ladd, F. F. Bruce, Edward J. Young, Meredith G. Kline, Ned Stonehouse, Donald Carson, Richard Bauckham, and Craig Blomberg. Certainly these men qualify as scholars, if we are permitted to employ a less tendentious definition of scholarship than that common in the liberal community.

But the major university faculties were nonetheless dominated by those who embraced the principle of intellectual autonomy. It all happened very quickly. There was no academic debate as to whether it is right for human beings to exercise reason without the authority of God's revelation. There was not much argument as to whether the universities should change their time-honored commitments to divine revelation. Rather, major figures simply began teaching from the new point of view, and there was no significant resistance. They accepted the assumption of autonomy and saw to it that their successors accepted it too. Campus politics certainly played a major role in this development. The conservatives did not know what hit them.

Soon, because pastors were trained in universities, the liberal view spread to the churches, so that by the late nineteenth century most mainstream denominations in America were tolerating that approach. In 1924, 1274 ministers of the Presbyterian Church, U. S. A., signed a document called the *Auburn Affirmation*, which denied that the inerrancy of Scripture, the virgin birth of Christ, the substitutionary atonement, the Resurrection of Christ, and his miracles, should be tests of orthodoxy in the denomination. In the 1930s ministers in the denomination were disciplined for insisting that the church's missionaries believe in the above-listed doctrines. The liberal commitment to intellectual autonomy had made these doctrines optional, and many church leaders regarded them as literally untrue. Those who objected to these developments (contrary to liberal claims of "tolerance") were given no respect or power in the councils of the church.

This change was astonishing. The adoption of intellectual autonomy as a theological principle was certainly at least as important as the church's adoption of the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity in 381, or the doctrine of the two natures of Christ in 451. Yet without any council, without any significant debate, much of the church during the period 1650 to the present came to adopt the principle of intellectual autonomy in place of the authority of God's personal words. But this new doctrine changed everything. Given intellectual autonomy, there is no reason to accept supernatural biblical teachings like the doctrine of the Trinity or the two natures of Christ. The virgin birth, miracles, atonement, resurrection, and glorious return of Jesus are on this basis no longer defensible. Some thinkers rejected these traditional doctrines outright. Others reinterpreted them in some

symbolic fashion. In both cases, these doctrines had to meet the criteria of autonomous human reason.

If these doctrines are true, they must be true because of God's personal testimony. There is no way that they can be validated on the authority of autonomous reason. Indeed, if human reason is autonomous, the God of the Bible does not exist, for his very nature as the creator excludes the autonomy of his creatures. And in fact nothing at all can be validated by autonomous reason, for as we have seen such reasoning leads to a rationalist-irrationalist dialectic, which destroys all knowledge. For that pottage, much of the church has forsaken its birthright, God's personal word.

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