

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

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

### **Part Two: God's Word in Modern Theology Revelation and History**

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

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## **5. Revelation and History**

As we have seen, theologians debating revelation have often discussed reason as a norm for evaluating revelation. So I have presented reason as the "normative perspective" of the debates.

We have seen also, however, that some theologians have wanted to deny or limit the authority of reason in the interest of some other category. The most common of these is history. I argued in the last section against the notion that history could somehow be a substitute for reason in Christian theology. Rather, the discussion of history requires reason. To discuss history is to engage in rational analysis.

Sometimes, however, we think of reason as a faculty for constructing abstract systems of thought, like Euclid's geometry, in which every idea is linked to every other by a tight chain of logical deductions, based on self-evident axioms. Certainly, it is often observed, Christian theology cannot be such a system. For it does not deal primarily with abstract or general truths, as does Euclid's system. Nor does it, like geometry, deal primarily with truths that are timeless, that are always true. Rather, Christian theology is about a *gospel*, good news: news about events in history. In that sense it is true that revelation is historical. So if we identify revelation with axiomatic systems and timeless truths, then revelation is historical rather than rational.

Of course, it should be evident that I think it wrong to identify reason with axiomatic systems and timeless truths. These are some forms of rational thought. But rationality is not limited to them. Reason is also important in examining history, in understanding things that happen in time. So as we begin to discuss history, I don't intend to leave rationality behind. Reason is crucial in the examination of history. But it must be a reason that is subject to God's word, not conceived as autonomous.

Or look at it this way: in the previous section, we looked at reason as a norm, as a tool of analysis. In this section we look at the data that theological reason seeks to analyze. As a norm, reason seeks to understand a situation. History is that situation, conceived in broadest terms. So reason is the normative perspective, history the situational.

The term *history* can refer either to a series of significant events, or to a (rational!) account of such events. As such, in both senses, history is crucial to Christian theology, even though the term is not often found in English translations of Scripture. As events, history provides the content of Christian faith. Revelation (well, "special" revelation) is an account of those events. So revelation is history and history is revelation.

The content of Scripture has often been summarized by three events: creation, fall, redemption. These can be further subdivided into many other events: God's creative acts over six days, Satan's temptation, the sin of our first parents, God's curses and promises upon them, the flood, God's covenant with Abraham, and so on. This series of events leads to the coming of Christ, his perfect life and teachings, his atoning death, resurrection, and ascension. Events following the work of Christ on earth are the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost and the

spread of the gospel through the earth. Revelation also holds out the promise of Jesus' return, the final judgment, and the eternal destinations of the saved and the lost.

In Chapter 2, I discussed three ways in which the biblical God is different from all other beings that have been called god. The biblical God is an absolute tripersonality, he relates to the world as creator to creature, and he holds the office of covenant Lord over all things. The centrality of history is also a unique feature of biblical religion. For biblical faith, everything turns on the historical events of creation, fall, and redemption.

In Buddhism, there are, to be sure, stories of the Buddha's life, focusing on his enlightenment under the Bodhi tree. But what the Buddha learns under the Bodhi tree is not about specific historical events. Rather, he learns general truths, such as that life is suffering. On the Buddhist view, these are true at all times. They are true whether or not Buddha discovered them, and they would be true even if Gautama Buddha had never lived. Some forms of Buddhism, to be sure, honor stories about miracles performed by the Buddha. But to most sophisticated Buddhists these miracle tales are an embarrassment. They detract from the main thrust of Buddhist theology, in which the path to enlightenment is not through miracle, but through a life based on the four noble truths and the noble eightfold path.

The same is true of Hinduism, Taoism, and other religions. Judaism and Islam would seem to be exceptions. But neither of these admits to any historical basis for human salvation from sin. As with Buddhism, they refer to history only to cite teachers like Moses and Mohammed who tell us how to live. If indeed these two religions are exceptional, however, it is because they are both strongly influenced by the Bible. This is the same point I made about their views of God in Chapter 2.

So the centrality of historical events is foundational to biblical faith, and unique to it. It is therefore not surprising that many theologians in the liberal tradition came to assert that revelation is historical events, not spoken or written words. The Bible itself points to the "mighty acts of God" (Ps. 106:2, 145:4, 12, 150:2) as the subject-matter of our praise. Obviously God's acts in the context of creation, fall, and redemption do reveal him. They show us what kind of God he is. For example, the New Testament often singles out the atonement as the chief revelation of, indeed the definition of, God's love (John 3:16, Rom. 5:8, Eph. 2:4-5, 1 John 3:16, 4:8-11, Rev. 1:5).

It is tempting to say, therefore, as some theologians have, that these events are a more fundamental revelation of God than the words about those events. On the other hand, it is the words that make the events accessible to us. A frequent pattern in Scripture is that a prophet will predict an event, then a passage narrates the event, and then further commentary interprets the event. Word, event, word. But even the narrative of the event is by word. The nature of an

event is that it occurs at a specific time and place. Words are the *news* of the event, the necessary media to report that event to people who weren't there, and to interpret its significance. If the event, say, of Jesus' atonement, had taken place without witnesses to spread the news in words, we would not benefit from it today.

So James Barr, in *Old and New in Interpretation*,<sup>1</sup> says,

The progression of the story is given not only by what God does but also by what he says. Indeed, yet more, there is no progression given by God's deeds and sayings alone, but only one when both of these are combined with the deeds and sayings of men. It is possible to make a chain of things done by God, and regard the sayings attributed to him as human meditation upon the things done. If we do this, we should be frank that it is also a modern rationalizing device, which departs from the form, and therefore from the spirit, of the literature itself.

Barr was no fundamentalist; indeed he was a very sharp critic of conservative Christianity. Yet he was also a sharp critic of the theologians who tried to limit revelation to the actions of God narrated in Scripture and to disparage the authority of his words reported there. It's fairly obvious when you think about it. Scripture represents God both as acting and as speaking, and it doesn't prefer the one to the other.

Those who prefer God's acts to his words do so, not because of anything in Scripture, but because they demand the right to consider biblical history autonomously. Divine words get in the way, when human beings try to place their own interpretations on God's actions.

Hence, through the history of liberal theology, a number of theologians have sought to place emphasis on history, the acts of God, as opposed to revealed words. Among these are Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1899), "acts of God" theologians of the mid-twentieth century like Oscar Cullmann (1902-1999) and G. Ernest Wright (1909-1974), and the later school of Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928-). In Ritschl's understanding, theology should be based on the attempt of historians to find and understand the "historical Jesus." For Cullmann, revelation consists of historical events interpreted by faith. For Pannenberg, revelation is general history, understood by reason to validate the Christian faith. Others such as Karl Barth (1886-1968) also had much to say on the role of history in revelation, as part of his larger theology of revelation.

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<sup>1</sup> London: SCM Press, 1966, 21. He adds, "Such a device has more serious consequences than at first appears, for it damages the picture of the personal God of the Bible."

For Ritschl, history is history interpreted by autonomous reason. What is authoritative in the historical events is not the events themselves, or truths derived from those events, but “value judgments” that arise from the work of the historian. Pannenberg’s thought is similar, except that Pannenberg is more interested in biblical eschatology as a reference point for understanding the Bible’s interpretations of its history. For Cullmann, the events in question may be perfectly natural in themselves, perhaps unremarkable; but when one looks at them in faith they become significant. In a way, what is important for Cullmann is not the event itself, but faith’s interpretation of the event. So although he speaks much of the primacy of the acts of God, he actually ascribes more authority to interpretation than to fact.

None of these repudiates the principle of human intellectual autonomy. Indeed, all presuppose it. For all of them, history is events interpreted by autonomous human thought. This is why, I think, in the end Cullmann backs away from history, embracing faith instead. But the relation between faith and event in his thought is obscure.

Barth distinguished between two concepts of history, expressed by two German words, *Geschichte* and *Historie*. *Historie* consists of events available for the inspection of secular historians, who use the standard techniques of autonomous historiography. Barth, like Cullmann (but not like Ritschl or Pannenberg) hesitates to base the Christian faith on *Historie*, so defined. But he recognizes in Scripture the centrality of such events as Christ’s incarnation, atonement, and resurrection.<sup>2</sup> So he explains these as events in history taken in a different sense: *Geschichte*. It is very difficult from Barth’s writings to get a clear idea of what *Geschichte* is. Barth’s main concern, I think, is to insulate it from the methods of autonomous, “objective” historians. *Historie* is indeed accessible to them. In it, they are free to believe or disbelieve, to determine for themselves its significance. But Barth does not want to give them such freedom with the great events of redemption.

Nevertheless, if *Geschichte* is to be truly independent of autonomous historical science, Barth thinks that it must be of a very different character from *Historie*. Events of *Historie* take place at particular times and places. Those times and

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<sup>2</sup> Many in the church have attempted to make major distinctions between events such as the atonement and resurrection, and “secular” events such as the Battle of Waterloo. Compare (1) the medieval distinction between nature and grace, (2) Luther’s distinction between the “two kingdoms,” (3) attempts among liberal theologians and some evangelicals to distinguish between Scripture’s authority for “faith and practice” and for supposedly secular areas of life, (4) Meredith G. Kline’s attempt to distinguish between the “realm of the holy” and the “realm of the common.” I reject all of these as lacking biblical support. (For argumentation, see DCL.) God’s lordship, and therefore the scope and authority of his word, extends to all of life.

places can be investigated, so that the historian can make an authoritative judgment as to whether they happened or not. *Geschichte* must, however, be immune to such profane analysis. So the events of *Geschichte* must be removed from calendar time and space.

Another distinction: events of *Historie* can affect only those who directly experience them when and where they can occur, or those who hear authoritative reports from scientific historians. But events in *Geschichte* can affect all people equally.

The idea of *Geschichte* as a series of events without specific time and place, which affect all people, and can be known apart from the mediation of historical scholarship is an odd notion. It seems even odder for Barth to place the incarnation, atonement, and resurrection into that realm. So all sorts of questions have arisen as to whether Barth believes these events “really happened” in the time-and-space world. To say the least, Barth’s answer to this question is unclear. He does believe that the Resurrection, for example, took place in literal history; but he represents this event as a pointer to a higher reality that can only be described as *geschichtlich*.

Clarification of this issue will have to be left to Barth scholars more expert than I. I should say, however, that this unclarity is due to the fact that Barth accepts the notion of intellectual autonomy. *Historie* is precisely the sphere in which such autonomy holds sway. So Barth believes that secular scholars should be perfectly free to criticize the historical assertions of the Bible. But as a Christian Barth senses the danger of exposing the central truths of redemption to such negative criticism. *Geschichte*, whatever other purposes it may serve, supports that concern, but it introduces much confusion.

It would be better simply to repudiate the legitimacy of autonomous historical scholarship. Then there is no need for two histories. There is only one, which occurs in time and space, and which is accessible to historians who regard God’s word as their ultimate standard of truth. There is nothing in the Bible that suggests the kind of distinction Barth sets forth, and Barth’s formulation brings nothing but confusion to discussions of biblical epistemology. In Scripture, it is simple: we believe in the incarnation, the cross, and the resurrection because of the apostolic testimony (as 1 Cor. 15:1-2, 11), which amounts to God’s personal words.

The whole discussion began with G. E. Lessing (1729-1781) who said in his *On the Proof of the Spirit and Power* that there was a “big, ugly ditch” between “accidental truths of history” and “necessary truths of reason.” Now it is right to say that necessary truths of reason, like  $2 + 2 = 4$  are not derived from an examination of historical events. And it is true that most historical inquiries do not yield the kind of certainty that we associate with mathematical and logical truths. But Lessing intended to draw a theological implication from this observation. As

an enlightenment rationalist, he believed like Spinoza that autonomous reason is the ultimate criterion of faith. So his “ditch” was not only a ditch between history and the necessary truths of reason, but also between history and faith.

Many have been troubled by Lessing’s ditch. How can we believe in Christ on the basis of historical events, when those events are so uncertain? No historical event is absolutely certain, it seems, let alone events that took place in a vastly different time and culture. The theologians of history we have considered in this chapter were all somewhat intimidated by this chasm. Ritschl and Pannenberg thought they could cross the chasm by autonomous historical scholarship. Cullmann felt the need of something else to bridge the gap, which he called faith. Barth thought that he had to distinguish a new kind of history, in which there was no gap, but in which historical scholarship played no role.

In this respect, Barth follows Immanuel Kant. For Kant the world of ordinary experience in time and space, the world of “phenomena,” is knowable by autonomous human reason; indeed its fundamental structure is created by reason. Even “religion within the limits of reason” is subject to the criteria of autonomous rationality, as I indicated in the previous chapter. That would include knowledge of the historical events recorded in the Bible. But Kant also speaks of the “noumenal” realm, the realm of things as they are in themselves, in which reason is incompetent. We can, nevertheless, imagine what the noumenal world is like and develop beliefs about it by a kind of “faith.” Although the existence of God, for example, cannot be demonstrated by reason, we should believe God exists for the scientific and moral advantages that belief gives us. Barth’s *Historie* is much like Kant’s phenomenal realm; Barth’s *Geschichte* is much like Kant’s noumenal. Barth leaps Lessing’s ditch by placing faith in *Geschichte*, much as Kant placed it in a posited noumenal. Both he and Kant do this because they agree with Lessing as to the autonomy of reason in historical scholarship. They concede ordinary history in time and space to secularists, in order to be able to make theological statements in a different realm, unfettered by historical scholarship.

But if we renounce the autonomy of historical scholarship, then the gap disappears. If God’s own testimony resolves all controversy, then the truths of redemptive history are not dubious or merely probable. They are certain, because God’s word is our ultimate criterion of certainty.<sup>3</sup> Historical scholarship

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<sup>3</sup> I shall indicate later that even with a soundly biblical epistemology, a believer may not become certain about everything in Scripture. There are questions of interpretation, and of course our level of understanding is subject to the sovereign decision of the Holy Spirit. But the uncertainties in our faith do not spring from the fact that history is essentially unknowable or uncertain. Nor should we imagine that there are no certainties in our faith. It is hard to conceive of any disciple of Christ who is uncertain, e.g., that Jesus lived, or that he rose

that proceeds with this presupposition will attain certainty about the main redemptive events of Scripture.

Then we are free to regard God's revelation as it is in the Bible: both divine acts and divine words, the words interpreting the acts and the acts as the subject-matter of the words. We study the events in the authoritative light of God's words, and we study the content of the words, which tell us of God's acts.

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from the dead. For such a disciple, these events become the *criterion* of certainty, the certainty by which all other certainties are tested. See Chapter 41.