

The Doctrine of the Word of God

(Preliminary Draft, 1st Edition)

Part Two: God's Word in Modern Theology Revelation and Human Subjectivity

John M. Frame

Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy
Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, FL

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

Table of Contents

Preface

Abbreviations of Frequently Cited Titles

Part One: Orientation

1. The Personal Word Model
2. Lordship and the Word

Part Two: God's Word in Modern Theology

3. Modern Views of Revelation
4. Revelation and Reason
5. Revelation and History
6. Revelation and Human Subjectivity
7. Revelation and God Himself

Part Three: The Nature of God's Word

8. What is the Word of God?
9. God's Word as His Controlling Power
10. God's Word as His Meaningful Authority
11. God's Word as His Personal Presence

Part Four: The Media of God's Word

12. The Media of God's Word
13. God's Revelation Through Events
14. God's Revelation Through Words: the Divine Voice
15. God's Revelation Through Words: Prophets and Apostles
16. The Permanence of God's Written Word
17. God's Written Words in the Old Testament
18. Respect for God's Written Words in the Old Testament
19. Jesus' View of the Old Testament
20. The Apostles' View of the Old Testament
21. The New Testament as God's Written Words
22. The Canon of Scripture
23. The Inspiration of Scripture
24. The Content of Scripture
25. Scripture's Authority, its Content and its Purpose
26. The Inerrancy of Scripture
27. The Phenomena of Scripture
28. Bible Problems
29. The Clarity of Scripture
30. The Necessity of Scripture
31. The Comprehensiveness of Scripture
32. The Sufficiency of Scripture
33. The Transmission of Scripture
34. Translations and Editions of Scripture
35. Teaching and Preaching
36. The Sacraments
37. Theology
38. Confessions, Creeds, Traditions
39. The Human Reception of Scripture
40. The Interpretation of Scripture
41. Assurance
42. Person-revelation: The Divine Witness
43. Human Beings as Revelation
44. Writing on the Heart
45. Summary and Organizational Reflections
46. Epilogue

6. Revelation and Human Subjectivity

We have seen that modern theologians have developed ideas of revelation drastically different from the traditional views of the church. They have substituted human reason for the personal words of God, as the ultimate test of truth. Some have also tried to locate revelation in history rather than in divine words, not only because of the actual prominence of history in Scripture, but because history seems more amenable to autonomous rational thought than

divine words. I have tried to show that it is biblically wrong to substitute either history or human rationality for the ultimate authority of God's personal words.

Another approach to revelation in liberal theology has been to identify it with a subjective event, something that takes place within the human heart. This view is most often associated with Friedrich E. D. Schleiermacher (1768-1834), often called the "father of modern theology." Schleiermacher was not pleased with the rationalism of earlier modern thinkers like Spinoza and Kant. He thought that the focus on reason was unsuitable to the distinctive nature of religion. To him, religion is based, not on reason, but on *Gefühl*, a German term that can be translated "feeling" or "intuition." Religion begins, he thinks, with a "feeling of absolute dependence," and God is, in the first instance, a name for that reality we feel dependent on. The Christian faith interprets that reality in terms of Jesus Christ. So Christian theology expresses the Christian religious affections in the form of speech. The feeling is first, the words (of Scripture and theology) a secondary expression of and reflection upon the feeling.

So for Schleiermacher, revelation is not the deliverances of reason as such, or the history presented in Scripture, but the feeling of God, the religious consciousness, that interprets the biblical history. Revelation is primarily subjective, not objective. It is not objective truths, but our subjective responses to objective truths.

Although Schleiermacher tries to lessen the emphasis on reason that was so strong in the work of his predecessors, we should note, however, that Schleiermacher's voluminous writings are not just expressions of feeling. They are rational *analyses* of religious feeling. And, as with others we have discussed, Schleiermacher gives no indication of bringing reason under the authority of divine words. His reasoning seeks to be *autonomous*. Autonomous feelings interpreted by autonomous reasoning. In fact, one suspects that Schleiermacher has limited revelation to feeling in part to avoid making religious feeling subordinate to divine words. So Schleiermacher's differences from the rationalists are not as great as he would have us believe.

Emotion and reason, I believe, are not sharply separate aspects of the mind.¹ Each affects the other, of course. Moreover, each defines the other in an important sense. Emotion can be understood as a kind of reasoning, in the sense that it is an appropriate or inappropriate response to data given to the person.² And reason is a kind of emotion: for when we arrive at conviction following a

¹ For more discussion of this relationship, see DKG 337-339, DG 608-11, DCL 370-82.

² Emotional responses tend to be more spontaneous, rational responses more labored; but there is a continuum between these, not a sharp division.

process of rational analysis, that conviction is very much a feeling, what I have elsewhere called “cognitive rest.”³

So when we pass from Spinoza to Schleiermacher, from reason to feeling as a judge of truth, we have not passed very far. The real issue is between those who accept and reject autonomy, not between autonomous reason and autonomous feeling. Similarly, there is not a great difference between Schleiermacher and those liberal theologians who have identified revelation with history. For what they consider history is either an achievement of autonomous reason (Ritschl, Pannenberg) or a datum malleable to subjective faith (Cullmann). Rationalism, historicism, and subjectivism, are three perspectives upon autonomous human thought. None are capable of dealing properly with God’s personal words.

Nevertheless, we should look at some more recent representatives of theological subjectivism, for many have followed Schleiermacher’s emphasis. Although Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) recognized an objective revelation in Scripture, he considered the objective truth of Scripture to be far less important than our subjective response to God. Emil Brunner (1889-1966) was deeply critical of Schleiermacher. Yet, following suggestions of Martin Buber (1878-1965) and Ferdinand Ebner (1882-1931), Brunner came to think that revelation in its highest sense was a personal encounter between God and the individual. The divine-human encounter cannot be described objectively. Indeed, the use of words depersonalizes it. Factual knowledge “about” God compromises the integrity of our knowledge of God himself. So revelation can never be identified with a spoken discourse or a written document. In this sense, it is subjective rather than objective.

Karl Barth, though his emphasis is elsewhere as we shall see, also identifies revelation with human subjectivity at a certain level. For him, Scripture is the word of God only as it “becomes” the word of God to an individual by a present event.⁴ Its being, as the word of God, is entirely in its becoming the word. We never “have” God’s word, but only the recollection of its being given in the past and the expectation or hope that we will hear it again in the future. Otherwise, he thinks, God’s words become objects, to be “possessed,” “manipulated,” or “preserved” by human beings. Thus, he believes, God loses control over his own words. So the biblical text should never be simply equated with God’s word. It is

³ DKG, 152-62.

⁴ More recent Barth scholars emphasize that for Barth, the Bible “is” the word of God; it does not only “become” the word. Indeed, it “becomes” because it “is.” But its “being is in becoming,” so its “being” the word of God is simply its capacity to become the word of God. In my judgment, the consequences are the same, whether the Bible “is” the word in its becoming, or whether the Bible merely becomes the word without being it. In neither case are we authorized to receive the words of Scripture as God’s personal words, except on those special occasions on which he chooses to speak through the Bible.

a human document, prone to error, even in its theological assertions. But that is of no concern to faith, in Barth's view. Whether there are errors in the biblical text is of no consequence: Errors do not prevent God from speaking his instantaneous, unpreservable words. The erroneous text may "become" the word of God anytime God wants it to.

I have some sympathy with Kierkegaard, who was wrestling with dead orthodoxy in the Danish Lutheran state church. He recognized the biblical importance of a living experience with God, in which God actually enters time and enters the experience of the individual. But his contrasts between objective and subjective tend to set asunder what Scripture brings together. In Scripture, subjective revelation is the Spirit's illumination of objective revelation. It brings the objective truth of Scripture into our hearts, communicating to us a vital personal relationship with Christ.

I have less sympathy for Brunner. His insistence that objective words and facts compromise the personal character of relationships is nonsense. It is not true on the human level. A friendship may sometimes be compromised when facts come to light, but just as often factual knowledge enriches such relationships. And Scripture never suggests that a factual knowledge of God's character, his words, and his deeds diminishes the quality of our friendship with him; quite the contrary.

As for Barth, his conception is also unbiblical. Scripture never says that "the being of God's word is in its becoming." Rather, in Scripture God simply speaks his personal words, and people are expected to believe, obey, rejoice, mourn, give thanks, etc. Revelation in Scripture is not something instantaneous, that appears for an instant and then disappears, leaving only its "recollection and expectation" as Barth says. Rather, revelation is to be preserved from one generation to the next (as Ps. 78:1-8). The Ten Commandments, written by the finger of God, were to be kept by the ark of the covenant, the holiest place in Israel (Deut. 10:5). That document is to be read over and over again, in every sabbatical year (Deut. 31:10-13). The apostolic tradition of the Gospel of Christ is also something given once for all that is to be preserved and guarded (Jude 3).

Does the objective preservation of the text compromise God's sovereignty over his word? Certainly not. The document is the constitution of God's covenant people. It is the very expression of his sovereign authority. It validates God's sovereign right to impose on his people everlasting ordinances. The objectivity of revelation is precisely what protects it from human manipulation.

Orthodox Reformed theology does not reject a subjective element in revelation, but it formulates it rather differently. In orthodoxy, there is both objective and subjective revelation. God reveals himself in creation and in Scripture, objectively. But that objective revelation is of no use to us unless the Holy Spirit illumines our hearts and minds. As sinners, we suppress God's revelation (Rom.

1 again). It is the gracious, regenerating work of the Spirit that enables us to understand, believe, and obey. So on the Reformed view there is a sense in which revelation is not completed until it becomes subjective by the Spirit's work.

The term *revelation* has various uses, some objective, some subjective. When a government official announces the year's budget in a document, we say that budget has been "revealed," even though nobody may have actually read the document. Einstein revealed his general theory of relativity to all, publicly, in 1915, even though few people on the earth could actually understand his proposal. That is objective revelation, like the revelation of natural revelation in Rom. 1, which reveals God clearly no matter how man chooses to respond.

But there are other cases in which something does not become revelation until someone actually knows it. The price of grain in China is public knowledge, but I don't know it. It has been objectively revealed, but it has not been revealed *to me*. Now in Rom. 1, the revelation is both objective and subjective. The passage does not contemplate anyone who is ignorant of this revelation or who has not responded to it. Rather, everybody knows it, and knows God (verse 21) through it.

A further distinction is also important if we are to understand the debate over revelation. There are different human responses to revelation: responses in unbelief and in faith. In Rom. 1, the response of the pagans is to repress the truth, exchange it for a lie, etc. But in Matt. 11:27, Jesus says "no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." Now Jesus here refers to a subjective revelation, a revelation that brings knowledge to the hearer, and indeed knowledge as part of a close saving relationship with the Father and the Son, a knowledge in faith. This meaning of *revelation* can also be found in Eph. 1:17, where Paul prays that God will give to the Ephesians "a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of (Christ)."

So we may distinguish three kinds of revelation: (1) objective revelation, (2) subjective revelation, received in unbelief, and (3) subjective revelation received in faith.

Now since Schleiermacher, liberal theologians have tended to say that revelation doesn't exist unless it is subjective, until someone knows it. They have tended to disparage the idea of objective revelation, the revelation that is "just there" in nature and Scripture regardless of what anybody thinks. Further, they have tended to believe that revelation is not revelation unless it is received *in faith*. So if someone has not come to believe, then he has not actually received revelation. This idea contributes to the universalistic tendencies in liberalism, for it regards those who reject God as those who have not received revelation, rather than (as in Rom. 1) those who have received it and have rejected it.

Scripture, however, as we have seen, speaks of both objective and subjective revelation, and of revelation received both in unbelief and in faith. All these kinds of revelation are important. Objective revelation is important, both because it actually exists, and because it creates an obligation to believe. (Rom. 1:20 puts the point negatively: it takes away our excuses.) Subjective revelation received in unbelief is important as an illustration of human depravity: man represses the truth, even when it is presented clearly to him. And subjective revelation received in faith, by the grace of God and the power of the Spirit, shows that God drives his word home to the hearts and minds of those he intends to communicate with as a Father and friend.

So for orthodox Reformed theology, there are both subjective and objective forms of revelation. For Schleiermacher and the subjectivist tradition, there is only subjective.⁵ And thereby Schleiermacher loses the element of *obligation*, which we earlier associated with the concept of *authority*. Revelation is not just what we feel, or even what we believe on the basis of feelings. It is what we *ought* to believe, what we are *obligated* to confess.

The present event, in which the Spirit draws our hearts into God's embrace, is an illumination of the word of God, the Gospel of Christ, already and permanently revealed (1 Thess. 1:5, 2:13).

There really is a subjective element in God's revelation, for God intends his words to be apprehended and understood. All true communication is objective (the content and the transmission) and subjective (the hearing and response). But the subjective element is a human response to God's objective personal words to us. Liberal theology has often sought to avoid the authority of God's personal words by eliminating the objective side of the communication. This enables man to judge God's word with his autonomous reason. That concept is unacceptable to Christian believers.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*. If you would like to discuss this article in our online community, please visit our [RPM Forum](#).

Subscribe to RPM

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [RPM](#), please select this [link](#).

⁵ As we shall see in the next chapter, Barth regards revelation in Christ as objective in a certain sense. But our knowledge of him is a subjective occurrence that cannot be expressed in objective truths.

