

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

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

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

**[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

## **7. Revelation and God Himself**

I have considered modern liberal views of revelation in terms of three themes representing our normative (reason), situational (history), and existential (feeling) perspectives. The word "perspective" indicates my judgment that these three

approaches are not very different from one another. Rather, they represent three aspects of a single approach, one that subordinates God's personal words to human autonomous thought.

In my judgment, these views are more right in what they affirm than in what they deny. It is not wrong to say that reason should judge matters of religion. It is wrong to say that such judgments should be made autonomously. It is not wrong to say that revelation centers on historical events. But it is wrong to insist on interpreting and evaluating these by autonomous historiography. Further, it is not wrong to say that revelation consists of feelings; that too is a legitimate perspective! But it is wrong to insist that those feelings be understood by autonomous thought.

There are other features of liberal thought about revelation that we will consider later in this text, on subjects such as hermeneutics, canon, the accuracy and purpose of Scripture. I postpone them, because these matters concern written revelation rather than revelation in general, and because they have attracted interest both in liberal and in orthodox theological traditions.

But something should be said here about one more theme that has appeared often in liberal theology, especially in the neo-orthodox writers of the mid-twentieth century. That is the theme that revelation is essentially identical with God himself. This broad statement puts talk of reason, history, and subjectivity into a larger context. Whatever we say about reason, history, and subjectivity, some theologians say, they are nothing more than means of putting us in touch with God himself.

We may recall the slogan common during that period: "God doesn't reveal information; he reveals himself." The purpose of this slogan was to demean the idea that God speaks to us in personal words, particularly words that state propositions. As a general refutation of the personal word model of revelation, this slogan is not very impressive. On the human level, there is no reason why someone cannot reveal himself through revealing information about himself. In fact, we regularly do that. It's almost impossible to imagine revealing yourself to someone without at the same time revealing information about yourself. And whenever we reveal information about ourselves, we are to some extent (not exhaustively, to be sure) revealing ourselves.

On the divine level, there is certainly no Scripture support for the notions that God never reveals information about himself, that such information tells us nothing about God himself, or that God's giving of information is not revelation. Consider the uses of "reveal" in Dan. 2:47, Matt. 11:27, and Phil. 3:15 and of "revelation" in Rom. 16:25, 1 Cor. 14:6, 26, Gal. 1:12, 2:2, Eph. 1:17, 3:3, Rev. 1:1. These constitute most of the New Testament occurrences of this word group. All of these passages present revelation as God communicating information. 1 Pet. 1:13 uses "revelation" to refer to Jesus' return, probably in

view of the fact that it is informative. The return of Jesus is glorious, a public display of his lordship that reveals Christ himself, and also many things about him.

Nevertheless, the equation of revelation with God himself can be understood in ways that merit serious theological discussion. Karl Barth's view is a case in point. We have seen that Barth engages the continuing discussions about the relation of revelation to reason, history, and subjectivity. But the heart of his view is that revelation is nothing less than Jesus Christ himself. Barth develops this position by showing that revelation has a Trinitarian structure: the Father is the Revealer, the Son the Revelation, and the Spirit the Revealedness. So when Barth defines revelation he focuses on the Son. He distinguishes three forms of revelation: Christ, Scripture, and Preaching. These are hierarchically structured. Christ alone is revelation in the fullest sense. Scripture may be called revelation insofar as it witnesses to Christ and insofar as the Spirit uses it as an instrument to bring God's word to its hearer. Preaching is revelation insofar as it witnesses to Scripture and thereby puts us in touch with Christ and the Spirit. Scripture and Preaching are not in themselves the word of God, but they can "become the word," and they "are" the word "in becoming."

It is theologically right to say that in a sense God is revelation. God is a being who in his very nature is communicative. He speaks, not only to creatures, but within his Trinitarian existence, Father to Son, Son to Father, both to the Spirit and the Spirit to both of them.<sup>1</sup> And we should note the specific biblical references to Christ as the Word of God which we shall examine more directly in a later chapter. This attribution is most explicit in John 1:1, but is also evident in 1 John 1:1-3, and Heb. 1:1-3. Note also Paul's use of Deut. 30:11-14, which speaks of the nearness of God's word to Israel, to refer to the nearness of Christ in Rom. 10:6-8. Note also the related ideas that Christ is God's wisdom (1 Cor. 1:30) and that he is God's name (Phil. 2:10-11; compare Isa. 45:23. When the Word becomes flesh, he speaks with authority greater than any scribe (Matt. 7:29).

But it is also evident in Scripture that the Triune God reveals himself through personal words, received through such means as reason, history, and human subjectivity. Should we say with Barth that Christ is the true revelation and that the personal words are revelation in a lesser sense, as witnesses to Christ? Or would it be better to say that in those personal words Christ himself comes to us and speaks? I will argue the second possibility later on.

What is clear from Scripture, however, is that the identity of revelation with Christ does not compromise the authority of God's personal words. If anything, it underscores that authority. For to dishonor God's personal word is to dishonor

---

<sup>1</sup> See DG, 470-75, and my further discussion in a later chapter of this book.

Christ. To disobey the personal word is to disobey Christ. To disbelieve the personal word is to disbelieve Christ.

Even if God's personal words, from an ontological point of view, are something "less" than Christ himself, they are not less authoritative, less reliable, less powerful.

When the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, he did not merely stand somewhere so that people could look at him and absorb some silent influence from him. Rather he *taught*. That is what we would expect from an absolute *person*. He said to Pilate, "For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world- to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice" (John 18:37). His word was uniquely authoritative (Matt. 7:29), because *he* was uniquely authoritative. The fact that he was the Word meant that his words were of ultimate authority.

So the Christological nature of revelation does not permit us to disparage God's personal words in any way. Rather it enhances their authority and power. Peter says, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

It is best to see Christ, not as a "form" of revelation superior to other forms, but as the *speaker* of God's personal words.<sup>2</sup> So our response to God's personal words is nothing less than our response to Christ himself. In God's personal words, Christ himself comes to engage our belief and obedience.

Barth does make the value judgment that Christ himself is somehow more authoritative than the words given in Scripture, or any words or sentences given to human beings. We ought to reject that judgment. Christ as lord is our supreme authority. But to say that he is more authoritative than his own words (i.e. more authoritative than himself) is nonsense. And Scripture itself never makes any such value judgment. Rather it calls us to give to Jesus' words the same reverence, obedience, and belief that we give to Jesus himself.

Nevertheless, we should thank Barth for drawing our attention to the identity between the word and Christ. As with the other themes in modern theology we have considered, we should agree with what Barth affirms, but not with what he denies. He affirms rightly that Christ is God's Word; but he is wrong to deny that God's personal words, the very words of Christ, are ultimately authoritative.

---

<sup>2</sup> He is, of course, also central to forms of revelation other than word-revelation. He is the one who performs the mighty acts of God, what I will call "event revelation" in Chapter 13. And he is the person who most reveals the Father, as I shall indicate in Chapter 42.

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](#).