

The Doctrine of the Word of God

(Preliminary Draft, 1st Edition)

Part Four: The Media of God's Word God's Revelation Through Events

[John M. Frame](#)

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

In Memory of
Edmund P. Clowney
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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

13. God's Revelation Through Events

First, we consider "event-media," the revelation of God through the mediation of events. We may further distinguish events of nature and events of history. Nature is everything that takes place in God's creation. History is a set of events significant to human beings. We also use the term *history* to refer to spoken or

written accounts of those events. We will look at history in that sense under the second class of media, word-media.¹

History in the first sense, the set of events significant to human beings, may be divided into general history and redemptive history. General history is the usual content of secular history books: the records of the earliest humans, the rise of civilization in China, Egypt, and Babylon, and the course of civilization since. Redemptive history comprises those events by which God redeems his people from sin. Redemptive history is pre-eminently the work of Christ in his incarnation, atonement, resurrection and ascension. But redemptive history also includes those events that prepared for Christ, such as God's covenants with Abraham, Israel, and David, and the application of Jesus' redemption in the church's mission, the return of Christ, and the final judgment.

In one sense, redemptive history is a portion of general history, but I will speak of general history in a narrower sense, namely the non-redemptive portion of human history. This is not to deny that redemptive and non-redemptive history influence one another, each forming a context in which the other should be understood.

Nature and General History

Let me consider first nature and general history as media of revelation. Clearly, everything that God has made, and every event that takes place, reveals God in some way. For everything in the world is God's creation, and everything that happens is God's providence.² Indeed, no fact can be rightly understood apart from God.

So Scripture recognizes the natural world as a revelation of God. As Ps. 19 says, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork." God's awesome deeds in the natural world bring the Psalmists to express awe, wonder, and praise, as in 46:8-10, 65, 104. In Chapter 9, I listed many Scripture passages in which the power of God displayed in nature is the power of his *word*; nature is God's self-expression. Nature behaves as it does because God's word tells it what to do.

It is important to remember that nature is not the word of God, but only a medium of the word. The word, as we saw in Chapter 11 and elsewhere, is God. It is divine, not something created. Theologians have sometimes written loosely

¹ This discussion should be compared with the discussion of history in modern theology, Chapter 5, above.

² Note the discussion of God providence in Chapter 14 of DG, and also Chapter 4, which argues that all things are under God's sovereign control.

about the “creation word” or the “word in creation.” But to be precise, the word is something *above* creation that speaks *through* creation.

Natural revelation shows us the kindness of God. Paul tells the pagans at Lystra that God

did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness. (Acts 14:17; compare Matt. 5:45)

But natural revelation can also have a negative meaning. It has a particularly important role in convicting human beings of sin. In Rom. 1:18-21, Paul says,

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. ²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

God has given human beings a clear revelation of himself (verse 19), including a revelation of his “invisible attributes” (20), from the natural world (“in the things that have been made,” 20). The knowledge we gain from this is not only a knowledge of information about God, but a knowledge of God himself, a personal knowledge (21). That revelation has a moral content (32) that requires human beings to honor God and give thanks to him (21). But, Paul says, human beings fail to honor him as they should. Rather, they “suppress” the truth (18), “exchanged the truth of God for a lie” (22), “did not see fit to acknowledge God” (28). They fail to worship God, but they do not abandon religion altogether. Rather, they worship idols (23), commit sexual sins (24-27, and “all manner of unrighteousness” (28-31). So the revelation is a revelation of the “wrath of God” (18).

Natural revelation, therefore, is a clear and personal revelation of the true God, which makes authoritative demands on human beings. As in Acts 14, it displays God’s kindness, his “common grace.”³ But when people betray that kindness, as they always do apart from faith in Christ, it serves as a basis for judgment, to leave them “without excuse” (20). Rom. 1 does not indicate that anybody can find a means of forgiveness of sins through natural revelation. Later on, Paul

³ See DG, 429-37.

indicates that salvation comes through a different form of revelation, the preaching of Christ (Rom. 10:14-17).

But for those who have received God's saving grace, natural revelation has a more positive meaning. Like the Psalmist, we come to praise God for the revelation of him in the heavens and the earth. Nature also provides signs for redemptive covenants: the regularity of the seasons in Gen. 8:22, the rainbow in Gen. 9:16, the "heaven and earth" in Deut. 4:26, 30:19, 31:28, 32:1, serve to witness the promises and threats of God's covenants.

Nature is fallen, because God placed a curse on man's labor after Adam's fall (Gen. 3:17-19). Yet it "waits with eager longing for the revelation of the sons of God" (Rom. 8:19, compare 20-23). So nature is not entirely separate from redemption, as one might suspect from Rom. 1 alone. Indeed, nature is preoccupied with the hope of redemption, and it cannot rightly be understood apart from that hope.

Another blessing of natural revelation to Christian believers is this: nature is a means of applying redemptive revelation, Scripture, to our daily lives. To apply Scripture to the world, we must know some things about the world, not only about Scripture. For example, the eighth commandment tells us not to steal. But to apply that commandment to the question of cheating on taxes, we must know something about taxes (natural revelation) as well as about Scripture. So to obey God, we need to know nature as well as Scripture.

One might ask how natural revelation fits the personal word model of revelation that I have recommended in this book. There is some awkwardness here, because events aren't words, at least in and of themselves. As I pointed out, natural events are not the word of God, but media of the word. In natural revelation, we do not hear a literal voice (Ps. 19:3). So some might ask whether natural revelation conveys the same power, authority and divine presence as God's personal words.

But natural revelation does have some important characteristics of personal word revelation. It is clear (Rom. 1:19-20) and makes clear demands of us, so that when we disobey we have no excuse (verse 20; cf. 32). As in our personal word thought-experiment, we have no right to talk back to God. His authority comes through as absolute and unconditional.

Similarly with his other lordship attributes. Many biblical texts on natural revelation stress the controlling power of God revealed therein (as Ps. 29:3-11). That power fills the believer with awe and wonder, and he ascribes glory to God. The heavens and earth become a temple for God's worship, a temple of his personal presence (Ps. 29:1-2, 10-11; compare Isa. 66:1, Matt. 5:34-35).

So although natural revelation does not consist of literal divine words, it is an infallible *medium* of such divine words. They convey to us God's power, authority, and presence.

There is therefore no room for human autonomy in dealing with God's natural revelation. We may interpret the creation only by thinking God's thoughts after him. And this means that when we analyze the creation, we must listen to God words in other media, such as the written word, if we are to understand nature as he made it to be. As Calvin said, we are to understand the natural world through the "spectacles" of Scripture.⁴ For it is the gospel message of Scripture that takes away our unrighteous desire to suppress God's truth.

Redemptive History

Redemptive history, as I defined it earlier, is that series of events by which God redeems his people from sin, a narrative fulfilled in Christ. It is the principal subject-matter of Scripture. Redemptive history constitutes the "mighty acts of God" that he performs for the sake of his people, those acts by which people come to know that he is the Lord (Ex. 7:5, 14:18). When God brings Israel over the Red Sea on dry land, both Israel and the Egyptians come to know his lordship. In Deut. 8:11-18, God tells Israel that when they are prosperous in the land of promise they should not forget the acts of the Lord. Their wealth comes from God alone, and he can take it away if they are not faithful. God's great deeds should be warnings to the nations outside Israel (Ps. 66:5-7). God's mighty acts are a theme that resounds through the Old Testament. For a sense of its importance to God's people, see Ps. 135, 136, 145:4, 12.

Similarly the Gospels are preoccupied with the mighty deeds of Jesus. The Gospel of John is structured according to the "signs" Jesus wrought in his earthly ministry (John 2:11). Compare Acts 2:22. Of course the greatest of Jesus' mighty acts are his sacrificial death on the cross, his resurrection, and his ascension to God's right hand.

Jesus also performs mighty acts in the history of the early church.⁵ In Acts 15:12, Barnabas and Paul relate the "signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles."⁶ Compare Heb. 2:4, Rev. 15:3-4.

⁴ *Institutes*, 1.6.1.

⁵ Acts 1:1 says that the Gospel of Luke concerns what Jesus *began* to do and teach, suggesting that the Book of Acts presents what Jesus *continued* to do and teach.

⁶ "Signs and wonders" is a name for what English speakers often call "miracles." For a somewhat nontraditional account of miracle, see DG, Chapter 13. Miracle is a form of revelation, which I define as "an extraordinary demonstration of God's lordship."

Redemptive history supplies what is lacking in natural revelation, the means by which God forgives sin. So is tempting to say that natural revelation is “law,” while redemptive history is “gospel.” But the matter is more complicated than that, as we have seen. In the conventional distinction, law is unmitigated “bad news,” gospel unmitigated “good news.” But as we have seen, nature reveals God’s kindness as well as his severity. And when believers look at natural revelation from a perspective of grace, it reinforces the gospel in many ways, in covenant signs, in its eager longing for the consummation of redemption, and in its help to believers in living the Christian life.⁷

Similarly, redemptive history contains negative, as well as positive elements. It shows us the glory of Christ in his redemptive work. But it also displays the judgments of God on those who reject Christ and who will not bow before his lordship. The blessings and the judgments are inseparable: God blesses Abraham, but he curses Sodom and Gomorrah. He redeems Israel, but in the same act curses Egypt (and later Canaan). When Jesus returns, his people will rejoice, but the wicked will weep and wail.⁸

Redemptive history, like natural revelation, is a medium of God’s word, rather than the word itself. But it bears all the power, authority, and divine presence of God himself. The mighty redemptive acts of God are a biblical paradigm of his controlling power, especially the miraculous birth of Isaac (Gen. 18:14), God’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt (Ex. 15:4-12), the cross of Christ (1 Cor. 1:18), and Jesus’ resurrection from the dead (Rom. 1:4, 2 Cor. 13:4, Eph. 1:19-21, Phil. 3:10).

The mighty acts of God also bear God’s lordship authority, in the sense that they demand a favorable human response. God’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt ought to motivate Israel’s obedience. The Preface to the Decalogue is “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” Then come God’s commands, “You shall have no other gods before me,” and so on. Israel’s disobedience is all the more culpable, because of the powerful and clear revelation they have received (Deut. 29, among many passages). God gave Israel much more revelation of himself than he gave to the other nations, and, “...to whom much was given, of him much will be required” (Luke 12:48).

⁷ See my discussion of law and gospel in DCL, 182-192.

⁸ There is a theory that Christian preaching should focus exclusively on redemptive history. I would agree, if “redemptive history” is taken broadly enough to include the whole content of Scripture. But if (as I sometimes suspect) “redemptive history” is defined as an exclusive focus on narrative, excluding the moral, wisdom, and literary content of Scripture, then I take issue. See DCL, Chapter 16, and this volume, Chapter 35.

God's redemptive deeds are also a revelation of his personal presence. God does, of course, bring all events to pass (Eph. 1:11). But God's presence is all the more intense when he is acting to carry out redemption and judgment. These are "acts of God" par excellence. God's wonderful works typically elicit religious awe (as Ex. 15, many Psalms). In Luke 5:1-10, Jesus grants to the disciples a miraculous catch of fish. Peter's response is surprising: "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" (verse 8). Peter's eyes are not on the fish, or on the event as such, but on the presence of God in Jesus. In the miracle, God himself is present.⁹

So, as with natural revelation, redemptive history is an unambiguous, clear, revelation of God. This fact is contrary to the liberal views of redemptive history noted in Chapter 5. Human beings have no freedom to interpret the event as they wish. There is no role here for human autonomy. It is not as if the event is somehow "neutral," accessible indifferently to unbelief or faith. And certainly it is not the case that the unbelieving, secular interpretation is somehow normative. Faith is essential, of course; but faith is obligatory. Faithful interpretation of these events is the only legitimate interpretation, not one of many.

So Lessing was wrong. There is no "big, ugly ditch" between history and faith. Rather, history necessitates faith, and history cannot be rightly understood apart from faith. There is no need for faith to retreat to some mysterious events occurring above and beyond time and space. God has acted in literal history, to redeem his people, and through that history he calls us to trust him.

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⁹ See the discussion of miracle in Chapter 13 of DG.