

The Doctrine of the Word of God

(Preliminary Draft, 1st Edition)

Part Four: The Media of God's Word God's Revelation Through Words: the Divine Voice

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In Memory of
Edmund P. Clowney
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14. God's Revelation Through Words: the Divine Voice

The second type of medium is revelation through human words. Because of Scripture's emphasis on this kind of revelation, and because of the theological controversy over this concept, this particular medium will occupy our attention from Chapters 14 to 41. Then we will turn to the third type of medium, person revelation, in Chapters 42-44.

This revelation is “verbal” in two senses: it is a revelation of the word of God, and it is a revelation using human words as a medium. We shall see, however, that in such revelations the word of God and the human words are not actually distinct from one another. In the verbal medium, God creates an *identity* between his own words and some human words, so that what the human words say, God says.

I mentioned earlier that in an obvious sense event-revelation is not verbal: events are not words. But word-revelation is precisely verbal. So there is a difference between event-revelation and word-revelation. But the difference is not great. As I indicated in the previous chapter, revelatory events bring to us clear revelation, embodying God’s own lordship, his controlling power, meaningful authority, and personal presence. Revelatory events, therefore, bring to us the same kind of content that verbal revelation brings.

Why, then, does God give us both? Because of the differing potentials of the two media. We say that a picture is worth a thousand words. We could substitute “event” for “picture” in this saying. Someone who saw Jesus resurrected from the dead received revelation beyond what words could say. But there are also senses in which a group of words is worth a thousand events. For words can interpret events in ways that events themselves cannot do. A witness to Jesus’ resurrection saw something wonderful, overwhelming. But a verbal description and interpretation of that event could add much to the witness’s understanding of what happened.

And words can be preserved. Memories of events tend to fade over time. But words can be written down, even passed from generation to generation.

In this and following chapters, we shall consider several kinds of divine revelation through verbal media: the divine voice, the word through prophets and apostles, and the written word.

I shall use the phrase “divine voice” to refer to the most direct kind of verbal revelation, in which God speaks to human beings without any human mediator. The paradigm of the divine voice can be found in Ex. 20, the only occasion on which all Israel is gathered in one place (camped around Mt. Sinai) to hear words from God’s own lips. God here declares the covenant (Deut. 4:13) establishing Israel as his people and himself as their God. He identifies himself as the one who delivered them from Egypt (verse 2) and he declares how they should serve him (verses 3-17). The people are afraid and stand far off (verse 18), and they say to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die” (verse 19). Moses accepts their request, and from then on God’s revelation to Israel is largely indirect, rather than direct.

People often say that if God spoke to them directly, they would believe. And Christians sometimes imagine that hearing God directly would be the height of spiritual joy. They do not know what they are asking. For Israel, the experience was terrible, frightening. They wanted nothing more than for it to end.

Nevertheless, many other people have heard the divine voice, unmediated. Moses himself is the chief example of this. Note the description of the intimacy between God and Moses in Num. 12:8:

With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he beholds the form of the LORD.

Unlike Moses, Israel did not “behold the form of the Lord” at Mt. Sinai (Deut. 4:12),¹ but like Israel Moses heard the word of God directly. The same, of course, was true of Adam, Cain, Noah, Abraham and many others. The prophets regularly heard the divine voice. That indeed is part of the definition of a prophet. Like Moses, a prophet hears the word of God directly and passes it on to the people (Deut. 18:18).

When Jesus came into the world, the divine voice was heard once more in the public arena. At his baptism, the Father said “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17). More privately, the Father spoke from heaven to three disciples at Jesus’ transfiguration, using the same words, adding “listen to him” (Matt. 17:5). But we should not forget also that throughout his earthly ministry Jesus himself was the divine voice. He himself was the Word. And though he had the right to speak on his own authority, he spoke only what the Father required him to say (both content and manner, John 12:49). And on the last day his word will judge those who reject him (verse 48).

Now the divine voice is a medium for conveying God’s mind to man. And there is a human-creaturely element even in the divine voice, though we have been calling it a “direct” form of revelation. For the divine voice evidently uses a human language and created elements (atmosphere, sound-waves, human hearing mechanisms and brains). These created elements distinguish the divine voice from the eternal language spoken between the persons of the Trinity. The divine voice speaks in the created world, in time and space, to creatures, employing parts of the creation.

¹ When God reveals himself under a visible form, the revelation is called *theophany*, divine appearance. The visual form is part of the revelation and underscores the verbal content. Jesus is, of course, himself a theophany, but much more than a theophany. In Gen. 18, God appeared to Abraham as a man. The angel of the Lord is often theophanic (Gen. 32:22-32). Most often God appears in the form of a “glory-cloud.” See further DG, 585-87, Chapter 42 of this volume.

But it is not *merely* a medium. The divine voice is the word of God. It brings God before people in all his lordship attributes. The power of this voice terrified the Israelites at Sinai. Its authority was absolute. And clearly when the divine voice speaks, God himself is personally present.

Place yourself as an Israelite hearer of the divine voice in Ex. 20. Can you imagine that you would ever find fault with what God said then? Comedians may joke about how people today translate the Ten Commandments into “ten suggestions.” But of course no Israelite would have understood them that way. When the divine voice speaks, you obey, and that is all there is to it. No authority is higher. If you disobey, you incur God’s curse. If you obey, blessings abound.

The only problem here is the identification of God’s voice. How do I know that it is really God speaking to me, especially if, as with Abraham, the voice tells me to do something really outrageous? The problem is exacerbated when we consider that there are counterfeits. Lying spirits sometimes have claimed to be the voice of God (1 Kings 22:20-23; compare 2 Thess. 2:2), and God sometimes permits people to be deceived by the counterfeits.² Everyone who hears the authentic word of God knows that God has spoken to him. But not everyone who claims God has spoken to him has heard the authentic word of God.

Scripture doesn’t tell us directly or systematically how the divine voice identifies itself. Ex. 19 tells us that God’s voice at Mt. Sinai followed frightening phenomena: thunders, lightnings, a thick cloud, a “very loud trumpet blast” (verse 16), and “the whole mountain trembled greatly” (verse 18). The people were cautioned “lest the Lord break out against them” (22, 24). These phenomena contributed to Israel’s frightened reaction in 20:18-21. But this display of phenomena occurred only on this occasion. On other occasions there were signs: the burning bush in Ex. 3, the angelic display in Isa. 6. Sometimes Jesus worked miracles to underscore his words.

Nevertheless it does not seem that such displays regularly accompanied the divine voice. No such thing is recorded in God’s visits to Abraham, except for God’s fire passing through the animal pieces in Gen. 15:17. God’s speech to the prophets was often quiet. God seems to make a point of that with Elijah in 1 Kings 19:12: his presence is not in the wind, earthquake, or fire, but in a “low whisper.”

The conclusion seems to be that ultimately God himself identifies himself to his hearers. That is part of the revelation.³ Natural phenomena and miracles do

² For a discussion of God’s permission of evil, see Chapter 9 of DG.

³ Recall our earlier argument (Chapter 4; Introduction to Part Three) that in the end revelation must authenticate itself. Similar circularity always occurs, in any argument purporting to validate the ultimate standard of truth in any system of thought.

impress, but Satan too can produce spectacle (2 Thess. 2:9). The phenomena are not our fundamental source of assurance; their main function is to underscore the nature and the seriousness of the encounter. Abraham *just knew* that God wanted him to leave Ur, that he would grant a son, that he wanted him to take his son to the mount of sacrifice.

As for the counterfeits of the divine voice, Jesus' words in Matt. 24:24 are reassuring: "For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect." He implies that the false christs and prophets will deceive many, and they will try to lead astray "if possible" even the elect. But the "if" clause is contrary to fact. The elect will not ultimately be deceived. How can that be? Evidently because assurance is supernatural. We know the false revelation is false, just as we know that the true revelation is true—by God's sovereign self-testimony.

The importance of God's sovereignty in identifying his own word cannot be overestimated. If that is the case in regard to the divine voice, it certainly is the case for other kinds of word-media. When we discuss those, we will discuss the self-identification of the word in terms of the testimony of the Holy Spirit.

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