

Revelation

In order to study God, we must approach the Bible with the proper understanding. The Bible, all sixty-six books, is inspired by God without error as His direct revelation to man. The study of the doctrine of the Bible, known as *bibliology*, will cover the revelation, inspiration, inerrancy, transmission, canonicity, and translation of the Bible.

Revelation defined

Revelation is God's communication to man. It may come in various forms but it is always from God to man.

Revelation is distinct from inspiration in that revelation speaks to the *content* of what God has communicated. Inspiration speaks to the *means* by which that communication has been given. The Bible is God's revelation and the Holy Spirit inspired the human authors to write the words on the page.

Revelation is distinct from illumination in that revelation is an objective communication from God, regardless of its impact upon a person. Illumination speaks to the affect God's revelation has upon a person. God revealed the Bible and the Holy Spirit illuminates the mind and heart of the reader to understand and appreciate the meaning and significance of what God has revealed.

Also, the Bible is more than a record that contains God's revelation, it is God's revelation. Revelation is also more than God's thoughts that have been communicated to man. It is His thoughts that have been combined with words (1 Corinthians 2:12).

According to the Bible, revelation is often verbal but it is always verbalized and intelligible. While revelation may come in non-verbal forms, such as visions and dreams (cf. Ezekiel), all revelation is able to be communicated verbally by man. God's revelation becomes communicated in words either initially or secondarily and those words communicate God's revelation clearly.

The spheres of revelation

God has revealed Himself in types of revelation, general revelation and specific revelation. General revelation refers to God's communication of His attributes, eternal power and divine nature in creation (Romans 1:18-20). The universe declares the glory of God (Psalm 19), man is made in God's image (Genesis 1) which communicates about God.

General revelation is available to all. Non-Christian people know about God through nature (Acts 14:17) and can know He is good (Matthew 5:45) and wise (Acts 17:29). No one can say they did not know about God (Psalm 14:1) for all know He exists.

Specific revelation is found today in the Bible. The Bible is what is often meant when people speak of God's revelation, that is prophecy. General revelation is sufficient for *condemnation* (no one has an excuse, Romans 1:20), specific revelation is sufficient for *salvation*. People without specific revelation are not condemned by failing to live according to the revelation they do not have, they are condemned for failing to live according to the general revelation they do have, the moral code that God has written on their hearts (Romans 2).

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General revelation declares God's greatness but specific revelation also declares God's saving grace. General revelation gives us common ground in speaking with unbelievers but we must communicate God's specific revelation in order for them to come to faith in Christ for forgiveness.

The sources of revelation

Revelation has come from God in many different forms, including dreams (Genesis 37), visions (Daniel 7), an audible voice (1 Samuel 3), an angel (Genesis 19), miracles (Exodus 3), an object (Exodus 28), an animal (Numbers 22), nature (Psalm 19), etc.

The primary means of God's revelation to man has been through people. Prophets, God's appointed messengers to bring His revelation, function out of necessity as they were compelled to speak (cf. Amos 3:8). They spoke all the words that the Lord had given them to speak, without adding or deleting (Exodus 4:30; Deuteronomy 4:2).

Prophecy in the Bible was an authoritative communication by God to His people through an individual (cf. Revelation 10:7; 16:15; 22:7). A literal rendering of the Greek word for prophet (*prophetes*) is "one who speaks before God," that is, one who speaks in the name of God. The message of a prophet was a direct revelation from God.

Prophecies in the Old Testament may be divided into three main groups:

- Prophecies concerning the destiny of Israel.
- Prophecies regarding the coming Messiah.
- Prophecies regarding the coming kingdom of God on earth.

Old Testament prophecies consisted of two basic elements: fore-telling and forth-telling. That is, God's revelation about the future and God's revelation about the present. Both aspects were God's direct revelation to man.

In the New Testament, prophets ranked second in importance only behind the apostles (1 Corinthians 12:28-31; Ephesians 4:11). With the apostles, the New Testament prophets were considered the foundation upon which the church was built (Ephesians 2:20). New Testament prophecies were identical in nature to Old Testament prophecies. Both were God's direct revelation to man and both included new information regarding the present and the future.

In modern language, the term prophet has come to mean a person who speaks forth boldly, telling people what they need to hear. While this may have similarities with the biblical meaning of prophet, the biblical prophet was first and foremost a communicator of new revelation from God. A person who explains what has already been revealed is known in the Bible as a teacher.

The Bible is the only record of God's written revelation to man. All prophecy that God has deemed necessary for our life of faith and our maturity toward godliness has been delivered to us in the Bible (2 Peter 1:3).

The substantiation of revelation

How do we know if a person claiming to give revelation from God is a true prophet? Fortunately, the Scripture gives us several tests and tells us to test the prophets by them (cf. 1 John 4:1; Matthew 7:15-20):

- Do they utter false prophecies (Deuteronomy 18:22)?
- Do they use objects of divination (Deuteronomy 18:10-12)?
- Do they contact spirits (Deuteronomy 18:11)?
- Do they preach another gospel (Galatians 1:8)?
- Do they follow another god (Deuteronomy 13:2)?
- Is the focus of their prophecies apart from Christ (Revelation 19:10)?
- Do they deny that Jesus is Lord (1 Corinthians 12:3)?
- Do they deny Christ is human (1 John 4:1-2)?
- Is the fruit of their teaching bad (Matthew 7:15-20)?
- Do they have new revelation since the time of the apostles (Hebrews 1:1; 2:3-4; John 14:26; John 16:13; Acts 1:21-22)?

It is important to note that each of these is a disqualifier. One positive answer and we can be sure that we do not have a true prophet. The final test makes for testing prophets now easier than in the early stage of the church age.

Beyond these negative tests, there is a positive test -- miracles. People who gave revelation from God were associated with supernatural activity, either through them or associated with them.

Miracles were performed in order to authenticate the message being delivered by God's servant as being revelation from God, without error:

- Christ's works validated His message (Acts 2:22; cf. John 10:24-25; 11:47-48; 20:30-31).
- The apostles' miracles were signs to authenticate their message (2 Corinthians 12:12; Romans 15:18-20; Hebrews 2:3-4; cf. Acts 2:43; 5:12).
- Moses' miracles confirmed for Israel and for Pharaoh that he was divinely appointed.
- Elijah's miracles validated the words that he spoke as being from the Lord (1 Kings 17:24).

The recipients of revelation

In order to clarify the doctrine at hand, we will use the terms "private revelation" and "public revelation." While these terms may be unfamiliar, understanding what they mean is necessary to frame the issue regarding how we come to know what is God's will for our life.

Private revelation is direct revelation from God to an individual that has specific application for the one who receives the revelation and no one else. Public revelation, or prophecy, is designed for those beyond the one receiving the revelation, while private revelation is intended solely for the individual with the revelation. Therefore, private revelation differs from public revelation in to whom the revelation from God is directed. Private revelation is designed for the individual alone, which is how many people claim to be discovering the will of God for their lives.

Public revelation is prophecy. On many occasions God chose to reveal Himself to man through prophets. The Old and New Testaments are the prophecies of God (cf. 2 Peter 1:20-21) which have been recorded for us to live by today. In fact, the Bible is the public revelation that God has provided for us presently.

Private revelation, like public revelation, results from the revelational gift of knowledge (1 Corinthians 12:8; 13:8-9). God imparts direct revelation (knowledge) to man, which is either intended for the individual alone (private revelation) or for others as well (prophecy or public revelation). Several examples of private revelation in the Bible include Joseph (Matthew 2:13-14, 19-21), Philip (Acts 8:26), Ananias (Acts 9:10-16), Peter (Acts 12:7-10) and Paul (Acts 16:6-10).

Revelation, public and private, should be understood as distinct from illumination. Illumination is the enlightening work of the Holy Spirit who shows man what has already been revealed by God. Illumination, therefore, does not involve the new disclosure of truth to man while revelation does. Illumination helps us to see the significance of what has already been revealed to our own lives.

The duration of specific revelation

God has communicated specific revelation to man at certain times throughout history. When He speaks to man or through men as His prophets, He does so only for a season of time. The gaps between God's direct revelation were hundreds of years, such as before Abraham, before the time of Moses, before the incarnation of Christ and during the church age. While there is no formula to measure the duration of prophetic eras or the gaps between them, they most certainly exist. Much of God's revelation was written and its duration continues with us in the Scripture.

Simply put, God is not giving specific revelation today. God's Word presently is sourced only in the Bible and nowhere else. While others may quote or allude to God's revelation, the source of this knowledge comes from the Bible alone. We are presently in one of those times when additional revelation from God is not occurring.

A point of clarification is necessary. We are *not* saying that God cannot give additional revelation today. Also, we know that God will reveal much more when Christ returns in the future. We are only saying that God has currently chosen not to do so.

Private revelation by God is commonly claimed by Christians today, whether they realize the significance of their words or not. Phrases such as "God told me," "I was given a word from God,

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"God called me to go to ...," "God called me as a ...," "God is leading me to do..." are at best misleading (if they refer to the Scripture) and are more likely confused. This is particularly the case in popular teaching about discerning God's will for our life.

Below are several major problems with claiming private revelation:

1. Claiming private revelation is not biblical.

1 Corinthians 13:8 teaches that "knowledge will be done away." The timing of the end of God's revelation (knowledge) is when the completion of New Testament and the conclusion of the apostolic era (1 Corinthians 13:9-10). This applies to private revelation as well as public revelation. For a more detailed discussion on the relevancy of 1 Corinthians 13 to the subject of God's revelation, see our paper on prophecy. Since God's revelation in the Scripture is complete, we must look to what God has already communicated to guide our wise decision making.

Also, the Bible says it is inspired by God to make us adequate and equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16). Through God's word, accurately interpreted and applied, we have an ample supply of guidance for all of life issues.

Furthermore, the Bible shows that our decisions that are within God's moral commands are left to our choice.

Examples include:

1 Corinthians 7:39: "A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes [*personal choice*], only in the Lord [*moral command*]."

2 Corinthians 10:27: "If one of the unbelievers invites you, and you wish to go [*personal choice*], eat anything [*moral command*] that is set before you, without asking questions for conscience sake."

2 Corinthians 9:7: "Let each one do just as he has purposed in his heart [*personal choice*]; not grudgingly or under compulsion [*moral command*], for God loves a cheerful giver."

Biblical examples of private revelation are from the period of God's special revelation to man. It should not surprise us that God gave private revelation during those times, particularly since the time when "knowledge will be done away" awaited the passing of the apostles. Since God is no longer giving special, normative revelation to the church, it follows that He is also no longer giving private, personal revelation to individual Christians.

2. Claiming private revelation is unnecessary.

2 Peter 1:3 teaches that we have everything we need to live a godly life. We have the Scripture, which the Holy Spirit uses to guide us. There is therefore no need for us to ask God to tell us anymore that what He has already revealed. The Bible is sufficient for our faith and the daily practice of our faith. To seek for private revelation is to say the Bible is not a sufficient guide for the practice of our faith.

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3. Claiming private revelation is dangerous.

You may assign God's reputation to a promise that He has never made. This may result in damage to God's credibility. If we wrongly think God promised something and it does not come to pass, how can we have confidence in what God has truly promised? How do we know whether the inner prompting is from God or not?

In addition, it is a slippery slope toward false prophecy. One day God is making a personal promise or command to you, the next day God is making a corporate promise or command through you. In essence, there is no difference between believing that God confirmed to you ahead of time that you should take a certain job and Oral Roberts believing that God confirmed to him that he would die unless he was given eight million dollars.

4. Claiming private revelation is the origin of cults.

Cults start with alleged private revelation from God. Cults typically have two things in common: a claim of direct revelation from God and supreme authority figure. Christians often incorporate both of these dangerously.

5. Claiming private revelation reduces to the absurd.

For example, do we need private revelation for our choice of food and clothes? Should we seek private revelation to determine what God thinks are the things for which we ought to be seeking private revelation?

6. Claiming private revelation inappropriately limits our God-given human freedom and individuality.

God wants us to grow in wisdom as we learn to apply His principles to life. God causes spiritual growth through our personal decision making. Seeking private revelation serves to move the responsibility for decision making from us to God. This stunts our growth.

Also, if we later believe we made the "wrong" decision we may be tempted to blame God for what was our responsibility.

7. Claiming private revelation is wrong, even if the supposed promise comes true.

Whether a certain result occurs does not necessarily mean that the private revelation was from God. We can never determine truth by results. For example, Jeremiah had very poor results and some cults have a lot of results.

We cannot expect God to give us specific, special, private revelation concerning decisions we are facing. Looking for such extraordinary guidance will result in disappointment and frustration with God, and/or assigning God's reputation to a revelation that He has not made.

The role of the revelation in the guidance of God

We must not conclude that since God is not longer communicating new revelation today that He is not actively and intimately involved in our lives. God does providentially guide us today. While God's will is not knowable beyond God's direct revelation in the Scripture, God's guidance is nevertheless assured if we trust in the Lord (Proverbs 3:5-6):

1. God has prepared good works for us beforehand and will guide us into these providentially (Ephesians 2:10).2. God is able to guide us in spite of our plans (Proverbs 16:9).3. God causes all things to providentially work out for good for those who love Him (Romans 8:28).4. In areas where the Bible does not give specific direction, God guides us in decision-making through providing wisdom, not private revelation. God wants us to ask Him for wisdom in responding to our circumstances (James 1:5). God imparts wisdom to us through the Word of God (Deut. 6:4, Psalm 119:98), through the wise counsel of others (Proverbs 1:5; 13:20) and through our life experiences (Hebrews 5:12-14), through our personal research (Luke 14:28-32).5. God guides us in prayer only in the sense that in communicating with Him we become sensitive to the revelation that is in the Scripture. For example, you have a harder time hating someone when you are praying for them. Prayer does not bring new revelation; in prayer, we speak to God, He does not speak to us.6. The role of the Holy Spirit in God's guidance can be understood as follows: The Holy Spirit wrote the Bible, which He uses to illuminate the minds and hearts of the hearer toward obedience. The Holy Spirit does not do an end run around the Bible but uses the Word to guide us.7. We are morally bound to follow the commands of Scripture and Ephesians 5:17 commands us not to be foolish but to understand the will of the Lord. Anytime we make foolish decisions we are acting outside of the will of the Lord. If we understand our choices to be foolish and rebel against God anyway, we do more than suffer natural negative consequences, we damage our relationship with God Himself.

Ignoring God's revelation is foolish

We avoid being foolish and understand the will of God (Ephesians 5:17) by studying what God has communicated to us in the Scripture! In the Bible, God not only lays our moral code of right and wrong, but He imparts His value system to us. Through the Scripture we can understand what is important to God and therefore what should be important to us. As we humbly examine, understand and yield ourselves to God's truth, we will not only be guided toward wisdom but more importantly, we will grow toward spiritual maturity.