

Divine Revelation: God Making Himself Known

AN ESSAY BY

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DEFINITION

God's makes himself known as Lord through divine revelation, which is given to all people through creation and human nature and to specific people through events, inspired human words recorded as Scripture, and Jesus Christ himself.

SUMMARY

God makes himself known to his creatures because he first knows himself perfectly as a personal, speaking God. Although all people suppress the knowledge of God in their sin, he has clearly communicated about himself to his creatures through the creation and through human's being made in the image of God. On top of this *general* revelation, God communicates about himself to particular people in *special* revelation, which includes the events of nature and history, human words that are inspired by God and recorded for us in Scripture, and through the person of Jesus Christ, who is the ultimate image of God. In all of these different ways, God reveals himself as Lord, which is comprised of his control, presence, and authority over all things.

The God of the Bible is a personal being, in contrast with the gods of many other religions and philosophies who are abstract or impersonal forces. The doctrine of the Trinity underscores this fact, for the biblical God is not only personal but a society of persons, existing eternally in mutual love and deference ([John 17](#)).

So, whatever God does he makes known. The persons of the Trinity know one another exhaustively, and each understands the thoughts and actions of the others. In human beings, there are hidden depths in our nature so that we cannot fully understand our own actions and motives. But God is fully known to himself. Much about God is mysterious to us, but not to him.

One way Scripture describes God's exhaustive self-knowledge is by saying that he is a *speaking* God or, simply, that he is *Word*:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ([John 1:1](#))

God is not only eternal, holy, all-powerful, and so on, but he expresses and shares those qualities through something like human speech. In his eternal nature, he has the power to speak (the “Word”), and that power to speak is who he is: his Word is eternally with him, and his Word is his very nature. John identifies this Word with Jesus Christ in John 1:14. In Jesus, the Word became flesh. So the existence of the Word did not begin with Jesus’s incarnation. There are hundreds of references to the divine word in Scripture, in both testaments, as the means by which God reveals himself.

Moreover, God reveals himself to himself, each Trinitarian person to the other two, and his revelation extends beyond his own being. It comes also to the world he has created, and especially to the intelligent creatures of that world: angels and human beings. Because self-revelation is his nature, he wants all his creatures to know him.

The creatures of the world cannot know God exhaustively. One cannot know God exhaustively unless one *is* God. But creatures receive great benefits from knowing God; indeed, they cannot live without knowing him, for he is the author of life. This is true both of our natural lives and our spiritual lives. Adam came alive when God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life (Gen. 2:7). And Jesus says that the great benefit of eternal life, his salvation from sin, is the benefit of knowing God:

And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. (John 17:3)

In one sense, all human beings, even the wicked, know God:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 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 (Rom. 1:18–20).

But many reject this revelation, people who, Paul says, “by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.” (Rom. 1:18). Though God is clearly revealed to all, fallen people prefer to deny that they know him, as Adam hid from God in the Garden (Gen. 3:8). When people say they do not know God, it is not because God has failed to reveal himself, or that God’s revelation is not clear enough. Rather, their ignorance of God is something they have done to themselves. They are lying to themselves, trying to convince themselves that God does not exist or that he is obscure, while all the time God is staring them in the face.

God Reveals Himself as the Lord

God’s personal name is *Lord*, which translates the mysterious name *I AM* which God revealed to Moses in Ex. 3:14–16. His lordship connotes particularly his *control*, *authority*, and *presence* in relation to the world he has made (see John Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, pp. 21–240, and *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, pp. 3–14, 47–68). Everything he does reflects his lordship in these ways, including his revelation. Scripture describes God’s word-revelation in terms of his *control* as a powerful force:

Is not my word like fire, declares the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces? (Jer. 23:29)

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Heb. 4:12)

It also makes clear that God's word of revelation has supreme *authority*:

The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day. (John 12:48)

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16–17)

And God's word, his revelation, is also his *presence*, the place where he meets with his people. God's nearness to Israel is the nearness of his word (Deut. 4:7–8, 30:11–14). And God comes to be "with us," *Immanuel*, in the person of his Son Jesus Christ, his living word to us (John 1:1–14).

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

It was mentioned earlier that the biblical God is *personal*, not an abstract force like the gods of the nations. His revelation is particularly a personal encounter between him and his people. When we hear revelation, we hear God himself. Our response to it should be a response appropriate to supreme power, to ultimate authority, and to an intimate Father.

General and Special Revelation

Theologians make various distinctions among types of revelation. The most common is between *general* and *special* revelation. General revelation is revelation of God given to everybody. It is the kind of revelation described in Romans 1. It tells us that God exists, what kind of God he is, and his moral standards. In revealing God's standards, it shows us that we have not measured up to them. Paul says of general revelation that it reveals God's wrath on sinners (Rom. 1:18). General revelation comes to us through the natural world (what is called *natural* revelation) and through our own nature. For we ourselves are revelation, the image of God according to Genesis 1:26–27.

On the other hand, special revelation is revelation God gives to selected messengers, charging them to bring the message to others. Those messengers may be angels, prophets, or apostles. The message may be presented orally or may be consigned to writing, as when the apostles wrote authoritative letters to the churches (see 1 Cor. 14:37–38). The Bible as a whole is a special revelation of God in written form (2 Tim. 3:15–17). The messages of special revelation typically contain one or both of two different kinds of contents: threats of judgment and promises of grace. The *gospel* is a special revelation of grace, a message of supremely good news:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).

Media of Revelation

Another way to distinguish between types of revelation is to distinguish the different ways in which revelation comes to us, the *media* of revelation. There are basically three types of media: *events*, *words*, and *persons*. These three categories correspond roughly to our earlier distinction between control, authority, and presence. But both these threefold distinctions are perspectives on the whole of revelation. The events of revelation not only manifest God's control, but also his authority and presence; similarly the words and persons.

Events

God reveals himself in the events of nature and history. We learn of him from the changing seasons, from the power of nature, from the sun, moon, and stars. We also learn of him through history, the particular events that shape the fortunes of human beings. He is the one who gave to all the nations their boundaries (Acts 17:26) and brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt to possess the land of promise. In his plan, general history becomes *redemptive history*, the events by which God arranges to redeem his people from sin by the coming of Jesus.

Words

In one sense, all of God's revelation is word-revelation, because it proceeds from God's own speech, the Word of John 1:1–14. But sometimes God gives us word-revelation in a further sense: revelation in which the medium is human words. But God does not leave us to figure out for ourselves what he is doing in history. He enters our experience and *speaks* to us in human words. In this way, the words of the prophets are the very words of God himself. God defines *prophet* to Moses in this way:

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I commend him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.' And if you say in your heart, 'How may we know the word that the LORD has not spoken?'—when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him. (Deut. 18:18–22)

When a prophet or apostle writes down God's words, the document is Holy Scripture, a document to be received as the Lord's power, authority, and presence (2 Tim. 3:15–17, 2 Pet. 1:19–21).

Persons

Since God is a tri-personal being, his revelation is particularly vivid when it takes the form of persons. God made Adam and Eve in his image to be revelations of himself (Gen. 1:26–27). And it should not surprise us that the highest, deepest divine revelation is the incarnate Lord Jesus Christ, God in person. Jesus displays his Father's control over all things (Mark 4:41), speaks his Father's words (John 3:34), and appears as the Father's glorified presence with his people (Matt. 17:1–8).

Conclusion

If we are to know God, it is important for us to seek knowledge in God's own way. Many have tried to gain knowledge of God through their unaided reason, or through some kind of subjective intuition. But the God of the Bible has told us not only who he is but also how we should seek knowledge of him. That knowledge comes as we attend to his created world, not repressing the truth in unrighteousness, but accepting his own guidance, his special revelation in Scripture and in Jesus. Only through these appointed means can we come to know him as Lord and as our Savior from sin.

FURTHER READING

- Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*
- Benjamin B. Warfield, *Revelation and Inspiration*
- Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*
- Cornelius Van Til, *The Protestant Doctrine of Scripture*
- J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*
- John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*
- Ned Stonehouse and Paul Woolley, *The Infallible Word*
- Paul Mizzi, “[Divine Revelation](#)”
- Peter Lillback and Richard Gaffin, eds., *Thy Word is Still Truth*
- R. C. Sproul, “[Divine Revelation](#)”

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