

A Study of the Doctrines of the Bible Lesson 1

Revelation—the Self Disclosure of God

“To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? Says the Holy God. Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created all these stars? He calls them all by name, because of the greatness of His might and the strength of His power not one is missing.” These are the words of God spoken through the prophet Isaiah to Israel in Isaiah 40:25-26. Israel had fallen into pagan polytheistic worship of the heavenly bodies (stars and planets) visible in the sky. In contrast, the one true God is incomparable in that He created all the stars, and owns them. With the naked eye, they probably could have seen around 5000 stars on a clear evening, but today astronomers estimate there are ten billion trillions. That sounds wild, but the God who created them named them and knows that “not one is missing”, they are all accounted for. God is truly an infinite Being that is beyond finite created being’s comprehension. Therefore, the infinite Being must reveal Himself if we are to know Him. What do we know about God, and how was that information made known to us?

Knowledge

The information explosion of the 20th and 21st centuries is truly enormous. The world’s yearly production of print, film, optical, and magnetic content was over 1.5 billion gigabytes (you don’t know either?). A gigabyte is one billion bits of information, therefore we are talking one and a half billion billion bits. To put this in perspective historically, a single daily edition of the New York Times contains more information than an average person in the 17th century would have encountered in a lifetime. By the time today’s kindergartners graduate from high school, the amount of knowledge in the world will have doubled four times. People truly put a great emphasis on knowledge today, and many of the great fortunes have been made in information technology. Nevertheless, we must ask ourselves what the greatest imaginable knowledge could be. It has to be the eternal questions of meaning and purpose. Without a doubt the greatest knowledge a person can have is knowledge of God. What is more important, sending men into space, or sending men to Heaven?

Traditional Modes of Revelation of God

The Greek word for revelation is the word we get apocalypse from, and it means unveiling or disclosure. God has chosen to reveal Himself in two major categories—general revelation and special revelation. In general revelation, God has revealed Himself to all persons at all times and in all places. Special revelation is God’s specific communications of Himself to particular persons at particular times. Special revelation is available to us now by reading the Scriptures. General revelation is available to everyone all the time in nature, history, and each person’s innate being. In history, every civilization and culture has had a

perception of a higher reality than themselves. The Psalmists wrote of the testimony of creation, "The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of God's hands. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge." (Ps.19:1-2). Paul echoed this in the New Testament when he wrote, "Ever since the creation of the world God's invisible nature, namely, His eternal power and deity, has been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so they are without excuse." (Rom.1:20).

The objective of general revelation was both informational and to draw people naturally to God. The objective of special revelation was relational in the sense it was to lead us to an acquaintance of God, and a relationship with God on His terms. When sin entered the human race, the need for special revelation became all-important. God had to speak on matters that were before not a concern. Sin diminished man's comprehension of general revelation, and the means for reconciliation with God needed to be revealed.

The Incarnation

The best and most complete mode of God's special revelation is the incarnation. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is called the "Word" of God. Jesus preexisted as God, and at a particular time and place, He took on the flesh of man to both reveal God to us, and to provide the means of salvation. "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth...No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God...He has explained Him." (Jn.1:14,18). The author of Hebrews contrasts the incarnation with earlier forms of revelation, and makes it clear that Jesus was superior (Heb.1:1-3). The New Testament was directly given and inspired by Christ, and the messages of Jesus surpassed those of the prophets.

The Church at Colossae in first century Asia Minor was being threatened by philosophers and man-made religion, so Paul wrote to them in Colossians 2:8-10 saying, "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men...rather than according to Christ. For in Christ all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority." Jesus is the ultimate revealer of truth about God, and God's provision for man to be reconciled to God. I love what Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3:11-13. Jesus told him that He alone spoke the truth about God, "heavenly things", because Jesus alone had come from heaven with these heavenly things.

The Uniqueness of Scripture

Imagine a book that has been the world's best seller every year for the last 400 years. This book is a composite of books

written by 40 different authors over about 1500 years. These authors all had diverse backgrounds as kings, fishermen, peasants, scholars, doctors, poets, and even a plowman. Together they wrote the 66 books of the Bible even though most of them did not know each other as they lived during different eras and in different places. Even without knowing or communicating with each other, the Bible is bound together by historical sequence, prophecy and fulfillment, and the common theme of the redemption of man. They also are consistent with many sub-themes like the fallen nature of man, the sovereignty of God, and God's grace. I have heard many critics say that the Bible is just another book written by men, but it clearly is not. Each of the 66 books has internal evidence that it is the Word of God. Each book says of itself, in different ways, that it is the Word of God. Consider those claims of all those different authors. The options are that they knew they were lying, they were deranged, or they were good men who thought they were telling the truth. If they knew they were lying it was the greatest fraud and cover up in the history of the world. Think about how many thousands of people would have had to be in on the cover up. I mean 500 people saw the resurrected Christ alone! In 1 Cor.15:6, Paul said that most of them were still alive at the time of that letter so they could go verify that Jesus was alive, so right off the bat the "critics" are calling them all liars. The second option that they were all deranged is held by no one I know of since you can read the letters of Paul, John, and Peter, etc. and tell that they are of sound mind. The logical conclusion is that these sincere, respected men believed that Scripture is the Word of God. Added to their testimony was the testimony of Jesus found in the four gospels. Jesus consistently quoted from the Old Testament and spoke of it being inspired by the Spirit of God.

The Doctrine of Inspiration

The question remains then, of how something written down by men can be considered the Word of God. The Bible tells us that "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). Inspiration is the divine controlling influence of God over human authors. God supernaturally directed the authors to use their individual intelligence, style, and context to write God's message to man. Paul was telling Timothy that the Bible was "God breathed". Peter used a similar phrase to explain how the Old Testament was written in 2 Peter 1:21 when he wrote that "men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God". The image here in the Greek words was of a sailboat that was being moved along by an invisible force (wind). You could not see the force, but you experienced the results.

Canonicity

The word that theologians use to speak of the accepted books of the Bible is "the canon". This comes from the word that means "the rule", or those books that passed the tests put to them by the early churches. Basically, there were five tests that each of the 27 books of the New Testament passed. First and most important was apostolicity---were they written by the Apostles who got their teaching directly from Jesus, or in the case of Luke and Mark, authority and eyewitness accounts from the Apostles. Naturally this would require that they were written in the first century. All of the so-called Gnostic gospels were written in the second century or later. The other tests were: internal evidence, unanimity among the early churches, orthodoxy (no contradiction), and the testimony of the Holy Spirit, meaning evidence that God was using that book to change lives for Christ. There were a few books that were disputed until the end of the 4th century when they began holding church councils. We have the record of the Council of Carthage in 397 AD where all the churches agreed on the 27 books of the N.T. we have now.

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The author of Hebrews 4:12 said it well, “The Word of God is living and active”, and able to change lives. It changed mine.

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