

Revelation and the Bible: Beyond Verbal Inspiration

by Herold Weiss

One of the major pastimes in our church is to talk about revelation, the doctrine of how God is manifest to his people, without paying attention to the Bible. It is not at all difficult to sound grandiloquent and propound abstract notions about revelation. One may even quote a text of Scripture here and there to provide a scaffold for the building of such verbal edifices. The problem with most of these verbal structures is that they are useless because the Bible does not feel at home in them.

It would seem to me that to understand the Christian revelation one must place it squarely within the biblical framework. One may not, in other words, talk about a Christian revelation without taking seriously the historical context that brought about the Bible. Any discussion of biblical revelation that is not anchored in that historical process is idle talk. Common practice, however, seems to state a doctrine of revelation that safely isolates the Bible from the rest of the world's objects. Afterwards, it studies the Bible in terms of presuppositions imposed on it.

The fact is that the Bible as a book can and

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must be studied as any other book. Ecclesiastical attempts to prevent scholars from investigating the process that brought about the Bible—starting with oral traditions in earliest antiquity and ending with canonization in the Council of Trent—are based on false distinctions and false fears.

The scholars of the Renaissance gave impetus to the application of literary, grammatical and historical criteria in order to establish the authorship, purpose, style and circumstances of a piece of writing. In their struggle with Rome, the Reformers of the 16th century found this most helpful. For example, by the application of such criteria the *Donations of Constantine* were proven not to have been written by Constantine. The value of these criteria was thus early established within Protestantism.

Later on, however, when scholars tried to apply the same criteria to the Christian documents of the first century, the Protestant ecclesiastical authorities reacted by declaring the first century off limits. Documents of any other Christian century could be submitted to such criteria but documents from the first century were not to be touched in this way. This ecclesiastical distinction was certainly artificial and in practice could not be maintained.

The basic fear behind this distinction was also false. If, when objectively examined, the *Donations of Constantine* turn out not to have

been written by Constantine, they may be declared spurious. But if, when objectively examined, the traditional view about the authorship of a New Testament book cannot be maintained with certainty, that book *cannot* be declared spurious or uninspired. For revelation is a divine act, not a human accomplishment. What revelation claims and what objective criteria establish are two different things. Objective criteria can neither prove nor disprove the claims of revelation. The fear of the objective study of the process by which the Bible came about is certainly founded on false assumptions.

When the ecclesiastical authorities of the 17th century realized that they could not effectively keep the Christian documents of the first century away from scholars, they reacted dogmatically with the doctrine of verbal inspiration. This doctrine has been expressed in different ways, some of which, because of their mechanical models, seem rather crude. But whether the doctrine is theoretically expressed or just assumed in practice, its basic concern is the same, namely, to declare God the author of the Bible, and thereby, it would seem, to minimize the role of His human instrumentalities. Verbal inspiration means that the Bible has one Author. The trouble is that the application of historical, grammatical and literary criteria to the study of the Bible has demonstrated precisely that it is impossible to lump all the books of the Bible under one author.

Biblical scholarship has clearly demonstrated the idiosyncracies of the men who wrote the Bible, and in this way has demolished the doctrine of verbal inspiration. It is now impossible for any doctrine of biblical revelation to bypass the communities and the men who wrote the Bible. As a result, the Bible, as a book, like any other object that exists in the world of men, cannot be declared immortal or infallible. Any doctrine of biblical revelation that wants to take the Bible seriously must also take this fact seriously. To make infallibility a necessary condition for revelation is to make an object of the world a divine object. It is to make the Bible an idol.

The confrontation between orthodoxy and biblical scholarship was, to a large degree, the result of two different ways of defending the

Bible from attacks upon it. Orthodoxy defended the Bible against Rationalism and Science in medieval terms. Scholasticism had considered the sciences to be closed bodies of knowledge, their limits clearly established by theology—the queen of the sciences. The business of scientists was not to discover but to show how everything within their sphere of interest harmonizes and agrees with what is known already through the Bible and theology. In terms of such a deductive, scholastic methodology, orthodoxy came up with the dogma of verbal inspiration.

In its defense of the Bible, biblical scholarship also went astray—because it conceived reason to be a value superior to, and independent of, revelation. Biblical scholarship, therefore, tried to demonstrate that the Bible was reasonable (rather than, as its critics charged, a compilation of myths and legends fit only for the imagination of children). In the process, biblical scholarship substituted the Bible for

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faith. Instead of the Bible’s being the place where the Call and the Demand of God may be heard, it became a place (among many others, of course) where the universal truths of reason were exemplified.

Trying to benefit from the mistakes of the past, biblical scholarship in the 20th century has been struggling to allow the Bible to play its proper role. On the one hand, it wishes to allow the Bible to speak its own truth—not the truth of reason, or history, or science. On the other, it recognizes that the Bible is not the object of faith, but the expression of faith. This means that the relationship between faith and truth has been redefined.

The traditional view—that both faith and truth deal essentially with information—became

problematic when the information of faith (supposedly given by revelation) and the information acquired by the scientific method stood against each other. Romanticism, in the form of 19th century Liberalism, came to the rescue by safely confining religious matters within the realm of “feeling” and allowing culture to go on with the building of civilization. But under these circumstances religion turned into impotent individualism and a triumphant culture inevitably became idolatrous and proclaimed its own gods. But this arrangement could not last, and now the truce is over because faith cannot surrender to any idol.

We must now consider briefly the concepts of faith and reason. The basic problem with the traditional understandings of faith is that they more or less localize faith within one of the human qualities. Faith has been understood as a function of the mind, or of the will, or of feeling.¹ But these are intellectualistic, voluntaristic, or subjective distortions of faith. Faith does not have to do with a part of man and his humanity. It is an act of the whole self, as Schleiermacher strenuously argued. Faith is just as much involved with the whole of man as is his rationality.

If reason is not understood as a tool of logic, but as the source of meaning and structure—that which makes it possible for humans to understand their existence as “selves”—then reason is the basis for language and freedom and that which makes human life possible. It is what allows for human responsibility and, therefore, for the actualization of moral commands in our lives.

When reason is understood this way, it can be said that faith and reason are coexistent. Reason is a precondition for faith, and a faith that wishes to deny reason would be a dehumanizing force. But still, reason is finite and must be aware of its limits. Faith is the fulfillment, the transcendence of reason. Man as man is conscious of his potential infinitude, and this awareness drives reason beyond its limits for its own fulfillment.

When reason is limited to the finite, it is arbitrarily contained—contrary to the aspirations that are essential in man as human. When faith is limited to belief in historical, scientific or philosophical propositions, it is deprived of its

essential element: the transcendent.

This apparent digression from the question of revelation was necessary in order to bring two important theological considerations into view. First, it must be said that the nature of man and, therefore, reason and faith, are distorted by the human condition in sin. Reason is distorted in practice because of irrational and demonic forces within us, and faith becomes idolatrous because men are not secure enough to risk everything on God. Secondly, it must be stated that the relationship between faith and reason must be established by revelation rather than by an analysis of man. As a matter of fact, revelation enters the human condition as the conqueror of man’s limitations within his corrupted condition in sin.

Man’s existence is characterized by his finitude. He is confined within time and space. He dies. This is his basic limitation, from which other limitations, such as his imperfect knowledge of reality, follow.

Man’s death has not only primary but also ultimate significance when considered from a theological perspective. For death is not just the end of biological functions in one member of the species, it is also the alienation of a person from God.

The biblical idea of revelation has meaning only when considered within this framework. If, as we must indeed maintain, Christ is the final and complete revelation of God to man, it would be a caricature of His mission to say that He came to earth to bring us information. As a matter of fact, it would not only be a caricature, it would be to affirm the most ancient and resilient of all heresies: Gnosticism. It would be to bind Christ to knowledge about the cosmos and to claim that this knowledge is the way of salvation.

Christ did not come to earth for the purpose of bringing to man information. Even though He communicated through words that had a cognitive content, His basic purpose was to give man life. This must be affirmed radically. Knowledge about life is not enough when the enemy to be conquered is not ignorance but death. The basic characteristic of knowledge, after all, is that it does not possess the thing it knows. Though knowledge possesses concepts about life, it does not automatically possess life itself. So if revelation is to be the power that allows man to tran-

scend his limit, death, then revelation must bring to man the power of life itself triumphing over death. Indeed, if we grant this, and are also willing to allow the New Testament to determine our understanding, we cannot but conclude that what revelation deals with it essentially the power of life itself.² What revelation communicates is a New Being, a New Creature. Revelation integrates man's reason and anchors his life in God Himself.

This is not to say that the anchoring of human life in God ignores the cognitive faculties of man. It is to say, rather, that revelation has to do with more than knowledge. To limit revelation to knowledge and to deny to revelation any knowledge are equally misconceptions. What I am concerned with is to establish what is primary in revelation.

In receiving life from God, man's intellect also receives new life. It certainly receives a new perspective from which to look at and understand life and the universe. But this may mean that one is now more critical than before of any and all descriptions of life and the universe. It does not mean that one can now look at life and the universe as if one were the Creator. We need to remember that God's questions to Job are still in effect.³ And that God's answer to Job did not give him a new vision of how the physical or moral universe operates. It rather brought Job to a new repentance in the presence of the God of the Whirlwind.

It would be helpful here to remember that the intellectualistic understanding of knowledge forgets the experiential understanding of knowledge typical of the Hebrews. The biblical mentality had not yet made the philosophical distinction between act and thought. To know was to be dynamically engaged with the thing or the person known. Amos, for example, insists that his people must "know their God." But he does not provide them with any new information, neither does he illuminate for them theoretically the niceties of His being. Rather, he works out the implications of God's being in terms of practical obedience immediately relevant to their situation.

A theologian who today studies the book of Amos in order to recover the "basic principles"

that transcend the concrete counsels of the prophet does not thereby arrive at the mind of God. In the process of separating thought from life, the immediacy of the Word of God is lost. Any modern description of Amos' concept of God cannot claim to be the eternal distillation of truth. As a description, it is an ideology that is informed as much by the modern theologian's presuppositions as by Amos' own.

Enough has been said to make clear that I do not understand revelation to be essentially the communication of divine information given by the Spirit to the writers of the Bible; nor do I consider faith to be the acceptance of this information. Revelation, rather, is, first of all, a divine disclosure that creates a community in which life expresses this revelation in symbols of action, imagination and thought under the guidance of prophets.

It is in this way that revelation communicates new life and conquers the internal conflicts between reason and faith in man's sinful condition. Revelation is an event in which God becomes manifest and in which people respond wholeheartedly so that their given conditions in religion and culture are changed radically.

God's action is not meant primarily to take care of man's ignorance. Revelation does not compete with science as a way of acquiring knowledge of the universe. It does not provide man with information above and beyond that which he may obtain from other sources. Rather, revelation breaks down man's limits in terms of his real and concrete situation in sin. Revelation changes man's situation *qualitatively*. If the content of revelation were only knowledge, it would change man's situation only *quantitatively*.

Faith is reason responding to revelation and, therefore, faith is actualized not in thought but in life. That is, faith is reason fulfilling itself beyond the life of thought alone. In revelation there is, therefore, no possible conflict between reason and faith; both are grasped by revelation and both are held together under its life-giving power.

Realistically, however, it must be said that revelation is given, or happens, to man in his state of corrupted faith and corrupted rationality. And while it conquers the corrupted condition, it does not, of course, remove it entirely.

This is a key point, for it means that revelation can never be a sure possession of man. And

any attempt to identify God's revelation with any one particular description of it, even in the pages of the Bible, fails to recognize the inability of human reason and faith to totally capture the living God. Moreover, if any such description of the revelation is given ultimate validity, it may become more of a hindrance than a help in man's search for God. The significance given to it tends to attract the believer's attention to himself—in this way distracting him from God. In other words, any description of the revelation that is given ultimate validity tends to become an idol. But revelation is precisely God's intervention to *save* men from their idols. God's purpose in revelation is to provide man with the basis for life in Himself.

A careful study of the Bible will maintain an infinite, qualitative distinction between God and the book. The gap between the two cannot be closed by an act of the will or an act of the mind. God and a book cannot be equated. Neither can the Word of God and a book be

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equated. To do that is to ignore the fact that God does not freeze Himself in any form. God is the Living God and the God of the living. To equate God's Word with a book is the work of a corrupted faith that sets up for itself an idol. The words of the book are the words of the prophets which only tangentially reflect the Word of God. Nothing on earth is the ultimate expression of God. To make the Bible such is bibliolatry, just another form of idolatry.

A doctrine of revelation may be arrived at either dogmatically, in terms of an ideal, or empirically, in terms of a careful study of how the Bible came about and what it actually deals with. It must be understood, however, that in either case the result is a human exercise in understanding a *process*. In an attempt to understand the process, I would like now to describe its different aspects.

Broadly speaking, the whole process—man's

role as well as God's—may be described as revelation, since it may be argued that no revelation has taken place until the intended recipient has understood it. In a more technical sense, however, revelation refers to the actual God-disclosure. It suggests the disclosing of that which was veiled. And the important thing to see is that when God reveals, he does not disclose *something*: things, words, a book. He unveils *Himself* by acting on behalf of people. People experience, or witness, His Being or His action. For God to reveal Himself, no word need be spoken. Even in a prophetic vision the words of God are the words of the prophet: each prophet imposes his own style and his own vocabulary on the lips of God. God reveals Himself, then, by acting on selves; there is no book in between.

Inspiration is the next step in the process. God's action needs to be interpreted, and inspiration is the working of God's Spirit with a personality so that the significance of God's action may not be lost. The inspired person—called a prophet—testifies that the action was not the result of just human or natural agencies, but that through them God was at work. He introduces words into the process. Grammar, style, cultural setting, needs of the audience, purpose for testifying, personal biases, human conditions—all of these factors enter into the formulation of what the prophet says under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Here the prophet's faith and reason are joined. Both revelation and inspiration take place outside and prior to the Bible.

At the foundation of the words of the prophet are found the action of God and the prophet's response in faith. He has seen God in action. He is witnessing. He is confessing.

The authority of the Bible is not the authority of the book itself, but the authority of the God to whom it bears witness. In matters of faith, the believer's authority is not the Bible, but the God of the Bible who lives and acts and thinks outside and prior to the Bible. The believer who resorts to the Bible in order to defend his faith is really doing this only to defend the way in which he expresses his faith in God. The Bible cannot be appealed to, for example, in order to prove or defend the existence of God. God is the Bible's presupposition. This shows that the authority of the Bible on matters of faith depends on the recognition of the authority of the God of the Bible.

Archaeology and history may prove the Bible to be reliable historically, but that is not all that believers claim for it. To make the Bible normative in matters of science or history is to make the Bible obsolete. The Bible is normative for faith because it represents the struggle of faith against idolatry. The Bible has normative force in matters of faith not because the mind of God is encapsulated in it, but because it represents the triumph of God over every idol.

It would be ironic, indeed, if in the name of the Bible a mere ideology were said to represent the mind of God. The Bible testifies to God's activity, but any human understanding of this activity is limited by human conceptions that are conditioned by time and space. For faith, it is tragic to confuse matters of faith with matters of belief.

The truth of faith transcends the facts of the stories in the Bible. Belief in the historical validity of the biblical stories should not be confused with faith. For matters of belief are subject to historical and literary verification, and can be established with more or less probability. It is not a matter of faith to decide who wrote I Kings, II Chronicles, Jeremiah, or the Epistle to the Galatians. It is not a matter of faith to determine the difference between the first 11 chapters of Genesis and the rest of the book or the first ten chapters of II Corinthians and the rest of the epistle. Faith can ascertain that Jesus is the Christ, but it cannot ascertain the historical conditions surrounding Jesus, the Christ. Faith is certain of an event in history that has transformed history for the faithful. A particular version of an event in history is subject to change without notice if new evidence should

come to light. The Gospels unashamedly report different versions of the same historical events. All of them are equally valid vehicles for the confessing of faith. A faith that feels bound to defend a particular version of an event has become idolatrous. It is no longer faith, but ideology. To make the authority of the Bible dependent upon its scientific or historical accuracy is to misunderstand what it is all about, and to ignore the process by which it came about.

It has been said that the message of the Bible is summed up in its first four words, "In the beginning God . . .," and the rest is commentary. Biblical man begins with the affirmation that God is. He does not affirm this by means of concepts and categories that suggest an objectively detached observer. Instead, he tells a personal story. He affirms his participation in life. And his story means much more than what is says. His story is a symbol of his faith.

The truth of faith cannot be uttered in any other way than in symbol and metaphor. The language of the Bible is the language of metaphors: The People, The Covenant, The Tree, The Crown, The Bread, The Wind, The Vine, The Way, Reconciliation, Justification, Sanctification, Redemption. The truth of the Bible is the truth of God Himself, the Truth of Eternal Life.

FOOTNOTES

1. It is quite unfair to ascribe to F. Schleiermacher this understanding of feeling. It became true of his later followers. By the word "feeling," Schleiermacher was trying to describe the bedrock upon which human existence is built, that which is "unconditioned."

2. For full exegetical support, see R. Bultmann, "The Concept of Revelation in the New Testament," in *Existence and Faith*, edited by Shubert Ogden.

3. Job 38-41.

A Reply to Dr. Weiss

by Frederick E. J. Harder

Dr. Herold Weiss begins by identifying a very real obstacle to fruitful discussion of the doc-

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trine of revelation, namely, the formulation of a theory that grows out of presuppositions rather than out of an inductive study of Scripture. He is concerned primarily with those concepts of revelation which have their origin in a quest for absolutist authority. Equal concern, however, must be maintained for those attitudes