

CHAPTER 2

MODES OF REVELATION

Revelation and covenant

Concept of covenant

A remarkable thing about the way God has revealed himself to us is that he has never given us esoteric lectures about his person to satisfy our intellectual curiosity, but he always has addressed us in the context of our responsibilities to him and his promises or threats to us. In other words, his revelation has come to us in the form of *covenant*.

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* puts it thusly:

“The distance between God and the creature is so great that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him, as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God’s part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.” (7:1)

A covenant is the formal basis of relationship between two parties. The parties may be equal or nearly equal, or they may be unequal. In the case of equal parties, the covenant may be in the form of a treaty with mutual obligations. In the case of unequal parties, the covenant more often is in the form of laws and sanctions (consequences) imposed by the superior party on the inferior party. This latter is the form taken in God’s covenants with human beings.

Some obligations shown in general revelation

The way that God reveals himself through his creation and his works of providence is known as general revelation. The light of general revelation shines on all people.

God reveals himself through his creation of the universe and of ourselves:

Genesis 1

“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” (Gen 1:26-27)

Human beings are created in God’s image, and therefore we can learn something of God by examining ourselves—especially our rationality and spiritual nature.

Psalm 19

“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun, which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion, like a champion rejoicing to run his course. It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is hidden from its heat.” (Ps 19:1-6)

Once a human has been enlightened by God and understands that he is the Creator, then he can look at the skies and see the mightiness of God’s power and wisdom. This same work of God is evident to all people, but because most do not possess the knowledge of the true God, this evidence is made to fit into their own presuppositions.

Romans 1

“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

[General revelation leaves people without excuse; people do not respond to the Creator with recognition and gratitude.]

“For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

[Consequently God further clouded their minds to reach unreasonable conclusions.]

“Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

[Then, as a judgment on their idolatry, he further clouded their minds to commit unreasonable actions.]

“Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen. Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion. Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done.

[This wickedness God judged by releasing the consequences of their depravity.]

“They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.” (Rom. 1:18-32)

God also reveals himself in his providence, his divine ordering and controlling of all his creatures and all their actions:

Deuteronomy 4

“Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day God created man on the earth; ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived? Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testings, by miraculous signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD is God; besides him there is no other. From heaven he made you hear his voice to discipline you. On earth he showed you his great fire, and you heard his words from out of the fire. Because he loved your forefathers and chose their descendants after them, he brought you out of Egypt by his Presence and his great strength, to drive out before you nations greater and stronger than you and to bring you into their land to give it to you for your inheritance, as

it is today. Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other. Keep his decrees and commands, which I am giving you today, so that it may go well with you and your children after you and that you may live long in the land the LORD your God gives you for all time.” (Deut 4:32-40)

God’s mighty acts in bringing the Israelites out of Egypt and in choosing them should lead those people to recognize and obey him.

John 10

“But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father.” (John 10:38)

Jesus’ miracles are adequate evidence for him to demand people’s belief.

Acts 17

“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’ Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man’s design and skill.” (Acts 17:24-29)

God’s providence includes the giving of life to all those now living, along with all the things necessary for life. He also has determined and controlled all of human history, including all the wars, famines, migrations, and great events that cause populations to rise, move, and fall or prosper. The purpose for all the misery in history is to cause people to “seek him.”

1 Corinthians 10

“For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert. Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: ‘The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan

revelry.’ We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. We should not test the Lord, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel. These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come.” (1 Cor 10:1-11)

God’s providential dealings with Israel in the wilderness reveal much of his character and his manner of dealing with sin. We are to learn from their example.

Revelation 9

“The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshiping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood—idols that cannot see or hear or walk. Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts.” (Rev 9:20-21)

John is amazed that the great acts of judgment pictured in Revelation will not lead the people of that time to reach certain conclusions about God and his expectations. They go on in their immoral lifestyle, ignoring the evidence of his displeasure and judgment.

The general revelation of creation and providence is plain to those whose minds are not blinded by sin. They therefore are accountable to God and responsible for worshiping him. Man’s failure to do so is evidence of his sinful heart, and is sufficient justification for his judgment by God. However, God’s way of salvation is not transmitted through general revelation, but through his covenant, which requires a more direct and specific form of revelation, called special revelation.

The covenants revealed in special revelation

Much less than one percent of the Bible offers “apologetic” evidence for the existence of God. Rather, his existence is assumed; and his attributes, while often described, are also assumed. What the Bible is concerned about is the relationship we have to God. Through the covenant structure, God has clearly spelled out our relation to him, what we are expected to believe concerning him, and how we are to live for him.

Thus, God reveals himself to us for a particular purpose—our salvation from sin and relation to him, or, in the case of the lost, the vindication of his justice.

“But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.

To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task?" (2 Cor 2:14-16)

For this reason the modes of revelation vary according to his purpose. His revelation of himself in creation is the basis of man's accountability, but his revelation through covenant is the means of our truly knowing him and his salvation.

Methods of special revelation

As it says in Heb 1:1, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times (*polumerw^v polumeros*) and in various ways (*polutro/pwv polutropos*), but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son." The methods God has used to convey special revelation have varied greatly.

1) Direct speech

Gen 1:28-30; 2:16-17—to Adam

Gen 4:6-16—to Cain

Gen 6:13-21—to Noah

Gen 12:1-3—to Abraham

Exod 19:25 – 20:18—to the Israelites (cf. Deut 5:4, 22-23)

Exod 33:11—to Moses

Num 22:30—Balaam's donkey

Josh 1:1-9—to Joshua

1 Sam 3:1-14—to Samuel

1 Kings 19:9-18—to Elijah

Dan 5:24-25—writing on wall (written speech)

Jonah 1:2; 3:1; 4:4, 9-11—to Jonah

Matt 3:17—to Jesus at his baptism

John 12:28—to Jesus before his death

Acts 10:9-16—to Peter

2) Direct appearances (theophanies; “the angel of the Lord”)

Gen 3—to Adam and Eve

Gen 16:7-14—to Hagar

Gen 18—to Abraham

Gen 32—wrestle with Jacob

Exod 3—to Moses at the burning bush

Exod 13:21-22—to Israelites in pillar of cloud or fire

Exod 34:5-7—to Moses in the mountain

Exod 40:34-37—in the Shekinah Glory (mentioned various times from the exodus through Ezekiel; revived at transfiguration; cf. Rev 1)

Josh 5:13-15—to Joshua

Judg 6:11-23—to Gideon

Judg 13—to Manoah and his wife (cf. v. 22)

Jer 1:4-10—to Jeremiah

Acts 9:4-6—to Paul (called a “heavenly vision” in Acts 26:19)

3) Dreams

Gen 37:5-11—Joseph’s dreams

Gen 40:8-22—butler’s and baker’s dreams

Gen 41—the pharaoh’s dream

Dan 2—Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the statue

Dan 4—Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the tree

Dan 7:1—Daniel's dream about the four empires

Matt 1:20-23—Joseph's dream about Mary and Jesus

Matt 2:12—the Magi's dream not to return to Herod

4) Trances and visions

Gen 15:12-20—Abraham's vision

Num 23-24—Balaam's four oracles (esp. 24:3-4, 16)

Isa 6:1—Isaiah in the temple

Ezek 1:1—Ezekiel by the Kebar River

Ezek 37:1-14—Ezekiel's vision of dry bones

Dan 8:1—Daniel's vision of the ram and the goat

Zech 1-6—various visions of Zechariah

Acts 10:9-16—Peter's vision of the animals

Acts 16:9-10—Paul's vision of the Macedonian

2 Cor 12:1-4—Paul, perhaps in Arabia

Rev 1:9-18—John on Patmos

5) Angels

Dan 9:21-27—Gabriel to Daniel

Dan 10:4 - ch. 12—angels to Daniel

Matt 1:20-24—angel in Joseph's dream

Luke 1:11-20—Gabriel to Zechariah

Luke 1:26-38—Gabriel to Mary

Luke 24:5-8—angels at Jesus' tomb to the women

Acts 12:7-10—to Peter in prison

Heb 2:2—mediated the law of Moses

Rev 22:8-9, 16—to John on Patmos

6) Priests during the time of the theocracy

Exod 28:30—Urim and Thummim (cf. Num. 27:21)

Num 5:11-31—test for marital fidelity

7) Prophets, gift of prophecy

—Cf. many examples of speaking and writing prophets in OT (even King Saul!)

Luke 2:26-35—Simeon

Acts 11:27-28—Agabus and others (also Acts 21:10-11)

Acts 21:9—Philip's daughters

1 Cor 14:24-25—some Corinthian church members

Jude 14-15—Enoch

[For a defense of the false view that prophecy continued up to the third century, confirming the canon of Scripture, see Gary Steven Shogen, "Christian Prophecy and the Canon in the Second Century: A Response to B. B. Warfield," *JETS* 40:4 (Dec., 1997), 609-26. Dennis Jowers has suggested that evidence that this gift is suspended is found in Dan 9:24-27. For an argument favoring the cessation of the gift of prophecy after the NT, see John A. Battle, "Agabus and New Testament Prophecy," *Journal of Modern Ministry* 4:2 (Spring 2007): 137-146.]

8) Revelations from the Spirit

Sometimes these modes of revelation are mixed, or are not specified. An example is Paul's experiences on his second missionary journey which led him to Troas and then to Macedonia (Acts 16:6-7). This leading by the Spirit could have come directly through a voice or a vision, or have been mediated through a prophecy or even through providential circumstances.

9) Jesus Christ himself

Jesus is God's greatest revelation of himself; both in his preaching, in his person, and in his works. (His human nature in essence was not a revelation of his divine nature, however.)

John 1:1, 14—"Word of God . . . became flesh"

John 14:9—"Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."

John 14:10—"The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work."

Col 1:15—"He is the image of the invisible God."

Heb 1:1—"God . . . has spoken to us through his Son"

10) The Scriptures

(Scriptural support for this mode will be demonstrated in the following chapter.)

All these methods of revelation have the same source in God. Each has been used with different frequency at different times in history. For example, some of these modes were especially prevalent during the theocracy, when God directly ruled over Israel. On the other hand, there have been periods of great prophetic activity (as during the divided kingdom), and then periods of little activity (as during the five centuries before Christ). During the present dispensation, we are instructed to test all claimed revelations by the written Word of God (Gal 1:8-9). This policy, actually, has been in effect since the beginning (Deut 18:20).