



The Role of Words in Revelation

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A pastor says, "Now that you ask me, I realize that, though I use the historical-critical method, I have no integrated view of how it fits with revelation and the authority of Scripture." A seminary student expounds at length about the positions to be rejected but, when asked, is hard pressed to express a coherent view of revelation, Scripture, and exegetical procedures. A parishioner wonders how to explain that the Bible is the Word of God without becoming a literalist.

These situations all suggest large agendas and call for thorough, extended responses. This essay will consider but one piece of that larger project. It is a small yet important and often troublesome piece because images and assumptions from the past "show through" theological statements even after new learnings have occurred. Until more adequate ones have captured our imaginations, old images and assumptions are not easily abandoned.

Whatever one's theory, every interpreter of the Bible operates with some basic image of how revelation occurred and how the Scriptures came to be. David Kelsey has made this point very well. After examining several theologians, each of whom affirms the authority of the Bible but appeals to it in a different way, he observes that a theologian's reflections and proposals are guided by "an imaginative judgment that tries to catch up in a single metaphor the utter singularity and full complexity of the mode in which God is present among the faithful."¹

I. REVELATION AS GOD'S SPEECH

One such image portrays revelation as God's speech. On this view, revelation imparts to the hearer truths already articulated in audible, understandable concepts. God gives instruction; God informs human beings about his will and pur-

¹David Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 167.

poses. Paul Achtemeier labels this the "prophetic model" of inspiration and finds this image operating among both conservative and liberal interpreters of the Bible.² According to the "prophetic model," the recipient of a divine revelation needs only to repeat to others what has been heard (and then behave in accordance with God's revealed will and purpose). But this image has several difficulties:

1. It does not fit very well with the contemporary historical portrait of how the Bible was formed.³ If the words came from God, why would the books of the Bible have been edited and re-edited over such a long period of time? If one attempts to combine this image with historical study of the Bible, then surely the span of time separating revelation from composition threatens

rather than reinforces the value of the writings.

2. This image does not fit very well with the biblical witness. Robert Gnuse, for example, observes that the prophets themselves do not exhibit the “prophetic model.” “They were dynamic spokespersons who articulated the divine message in their own words. The experience of the divine was inexpressible but real for them. The articulation of the message was in their own words.”⁴

David Bartlett makes a similar point. He affirms that the prophets sometimes did utter oracles from God. In the Scriptures, “however, the word of the Lord which the prophet pronounces is often set within a literary context which discloses the imagination and interpretation either of the prophet or of his followers; and this larger context, too, is sometimes called ‘the word of the Lord.’”⁵ Bartlett outlines four different scriptural models, each assuming a somewhat different understanding of what precedes the text, and each claiming a slightly different kind of authority: the authority of words, the authority of deeds, the authority of wisdom, and the authority of witness.⁶ He concludes: “All we have said about the diversity of biblical literature would suggest that there is *no single way* to approach that literature which suffices in every instance.”⁷

3. The image of revelation as God’s speech tends to undercut the ongoing process of interpreting the Scriptures in the church. Lacking direct, audible communications from God in the present, preaching seems removed from revelation and Scripture-formation, and a chasm seems to separate the day-to-day decisions of Christians from the will of God revealed in the distant past. Compared with the clarity of revelation in biblical times, any possible action or statement seems second-rate. The ordinary lives of laity seem not to measure up to those of Paul, Jonah, or Isaiah or even a pastor who has received an inner call from God. Contemporary Christians who operate with this image feel that their own speech is not religiously important. Because there must be a statement from God to cover every situation, they are intimidated when they cannot supply one, for

²Paul Achtemeier, *The Inspiration of Scripture: Problems and Proposals* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) 29-32 and 74-75.

³Achtemeier also makes this criticism, *ibid.*, 99-104.

⁴Robert Gnuse, *The Authority of the Bible: Theories of Inspiration, Revelation and the Canon of Scripture* (New York: Paulist, 1985) 16.

⁵David Bartlett, *The Shape of Scriptural Authority* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 22.

⁶*Ibid.*, 11-130.

⁷*Ibid.*, 149.

they assume that they have not memorized enough of the Bible or that they lack the sophistication to make applications the way pastors spin them out in their sermons.

The question of authority in the church is difficult enough in itself, but this image exacerbates the problem. Lacking God’s direct speech today, how can one begin to decide whose interpretation of the Bible is correct? Because the application of the revealed words seems so different from receiving and recording them, this model supplies no conceptual framework within which to begin evaluating possible applications.

It is, of course, important to distinguish between the image of revelation as God’s direct speech and the theological concept of God’s Word (with a capital “W”). If, as the Christian

Church has consistently asserted, Jesus is the incarnate Word of God, then the image of God's direct speech already does not fit. Quite obviously, Jesus was a person and not audible speech, however much the good news about him may appropriately be communicated by means of words, concepts, propositions, and the like.

The church has also affirmed the Scriptures to be in some sense (perhaps even in several senses) the Word of God. Though correct, this affirmation is not a simple truth to understand. The question of *how* the Scriptures are the Word of God therefore deserves further exploration. This essay pursues part of such an agenda. Its purpose is to suggest away to picture the role of revelation in relation to the words subsequently used to communicate that revelation.

This essay does not intend to deny that God may have spoken at various times and places with audible syllables, words, and sentences. It endeavors only to set alongside this another possibility, one more frequently at work than the "prophetic model."

II. A CASE STUDY

Revelation (understood in its theological sense) is an uncovering of some facet of God's character, activity, or will. To the person or group experiencing this disclosure it provides a new insight or a new perspective on God and God's relation to human beings. Let us imagine what happens after a revelation occurs.

An imaginary person (let us call him Demetrius) has been very concerned about an oppressed group of people living nearby. He has watched them suffer and die. The agony he feels on their behalf accompanies him throughout the day. His concept of God stresses God's concern for Demetrius' own people, without denying or explicitly affirming God's concern for other peoples.

One day Demetrius has an experience, not necessarily unusual or dramatic. (For purposes of this essay, the exact character of this experiences does not matter; what happens after the experience is the focus here. This essay thereby sidesteps a whole range of other important issues, such as the reliability of a claimed revelatory experience.) Demetrius senses something, not an ordinary object, not one he can readily identify, but one which puzzles and haunts him. "It" spoke no words, made no motions, possessed no discernibly human features, and yet seemed to beckon him towards some goal.

A few days later Demetrius meets his best friend, Sergius, and decides to tell him about the experience. Demetrius hunts for appropriate descriptive

words; what he sensed, he says, was like a pleasant, warm light, but it was not a light. It was like a person saying, "welcome, please come in," but it had no shape or sound. It was like an aura but did not surround any object.

Sergius, let us say, is a good friend. He listens carefully and asks a series of good questions, thereby prompting Demetrius to try to describe more fully his experience and whatever "it" was that he saw or sensed. Were Sergius to have dismissed the event as a delusion, Demetrius would not have continued to probe his own memory and may even have dismissed the experience himself, but Sergius' questions draw him out. He "tries on" words, some of which seem to convey understandable impressions while others make no sense at all to Sergius. When Sergius asks, "Is this what you are saying?," sometimes Demetrius says, "Yes." At other times he

says, “No,” and then tries again to communicate, using different words.

Ultimately Sergius asks, “What does it mean?” Though Demetrius has no answer, he is a little startled by the question, because he feels strangely that he does already on some (perhaps inarticulate) level sense what it means. An awareness is present, if only he can sort out what it is. He senses that the experience has something to do with the oppressed community which has been so much on his mind, but he is not sure what.

Demetrius ponders and ponders this feeling. The next time they meet, he tries to explain it to Sergius. Sergius this time is less sympathetic. He has not shared Demetrius’ concern. “Those people” have brought their suffering on themselves, he thinks. Demetrius has been too “hung up” on their plight, and this is but another instance of his preoccupation. Sergius tries to talk Demetrius out of his interpretation.

Demetrius’ feelings do not disappear, however, and he explores them again with Sergius. This time he approaches the topic indirectly, reminding Sergius of a charitable task they once did together, slowly building his way towards the meaning of his recent experience. Sergius is now more sympathetic; together they discuss again the shape of the experience and its possible connections with “those people.” Disagreements and even heated arguments occur, but the two men wind up agreeing that Demetrius’ experience relates in some way to their oppressed neighbors, who now deserve a name. Let us call them the Umbeezees.

Together they visit the Umbeezees where another strange thing occurs. They are greeted with the words: “At last you have come!” The greeting is startling, as if they had been expected. “We desperately need medicine. Tomorrow would have been too late. Did you bring what we need?” They carry no medicine, of course, but, touched by the appeal, they hurry off to obtain what the Umbeezees need.

The following week they meet again. Sergius speaks first: “When we parted last week, I thought we were done with your vision, but now I am not so sure. It has been bothering me all week.” Sergius explains how this one incident seems only to have confirmed that they were on the right track, without exhausting the meaning of the original experience. He now feels Demetrius was being called by God to help the Umbeezees in some more lasting way. Demetrius admits that he too has been bothered but is not certain he under-

stands. Carefully Sergius takes him back through everything Demetrius had told him, showing how he now perceives a pattern of deeper meaning. Gradually Demetrius is convinced that Sergius has uncovered the meaning that he had earlier felt but was unable to articulate.

Demetrius and Sergius go for longer and longer visits. They learn to know the problems of the Umbeezees and bring them whatever aid they can. In time they also see how their own people (perhaps inadvertently) contribute to the plight of the Umbeezees. With this their involvement takes a new turn; they begin to address their own people, telling their story and advocating a whole new pattern of relationships.

Needless to say, misunderstandings and hostility ensue. When one approach does not work, another is tried. Sometimes a new image pops into their minds. After exploring it with each other and watching how it is received, they abandon it or incorporate it into their thinking. Sympathetic hearers join them and begin to spread the call in their own words and in their own way. Demetrius and Sergius must decide: are the words and actions of their colleagues

appropriate or not? Do they embody the call or not? Do they recommend attitudes and actions that are genuinely beneficial to the health of both groups of people or not? Each misinterpretation spurs them to articulate more fully an additional facet of their dream.

III. REVELATION AND ARTICULATION

In the hypothetical scene sketched above, the initial experience did not contain words. Demetrius heard no audible sounds; yet he and his colleagues eventually came to say, “The word of God for here and now is: ‘Come, help the Umbeezees.’” These words, they were eventually convinced, uncovered and articulated the meaning of the original experience. The message they formulated was effective because their hearers found themselves encountered by the same call. Several features of this process should be noticed:

1. The appropriate words were found amidst endeavors to communicate to other human beings the character and meaning of the revelatory experience. Demetrius and Sergius together explored a range of possible words, finding some useful and discarding others. Additional words were explored during their conversations with the Umbeezees. Subsequent attempts to “move” the members of their own community also added new words and shaped the character of the message. Their formulations grew out of social interaction.

The image of revelation which best fits this story is the image, not of God’s speech, but of God’s presence. Revelation is not a subjective, inner experience. Human beings are encountered by God and brought up short by a self-transcending reality with a recognizable identity. They must come to terms with the “givenness” of the other, with the character and identity of the one who encounters them. As John Baillie pointed out in his still useful Gifford lectures of 1961-62, “reality is what I ‘come up against,’ what takes me by surprise, the other-than-myself which pulls me up and obliges me to reckon with it and adjust myself to it because it will not consent simply to adjust itself to me.”⁸ The

⁸John Baillie, *The Sense of the Presence of God* (New York: Scribner’s, 1962) 33.

“reality” of which he speaks involves the physical world, yes, but more emphatically other human beings and still more emphatically God. “Reality *presents* itself to me.”⁹ For Baillie, faith is the same as acknowledging the presence of God. Theological statements and judgments are based on faith; faith itself is contained within the genuine (i.e., acknowledged) religious experience.

The presence of God is simultaneously both profoundly satisfying and profoundly disconcerting. Ultimately it alone overcomes our basic fear of abandonment, but in so doing it also threatens our autonomy and exposes the unreality of our pretensions to self-sufficiency. The simultaneity of attraction and confusion stimulates verbal expression, for in joy one seeks to understand and convey to others what one has found so satisfying, and in perplexity one searches for words with which to understand one’s own inner confusion and envision reconciling possibilities for living in the presence of this God.

Revelation is an activity of God; verbalization is a human activity. The latter is inherently communal, both because the meaning of a revelatory experience is explored with other human beings and because a community is thereby formed.

2. The second feature to be noticed about the story of Demetrius and Sergius is this: the

words were in one sense invented and in another very important sense not at all the invention of the human beings who formulated them.

(A) This is the sense in which they were *not* invented: the words needed to be appropriate. No matter how vague, a point of reference existed. Certain interpretations could be ruled out as inappropriate to the experience. Others seemed to have varying degrees of value. Some were misleading. Some encouraged listeners to focus only on peripherals. Others seemed to be “powerful” words, in the sense both of capturing the meaning of the revelatory experience and of conveying it vividly to others. What took place was not so much invention as a search for words faithful to the content and meaning of the revelatory experience.

(B) The following is the sense in which the words *were* invented: the message brought by Demetrius and Sergius had never before been spoken; theirs was a new insight, carrying new possibilities and requiring new images. Old concepts were reworked and given new meanings. Suitable metaphors, symbols, and images had to be created. Words were combined into phrases which seemed startlingly strange. Who had ever heard of God being interested in the Umbeezees before these men came along? Though a point of reference existed which enabled them to distinguish the appropriate from the inappropriate, the appropriate language was of necessity their own creation, and in that limited sense invented.

3. Words have the amazing capacity to convey God’s presence. To be sure, they do not capture or contain that presence; no formulas exist to “deliver God on demand.” Instead, as concepts and images are crafted to communicate a revelatory experience, words are stretched and pulled to the point of transparency. God’s presence “shines through” the words which thereby point beyond themselves. A dialectic is created whereby words and concepts disclose precisely in their self-negation. To borrow language from Luther, God is both

⁹Ibid.

“hidden and revealed” in the Christian message of Jesus the Christ. Because of this, paradox is often employed, vivid parables are helpful, and fresh metaphors are indispensable.

Appropriate parables, metaphors, concepts, and images do not merely resurrect the ancient experience; through the words themselves God encounters the listener in the present. God is here now in, with, and under the words. The unchanging character of God, not the same words, provides continuity between then and now.

4. The meaning of the revelatory experience was articulated in a particular context. It was intimately tied to a specific set of problems with which first Demetrius and then later Sergius and others were concerned. Human dignity was at stake. Changes were called for. Theirs was not an abstract or theoretical quest for insight into the character of God; it was not the leisurely activity of otherwise unoccupied thinkers. It was “context specific.” Concepts were worked out, to a large degree, “on the go,” amidst the urgent need for assistance and amidst the give and take of enlisting support and advocating change.

The socio-political, cultural situation formed part of the context. Another part was linguistic. Demetrius and Sergius already had some idea of God. The revelatory experience challenged and revised that concept, making possible a more appropriate understanding of God.

5. Were the results of this process to be carried into another setting, whether into a different locale or a different time period, the revelatory insight would need to be

recontextualized. Another search for appropriate words would be necessary. The pattern of meaning would have to be isolated anew, and the needs of the new setting compared with the old. Having done this carefully, with the full involvement of a community interested in maintaining continuity with Demetrius, Sergius, and his colleagues, a different message could be derived from the same revelatory experience. In this new context, the word of God may turn out to be, "Come, help the street people who have nowhere to go and nothing to eat." The discernment involved in recontextualizing the message is not very different from the discernment involved in formulating it originally.

Amidst such changes, how is continuity to be located? The two tests are these: do the new words reflect the same insight into the character of God? Do the new words or actions have the same impact on the people involved?

6. Though articulation/communication is "context specific," it does involve thinking about the character of God. Is God really the kind of God who would invite us to be concerned about the Umbeezees? Not only does revelation call people to assist the Umbeezees; it also deepens their awareness of God and God's purposes. Demetrius and Sergius eventually became convinced that *God* was calling them. This added urgency to their task. Without such a conviction this one experience would remain an isolated event, never to be woven into the fabric of their outlook on themselves, others, and the world as a whole.

7. A new insight into the identity of God is also a new insight into one's own human identity. To recognize that God cares about the Umbeezees is to recognize that they deserve my care and attention. This linkage sometimes increases the difficulty of finding the appropriate words, because a person's current concepts are shaped and colored by present perceptions. If these percep-

tions are changed, then one's language must also be reshaped, and this involves not merely adding a few new concepts but redoing the whole composite linguistic world in which a person lives and operates.

IV. APPLICATION

Up to this point we have been examining a hypothetical occurrence. Does it apply in any way to the Scriptures and life in the Christian church? Yes. Though some isolated segments of the Scriptures may have been received directly from God in spoken form, most scriptural passages evolved into their canonical form as the community of faith struggled (often joyfully) to articulate and communicate God's presence and identity. Those Scriptures are used appropriately in the contemporary church when they occasion new endeavors to recontextualize the message and create a language capable of mediating God's presence in this day. This is not simply the task of the preacher but of the whole community and is the same kind of task as that faced by the ancient church. God is present now in the same way as God was then.

The following examples are intended only to be suggestive. They are not introduced as evidence to support an argument but merely suggest that the Christian Scriptures and some incidents in the history of the church may be understood along the lines already outlined.

1. Let us consider Paul. At first glance, his experience on the Damascus road does not seem to fit our paradigm, for, according to Acts 9, he hears a voice which was audible both to

Paul himself and to his traveling companions. Yet, according to Luke's portrayal, Paul does not begin preaching immediately nor does he spend the time alone. For three days he was without sight (Acts 9:9). Then Ananias comes, Paul's sight is restored, and he is baptized. Thereafter Paul spends several days with the disciples at Damascus (Acts 9:19). Luke does not record their conversations, but one can reasonably assume that they explored the meaning of this strange turn of events, strange both for Paul, the arch-opponent of the Way, and for the disciples who needed to come to understand and trust this newly transformed colleague. They must have examined together Paul's revelatory experience and its meaning. Could God really be the kind of God who would turn even Paul into a follower of Jesus?

Consider also how Paul works at finding the right words with which to convey to others his convictions about Jesus the Christ. He visits the Corinthians and preaches to them, but later he discovers that they were misconstruing his words, thinking themselves to be more spiritual than others and dividing the community into rival factions. Paul responds with new words, aimed at correcting this misunderstanding. He is not content merely to repeat the words he had used during his earlier stay; he hunts out new ones. Some work exceedingly well, such as, for example, the magnificent affirmation of love found in 1 Corinthians 13. Others work less well. In chapter 11, for instance, after trying several arguments, each of which seems forced, he finally throws up his hands: "Judge for yourselves, is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head covered?" (11:13). He seems to have found no way to link a resolution of this issue back to the message of God's love in Christ Jesus.

In 1 Corinthians Paul searches both for clearer words with which to communicate the original message and its implications regarding life-in-community and for ways to answer new problems and issues which have arisen. There are no ready-made answers, except in those instances when he had a "command from the Lord" (cf. 7:10, 12, and 25). Paul's search for appropriate words is instructive; his words can be assessed, revised, and even abandoned, because they are neither themselves revealed nor disconnected from the revelation they endeavor to understand and communicate.

Paul underlines this in 2 Corinthians when he says "we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word" (2:17). Instead he depends on the God "who has qualified us to be ministers of a new covenant, not in a written code but in the Spirit; for the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life" (3:6). Words are neither cheap nor dispensable. A good deal of effort and anguish goes into finding the right set of words to use, precisely because their role is so very important in communicating the gospel.

Were ready-made words to be provided by God, they could be uttered too glibly. The full plight of the person(s) addressed would not be taken into account. When revelation is understood to be already verbalized and formulated in propositions, the setting is not taken seriously enough for the full depth of God's transforming presence to be appreciated.

2. Let us consider the formation of the Gospels. Mark's Gospel is particularly candid in its appraisal of the disciples. Even though they had close contact with the Incarnate Word, given the chance to see and hear him on a day-to-day basis, they apparently did not understand what it all meant until after the resurrection. The events they had witnessed were then remembered, and their pattern and significance were perceived for the first time. Words were forged to proclaim

the disciples' message to others. Their preaching was heard and discussed within the community, interpreted and reinterpreted until still more appropriate words were found. Only then did our canonical Gospels emerge, some thirty to seventy years after Jesus' ministry.

The point is this: the disciples experienced a person, who in the totality of his life was a life-transforming revelatory experience for them. The insight into the character of God which they received through Jesus was not given to them in propositional truths. The words emerged from the communal process of interpreting and articulating the impact of Jesus.

This does not mean that words are unimportant, because through those same words the revelatory experience is transmitted to others. Only through words are the story's implications for one's own life understood. Without the words the revelation is "undigested"; it remains private and not yet fully communicable.

3. Let us consider the experience of Martin Luther. In the preface to the complete edition of his Latin writings in 1545 he recalls his all-important insight into the gracious character of God, his new life-transforming awareness that God's righteousness creates rather than demands righteousness in us. Scholars have puzzled and argued over the dating of this "tower experience,"¹⁰ because

¹⁰For a general discussion of this transition, see, e.g., Eric W. Gritsch, *Martin—God's Court Jester: Luther in Retrospect* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 12-16.

no decisive alteration in his theological vocabulary can be located in his lectures from 1513 to 1518. Luther's language changed only gradually.¹¹ Even in his disputations he was "trying on" words. They had not been given to him readymade in his tower experience. Some words were gradually dropped and replaced by other more appropriate concepts.

4. Let us consider the sermon. A good sermon employs contemporary images and concepts in order to elicit an encounter between God and the listener. Its primary purpose is not to supply information about the past or about the future but to mediate the identity and character of God who is present in, with, and under the words of the preacher. A good sermon does not merely repeat the words of Scripture but recontextualizes the message. To do so the preacher must craft fresh words, capable of mediating the arresting presence of God. Though the authority of the sermon is different from that of the Bible, the process of searching for appropriate contemporary words is not that much different from the process which produced the biblical text.

5. Let us consider the lay person sorting out the implications of Christianity for his or her own life. The revelatory experience of Jesus the Christ has been mediated to that person through the Scriptures and the witness of the contemporary church. The problems of work or family or community provide the setting within which that person tries to articulate the appropriate word of God. It cannot be done well alone; the counsel of other Christians is indispensable. The process of "trying on," evaluating and revising words, is the same as that which lies behind the Scriptures. Discerning the appropriate action for a Christian in that situation likewise involves a similar process. What happens in the church building is only the preface; here is the work of the church, and it should be honored and attended to with appropriate respect. Here is where the inspiration of the Spirit is most needed (and most available?).

V. CONCLUSION

What is the role of words in revelation? The words are part of the process whereby humans in community with one another try to understand and communicate the revelation. Though of crucial and indispensable importance, they are not always given in the revelation itself. Revelation is God's act; the words are the work of the church under the guidance of the Spirit.

Why is this important? It is important because it reassures us of God's incarnate presence amidst our groping for appropriate words and our (sometimes agonizing) endeavors to sort out the meaning and implications of this arresting presence. "God with us" is itself gospel, but so is the manner in which it is communicated, for God here involves human beings. Our formulations can be more than distant, second-rate repetitions of the words used by an Isaiah or a Paul. Though we are forever indebted to them, we (laity, clergy, students) are not "peddlers" of their words but creatively involved in articulating and communicating God's presence in our midst.

¹¹See, e.g., Daniel Oliver, *Luther's Faith: The Cause of the Gospel in the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1982) 60-62. Oliver goes on to discuss the 1545 preface and the tower experience on pp. 63-70.