## God’s Revelation

In our previous volume, we demonstrated that an Ultimate Being does indeed exist and that the Christian faith provides us with best understanding of who He is and what He is like. The next question is a big one: “How does the Christian God make Himself known?” If our goal is the knowledge of Ultimate Truth, we must discover how to personally attain that knowledge.

Happily, we can narrow our search by enumerating the means, by which humans obtain knowledge. First, we learn by observation. If this is God’s primary means of self-revelation, then we will know Him by studying what He has done, both in creation and in human history. Second, we have intuitive knowledge, that is, we can sometimes simply sense within ourselves what is true. If God primarily communicates to us in this way, then we find the path to Truth in personal religious experience or in the progressive development of human religious thought through history. A third option is language. Does God reveal Himself verbally in inspired books? Finally, God could certainly reveal Himself through a direct, personal encounter with an individual.

In this chapter, the task before us is to investigate these possible paths to knowing God’s revelation and acquaint ourselves with various movements that promote or have promoted these options.

### А. Revelation through Nature (General Revelation)

In the world of theology, a special term is used to designate God’s revelation through nature – God’s “general revelation.” More specifically, general revelation includes what we can know about God through His creation, the human conscience, and our human experience. We recall the classic reference from the Hebrew Scriptures about knowing God through creation: “The heavens are telling of the glory of God, and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge” (Psalm 19:1-2). The apostle Paul also affirmed, “That which is known about God is evident within them, for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made” (Rom 1:19-20).

Paul also writes about knowing God’s standards thought the human conscience. In Romans 2:14-15 we read, “For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them.” Finally, wise Solomon feels we also learn truth by observing life in the world. He notes how laziness results in poverty (Prov 24:30-32), and how adultery leads to misery (Prov 5:7-14).

Knowing God through nature seems straightforward. Yet, a noted 20th-century theologian, Karl Barth, issued a now famous challenge to this idea. He emphatically denied that God reveals Himself by means of general revelation. He objected to the idea that God’s revelation could be impersonal. In Barth’s opinion, God always reveals Himself through personal encounter, primarily through the coming of Jesus Christ to the earth. Barth did concede that we can encounter God through Scripture, preaching and the sacraments, but only if and when they lead us into a personal experience with Him.[[1]](#footnote-1)

How did Barth come up with such a notion? In his theology, Barth emphasized God’s “transcendence” – that He is distinct from His creation. He emphasized that feature to the extreme of claiming that God must take the initiative to reveal Himself in a personal spiritual encounter in order for someone to know Him. He also noted that sinful human nature distorts the knowledge of God obtained through observation.[[2]](#footnote-2) Furthermore, Barth emphasized the unity of God’s nature. To maintain that unity, God’s actual presence must accompany His self-revelation. Finally, Barth felt that God’s self-revelation always led to a positive response by the recipient of that revelation. Consequently, He must be personally present and active in drawing the recipient to Himself.

Nonetheless, Barth’s view has serious shortcomings. First, as we have seen, the Bible, which Barth accepts as true, clearly speaks of general revelation. Second, it logically follows that if we observe what a person has done, we gain some knowledge of the person himself/herself. A person is revealed, at least in part, by what he/she does. Therefore, one can certainly know something about God by observing His work in creation.

In connection with general revelation, we must familiarize ourselves with a related concept called “natural theology.” Natural theology refers to a person’s ability to actually know God through general revelation. If general revelation does exist, which seems beyond doubt, the question remains as to whether people can properly perceive that revelation and come to true conclusions about God based on their observations.

Various theories exist to delineate the relationship between general revelation and natural theology. The theory “deism,” which we discussed in volume 1, proposes that God created the world and then abandoned it, leaving people to deal with their issues on their own. People do not need personal contact with their Creator, and it is beneath His dignity to do so.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Deist Edward Herbert proposed that through general revelation one could know all one needs to know about God, namely: (1) God exists, (2) He is worthy of worship, (3) one must pursue holiness, (4) one is in need of repentance, (5) God will reward and punish.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Therefore, deists believe in general revelation and consider natural theology not only possible, but also imperative, since God does not reveal Himself in any other way. The individual must formulate his/her understanding of God based on what He has done in creation and conscience, and only by that means. On the other extreme, we have Karl Barth’s view that general revelation does not exist. Consequently, natural revelation is also ruled out, since it is derived from observations about God in nature.

We welcome more moderate positions. Roman Catholicism, for example, accepts the existence of general revelation and believes that one can form a natural theology from it. Yet, this knowledge is limited, since there are aspects of God’s nature and plan that are available to us only through direct revelation from God. The 16th-century reformer John Calvin held a different view. He taught that people are so deeply affected by sin that they will unavoidably distort the knowledge of God available through creation. So then, for Calvin, general revelation indeed exists, but it does not benefit anyone. Natural theology, that is, theology formed without the benefit of direct divine revelation, is ruled out.

Based on what we have said earlier, it is difficult to take Karl Barth’s theory seriously. We refuted deism in our previous volume. That leaves us with the Catholic and Calvinistic views. The apostle Paul can aid us here. We have already cited him in support of the existence of general revelation (Rom 1:19-20). Yet, contrary to Calvin, Paul states that people are responsible for the knowledge available through general revelation, claiming that unbelievers “are without excuse” (v. 20). They could have known about God through creation, but rejected that knowledge. Clearly, God would not hold people responsible for what they could not do. The fact that God will judge people for their rejection of His revelation in creation shows that they are thus able to know Him.

We find more support in Paul’s teaching in Athens, where he states, “He made from one {man} every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined {their} appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him” (Acts 17:26-27). Here we see that God expected humankind in general, particularly those not privileged with special revelation, to seek Him, which is possible only if they could perceive Him in nature.

Moreover, in the second chapter of his letter to the Romans, Paul relates that the conscience can “accuse or defend” (Rom 2:15), showing that conscience can provide true knowledge of God’s standards. Finally, in the book of Job we read the following: “But now ask the beasts, and let them teach you, and the birds of the heavens, and let them tell you. Or speak to the earth, and let it teach you, and let the fish of the sea declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the LORD has done this?” (Job 12:7-9). The author affirms that nature can teach us about the ways of God.

As we form our response to the question of the relationship between general revelation and natural theology, we must take into consideration still other factors. Paul continues his discussion of creation in Romans chapter 8, and there claims that our planet Earth is in a fallen condition: “For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption…” (Rom 8:20-21). So then, creation, having departed from its initial perfection, will not give us a precise picture of the nature of its Creator.

Paul also speaks of the fallen condition of humans, which will consequently lead to their distortion of what can be observed about God in nature. He writes that people are “darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart” (Eph 4:18). This means that people are likely to reject the knowledge available to them through general revelation. Paul directly states this fact in Romans 1:21: “For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened,” as well as in Romans 3:10-11: “There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God.”

Based on the above considerations, we may conclude the following. First, general revelation does indeed exist. God does reveal Himself and His ways through creation, conscience and human experience. However, because of the fallen state of creation, the picture of God presented by these means is not precise, which renders any theology derived from them, at best, only an approximation of the truth. We also conclude that natural theology is possible – people can potentially arrive at true knowledge of God by means of observation. Yet, in practice, people generally do not accept what God has revealed of Himself in nature. Hence, this method of God’s self-revelation, in and of itself, seems inadequate.

### B. Revelation through Personal Religious Experience (Mysticism)

Another suggested means of acquiring God’s revelation is through special mystical experience, or a personal, spiritual encounter with God. Adherents of this approach describe this experience with terms like “feeling,” “intuition,” “encounter,” or “awareness.” According to this view, God speaks to the individual directly, through the heart. The individual comes to know God and His plan intuitively.

Mysticism has a long history in the Christian Church, especially in the East. Noted in this regard are Eastern mystics like Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022) and Seraphim of Sarov (1754-1833). The Western Church boasts similar individuals like Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) and Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556).[[5]](#footnote-5) More modern mystical theologians in the West include Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and Karl Barth (1886-1968).[[6]](#footnote-6)

Many consider Friedrich Schleiermacher the father of liberal theology. His views differed markedly from other thinkers of his day and are coined by the term “Romanticism.” Schleiermacher put great weight on the idea of God’s immanence, that is, His nearness to creation and interaction with it. He emphasized God’s immanence to such a degree that conservative theologian Carl Henry considered him a pantheist.[[7]](#footnote-7) Like the classic mystic, Schleiermacher felt that God communicates through inner feelings or intuition.

Schleiermacher delineates his mystical approach in his hermeneutic (i.e., interpretation of Scripture). Schleiermacher advises us not only to analyze a text from a grammatical point of view, but also to conduct a psychoanalysis of the text’s author. For Schleiermacher, the goal of Scripture interpretation is to reproduce for oneself the inner world and inner experience of the author and relive the feelings of devotion that he had when writing his text.[[8]](#footnote-8) In this way, the reader may secure personal contact with the One, Who inspired the biblical author in the first place. Schleiermacher claimed that the indicator of a true mystical experience with God is the presence of a deep feeling of dependence on Him.

As for Karl Barth, we have already discussed his views on general revelation. His theological system, in its entirety, is named “Neo-orthodoxy.” As mentioned before, Barth believed that God reveals Himself only through a personal, spiritual encounter. God is so transcendent that there does not exist any natural point of contact between God and people. Therefore, in order for God to reveal Himself, He must take the initiative to “break in” to an individual’s consciousness. The most striking example of this kind of “inbreaking” is the coming of God’s Son, Jesus Christ, from heaven to earth.[[9]](#footnote-9) As is common among mystics, Barth feels that human language is incapable of adequately expressing God’s nature or communicating the knowledge of Him.

Barth’s theology birthed his unique approach to Scripture. He felt that the Bible is the Word of God only when the Holy Spirit makes the words of Scripture alive in the hearts of the readers. That is, the Bible can “become” the Word of God. Before and after that personal encounter with the Spirit, the Bible is simply regarded as a testimony of previous encounters between God and people. Thus, it loses its inspired status.[[10]](#footnote-10) Nonetheless, Barth ascribes a special status to the Bible, claiming that these personal encounters with the Spirit occur exclusively through the words of Scripture.

In summary, for Barth, God’s revelation does not consist in information about God, but in an encounter with Him. God reveals Himself only through a personal, spiritual experience of encounter, and when that encounter concludes, people have no access to Him until He takes initiative again to reach out to an individual.[[11]](#footnote-11) Thus, we see the mystical nature of Barth’s theology.

Barth fears that if we consider the Bible God’s Word as such, then we limit God’s freedom and sovereignty, since now God is obligated to fulfill His Word. Barth fails to consider, though, that no one compelled God to give His Word in the first place. God’s giving of His Word is actually an expression of His freedom and sovereignty.[[12]](#footnote-12) Barth also fears that regarding the Bible as God’s Word will allow to reader to somehow “control” God. Yet, as Helm properly notes, knowing someone in no way implies gaining control over that individual.[[13]](#footnote-13)

It appears that mysticism has exerted, and continues to exert, a significant influence on Christian thought. The well-known Catholic theologian Karl Rahner claims, “The Christian of the future will be a mystic, or he or she will not exist at all,” meaning that a person’s faith will be primarily based on “a genuine experience of God emerging from the very heart of our existence.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Yet, should Christianity welcome this tendency?

We can note some significant weaknesses in this approach. First, mysticism unavoidably leads to subjectivity. Each individual will develop his/her own unique understanding of God based on his/her personal spiritual (mystical) experience. There will be as many views on God as there are people who hold those views. There are no objective criteria, by which one can verify claims about God. There are no objective criteria to judge right from wrong, spiritual experience from human imagination, or the Spirit of God from another spirit.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Second, we see no need to make mystical experience an exclusive means to knowing God. Personal experience with God need not exclude other means of revelation, but rather will compliment them.[[16]](#footnote-16) If the same God we experience in personal, spiritual encounter has revealed Himself in other ways, then accessing these other means will in no way interfere with obtaining a true knowledge of God, but, instead, will only enrich that knowledge.

At the same time, we must heartily affirm that personal experience with God is healthy and vital for developing a personal relationship with Him. God is a living God and seeks fellowship and interaction with the people He created. Yet, an exclusive reliance on mystical knowledge of God is haunted by the defect of subjectivity, as noted above.

### C. Revelation through the Historical Development of Religious Thought

Others have advanced the idea that God reveals Himself progressively through the development of religious thought in history. According to this theory, over time, religious thinking has progressed from more primitive to more sophisticated forms. Later religious thinkers have borrowed concepts from earlier thinkers, developed them, and passed them on to later generations. Many think that Christianity represents the highest attainment of human religious consciousness.

So then, God does not reveal Himself as such, but people discover Him as religious faith progresses over time. Such an approach has much in common with the theory of evolution in science. We may even term this idea the “evolution of religion.” In the world of theology, it is known by the phrase “History of Religion.”

Let us trace the route religion has supposedly taken through human history. Primitive peoples encountered natural forces that they could not control, but that, nonetheless, affected their lives. They began to worship these powers in order to appease them and, in so doing, to secure for themselves success and security. In time, people began assigning names to these powers, like Neptune, Diana, etc.

Later, people began acknowledging among many gods a patron god, who especially cared for their tribe. According to this theory, early Israel believed in many gods, but recognized Yahweh as their tribal, patron god. Israel advanced religious thinking in that it eventually embraced monotheism, the belief in only one God. This supposedly occurred in the fifth-sixth centuries BC. Proponents of the “History of Religion” school assert that the first monotheist was the final (unnamed) editor of the Pentateuch, who lived at that time.

At first glance, this approach seems convincing. Still, a closer look will reveal some serious defects. First, this theory, which supposedly offers an explanation for the rise of Judaism and Christianity, does not seriously take into consideration what the Judaism and Christianity have to say for themselves.

For example, liberal scholars claim that an unknown editor produced the final form of the Pentateuch in the fifth-sixth centuries BC. Yet, there is no documented evidence in Jewish history that such a person ever existed or did such a monumental work. In addition, no one has ever discovered a copy of one of the supposed documents he employed to make his composition. The Jewish Scriptures, as well as Jesus and His apostles, all attribute the writing of the Pentateuch in its final form to Moses.

When one accepts the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, one obtains a totally different picture of origins of monotheism. In the 15th century BC, Moses wrote, “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!” (Deut 6:4). Here we see that Moses, who lived about a thousand years before the so-called editor of the Pentateuch, was clearly a monotheist.

Even before Moses’ time, the Jewish Scriptures testify that Abraham, who lived in the 21st century BC, believed in one God. He once said, “I have sworn to the LORD God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth…” (Gen 14:22). He also stated, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?” (Gen 18:25). Additionally, the apostle Paul flatly contradicts the History of Religion approach. In Romans 1:21-23, he claims that humans were originally monotheists, but degraded into polytheism.

So then, the teachings of Judaism and Christianity draw a totally different picture of the development of religious thought than the History of Religion approach does. According to the former, the initial religious faith was monotheism, and polytheism arose as a deviation from it.

Aside from the biblical witness, historical data also contradict the History of Religion approach. We know of another monotheist of ancient times – Akhenaten (1353-1336 BC), an Egyptian pharaoh. In his time, he required the worship of Aten, who was identified with the disc of the sun. We also know that in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, as far as records allow us to trace, worshippers recognized a chief god among the pantheon of gods. In Egypt this was Ra, the sun god, and in Mesopotamia – Any, the sky king. It seems that the earliest faiths embraced the notion of a chief god above the rest.

We must ask the question, “Does what we observe in ancient religions represent a developing monotheism, or a degrading monotheism?” In other words, did the Egyptians originally worship only Ra and later adopted other gods into their faith, or did they worship many gods in the beginning and then “promoted” Ra? We may pose the same question about the worship of Anu in Mesopotamia. What actually took place in antiquity: a developing monotheism, or a degrading monotheism?

To answer this question, we need to consider several factors. Ancient religions paid very little attention to the chief god of their pantheon. The found the lesser, immanent gods more to their liking. As a rule, people are more fascinated by novelties than by established traditions. Consequently, we may posit that the lesser gods appeared later. These considerations weight in favor of an original monotheism, degrading into polytheism.

We can confirm antiquity’s neglect of their chief gods with data from Sumerian texts.[[17]](#footnote-17) Enmesharra was the original, or at least one of the original gods of Sumer. He gave his authority to Anu and was subsequently forgotten. Anu, in turn, gave his authority to Enlil, after which the ancients withdrew their worship from the former as well.

The Aztecs believed in two original gods, from which all other gods and people originated. Their names were Ometecuhtli and Omeciuatl. Yet, it is written of them, “By the time of the Spanish Conquest, the two primordial beings had largely been pushed into the background by a crowd of younger and more active gods.”[[18]](#footnote-18) In addition, the chief god of Canaan, El, “appears in some of the myths as an old man, too old to act effectively.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

Russian Orthodox scholar Andrey Kuraev comments on this phenomenon: “In some sense, the Original God continues to be considered the most powerful being, but cultic practice dares to appeal to Him only in the most extreme circumstances.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Similarly, M. Eleade writes, “If such action (i.e., an appeal to other gods) does not produce the desired results, people remember the Highest Being, who, in ordinary times, was nearly forgotten,” and also, “In the cults of so-called primitive peoples, the Highest Beings occupy last place.” Eleade concludes, “Forgetting the High God, the Creator, was a relatively frequent event in the history of religion.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

We must also consider the extensive research done by Andrew Lang and Wilhelm Schmidt concerning primitive religions that exist now. Lang studied a tribe in Australia, whose God is known as the “Creator.” He requires from people a moral lifestyle and unselfishness. Conventionally, the “Creator” is not represented by an idol. Once, He destroyed the world by a flood because of people’s ungodliness.[[22]](#footnote-22)

It is remarkable to see the overlap between the faith of these primitive aborigines and the so-called “evolutionary advanced” faith positions of Judaism and Christianity. It is unlikely that they borrowed these concepts from the Bible, but their faith may well reflect an original monotheism that they have preserved over the centuries.

Schmidt conducted an exhaustive study of primitive people groups worldwide and published the results of his study in a twelve-volume work *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee* (*The Origin of the Idea of God*).[[23]](#footnote-23) He concluded that the more primitive the tribe, the higher their conception of God. He claimed that in comparing primitive cultures with more “advanced” ones, we observe that not one of the “advanced” cultures held a higher view of God than the more primitive.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Schmidt’s description of the God of these primitive tribes is as follows: “He is One, has existed from eternity, knows all things, is beneficent, inculcates morality, is all powerful, and was the creative Power… no image of the primitive Supreme Being is made anywhere.”[[25]](#footnote-25) If we postulate that the faith of primitive tribes reflects the faith of the most ancient peoples, we uncover another testimony in favor of an original monotheism. World-renown biblical scholar Bruce Metzger supports Schmidt’s conclusions and relates critics’ reaction to his findings:

The outcome of this book is that evolution cannot be postulated as an explanation of the origin of religion, but the facts – cold, hard facts – demonstrate that monotheism was everywhere the earliest form of religion of which we have knowledge. Schmidt has smitten his opponents hip and thigh. Instead of answering him, they have largely ignored his documentation of evidence, preferring rather to brush him aside.[[26]](#footnote-26)

To the above, we may add the testimony of W. A. P. Martin, former president of Peking University: “China, India, Egypt and Greece all agree in the monothetstic type of their early religion. The Orphic Hyms, long before the advent of the popular divinities, celebrated the *Pantheos*, the universal God. The odes compiled by Confucius testify to the early worship of Shangte, the Supreme Ruler. The Vedas speak of ‘one unknown true Being, all-present, all-powerful, the Creator, Preserver and Destroyer of the Universe.’”[[27]](#footnote-27)

Still more arguments for an original monotheism can be advanced. In human history, we note people’s tendency to reject monotheism. The history of Pharaoh Akhenaten, who made mandatory the worship of one god – Aten, is illuminating in this regard. Immediately after his death, the Egyptians returned to the worship of many gods, which shows their predilection for polytheism. Excavations of the tomb of a certain official of Akhenaten confirms this claim. We see in his tomb evidence of inscriptions honoring Aten alone, but also later alterations to honor other gods as well. Could not these alterations have been made after Akhenaten’s death?[[28]](#footnote-28)

Moreover, one sees in the history of Israel clear indications of a popular attraction toward polytheism. Only after the exile to Babylon did the Jewish people fully embrace the teachings of Moses and the prophets, that God was one. Even in our day, certain practices of traditional Christian denominations hint at this polytheistic tendency – namely, the honoring of Mary and the saints.

In refutation of the History of Religion school of thought, we can point out the uniqueness of Hebrew faith in comparison with other belief systems of ancient times. One of the most noted theologian of Old Testament studies, John Bright, acknowledged that Israel “brought with them onto the stage of history a religion quite without parallel in the ancient world,”[[29]](#footnote-29) and, “Her (i.e., Israel’s) conception of God was from the beginning so remarkable, and so without parallel in the ancient world.”[[30]](#footnote-30) This may show that Israel did not borrow their conception of God from neighboring tribes, but received it by divine revelation.

In light of the above considerations, we may confidently conclude that in the course of human history the idea of God has not developed, but degraded from monotheism to polytheism. Then, how can we explain the predominance of monotheism in the religious world today? It is best explained not by a progressive evolution of religious thought, but by divine intervention. The positive influence of Judeo-Christian faith is responsible for the rise of monotheism, and those faiths received that knowledge by special divine revelation.

Unfortunately, several of the early Christian apologists were also ready to concede, at least in part, to a more evolutionary pattern in the development of religious thought.[[31]](#footnote-31) Justin Martyr, for example wrongly associated the Stoic concept of “Logos,” an all-pervading, impersonal rational force, with the “Logos” of John’s Gospel, who is the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ. In his attempt to defend Christianity before a pagan world, he suggested, “For whatever either lawgivers or philosophers uttered well, they elaborated by finding and contemplating some part of the Word… Christ, who was partially known even by Socrates (for He was and is the Word who is in every man…) (*2* *Apology*, 10).[[32]](#footnote-32) In addition: “For each man spoke well in proportion to the share he had of the spermatic word, seeing what was related to it” (*2 Apology,* 13).[[33]](#footnote-33)

Clement of Alexandria committed the same error: “Before the advent of the Lord, philosophy was necessary to the Greeks for righteousness…. Philosophy, therefore, was a preparation, paving the way for him who is perfected in Christ” (*Stromata,* 1.5).[[34]](#footnote-34)

Finally, we will conclude our discussion with a helpful thought from the prominent 19th-century evangelical theologian B. B. Warfield. He correctly notes that in the History of Religion approach we encounter a confusion of the roles of revelation and reason.[[35]](#footnote-35) When a person seeks the knowledge of God by reflection, his/her reason plays an active role in obtaining that knowledge. On the other hand, when God gives revelation, human reason is passive and merely receives that information. Warfield writes,

The characteristic element in the Bible idea of revelation in its highest sense is that the organs of revelation are not creatively concerned in the revelations made through them, but occupy a receptive attitude. The contents of their messages are not something thought out, inferred, hoped, or feared by them, but something conveyed to them, often forced upon them by the irresistible might of the revealing Spirit.[[36]](#footnote-36)

### D. Revelation through Historical Events

This approach works off the assumption that God makes Himself known through His acts, that is, though what He has done in history. We know God by reflecting on His mighty deeds. This theory takes two main forms: the so-called “death of God” theology, and “narrative theology.”

We will investigate the “death of God” theology as espoused by one of its leading proponents, Thomas Altizer.[[37]](#footnote-37) According to this teaching, God “died” in the sense that He became part of His creation. Originally, God existed separate from the world, but subsequently He surrendered His transcendence and became completely immanent, that is, joined Himself to the material world. This occurred at the moment when He became incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ, and thus irrevocably united Himself with the material universe. The Early Church, however, supposedly invented the story of Jesus’ resurrection and ascension to again “locate” God in heaven and restore His transcendence. According to Altizer, however, God, in fact, “dissolved” into His creation.

Consequently, since God and the universe are now one entity, it is senseless to expect from God any supernatural intervention. He now works exclusively by natural means, especially through the efforts of people. Since God is totally immersed in His creation, He works equally through the Church and through society. Therefore, the people of God should be active participants not only in religious work, but in social and political affairs as well.

Nonetheless, the “death of God” theology is subject to criticism. First, multitudes of people over time have testified of divine intervention in their lives in answer to prayer. Such cases are far too numerous to attribute them simply to chance. Second, when we observe conditions in society, it becomes difficult to conclude that God is working equally in the Church and in secular society. Although the Church is far from perfect, in comparing conditions among God’s people with conditions in society, one must conclude that God is more active in the former. In addition, there exist numerous historical evidences of Christ’s resurrection, as delineated in chapter 16 of the previous volume. Finally, the “death of God” movement was very short lived. It began in the 1960’s, and boasts few adherents today.

Let us turn our attention to the second form of “revelation through events,” i.e., “narrative theology.” Unlike the previous theory, narrative theology focuses attention on God’s works among His people as recorded in the Bible. According to this theory, however, the Bible is not God’s Word, but only records the historical events, through which God revealed Himself. Marshall describes this view as follows:

“The Bible gives us, we must say, not simply a recital of historical events which functioned as divine revelation, but rather an account of historical events in the midst of which a revelation of God took place. So, from this point of view what is at issue is not so much the truth of the Bible as a source of divine revelation but rather the truth of the Bible in its depiction of the human situation in which God revealed Himself.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

Consequently, the goal of Bible study is to somehow “get behind” the words of Scripture and mentally reproduce the historical events described therein. By means of reflection on these events, the reader receives revelation about God and His plan. Similar to how God opened the eyes of the biblical authors to recognize His action in history, the Holy Spirit opens the eyes of the reader of Scripture to understand the significance of the events recorded there for today.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Yet, we note serious problems with this approach as well. First, the Bible records not only God’s deeds, but also His words. In Scripture, God not only acts, but also speaks. Additionally, historical events do not interpret themselves. We need a reliable interpretation of historical events in order to understand their meaning and significance. In this regard, J. I. Packer wisely remarks, “For men can ‘know that he is Yahweh’ from seeing his works in history only if he speaks to make it clear that they are his works, and to explain what they mean.”[[40]](#footnote-40)

Also problematic is that the only source of information about biblical events is the Bible itself. How can the reader “get behind” the text to reflect on biblical events independent from the text? Where else can material for reflection come from, except from the pages of Scripture? In addition, in claiming that He reveals Himself only in actions, this theory severely limits God’s ability. Why can God not speak? It leaves the impression that God is mute.

We can underscore other weaknesses as well. The Bible contains various literary genres, but narrative theology relates only to the narrative genre. What about other literary forms in the Bible, like law, prophecy, apocalypse, epistle, proverbs and poetry?[[41]](#footnote-41) Moreover, when God speaks, that is also an event. If God’s revelation consists only in His acts, then we must include His “speech acts” as well.[[42]](#footnote-42) Finally, in Scripture, we encounter many instances where God predicts future events. Therefore, one must include in the chronicle of God’s acts His future ones as well, which are made known only by prophetic utterances.[[43]](#footnote-43)

In conclusion, we can confidently state that God does indeed reveal Himself through events, that is, by means of what He does. Yet, that is certainly not the exclusive means of God’s self-revelation. In addition, as mentioned above, the record of God’s deeds must be properly interpreted. Easton gives a fitting summary of the issue: “The Scriptures are not merely the ‘record’ of revelation; they are the revelation itself in a written form,” for “the accurate preservation and propagation of the truth.”[[44]](#footnote-44)

At the same time, one must not undervalue the importance of God revealing Himself through His works. Helm rightly asserts that God’s revelation in Scripture mainly concerns His deeds in history and their interpretation. Helm explains that a “historical” approach to revelation (as opposed to a more “philosophical” approach) was necessary, seeing that God’s goal was not only to give information about Himself, but also to accomplish salvation. Therefore, God needed to act in history, thereby revealing Himself by means of His mighty acts of redemption.[[45]](#footnote-45)

### E. Revelation through Direct Personal Encounter with God

Without doubt, the best possible means of receiving God’s self-revelation is to encounter Him directly, such as was the case when God became incarnate in the Lord Jesus Christ. The early disciples of Jesus not only heard His words, but also saw Him in action: how He dealt with people, how He handled various situations, etc. The apostle John describes this experience of direct fellowship with the Lord as follows: “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). Yet, unfortunately, Jesus is no longer physically present with us. Our knowledge of Him now depends on the testimony of Scripture.

Aside from the coming of Christ, we note several similar experiences of direct fellowship with God in Scripture. Certainly, Adam and Eve knew God personally as they fellowshipped with Him in the Garden of Eden. Moses has a similar relationship with the Lord: “The LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend” (Ex. 33:11), and, “With (Moses) I speak mouth to mouth, even openly, and not in dark sayings, and he beholds the form of the LORD” (Num 12:8). Although we know little about his history, Enoch possibly had a similar walk with God (see Gen 5:24). At the same time, we must consider these as rare exclusions to the rule that, in our fallen world, regular, direct contact with God does not typically occur.

Nonetheless, the apostle Paul testifies of a time when direct fellowship with God will be restored. This will occur at Christ’s Second Coming, when believers will see Him “face to face” and “know, just as we have been fully known” (1 Cor 13:12).

### F. Revelation through Words (Propositional Revelation)

In the opinion of many, God reveals Himself primarily not through nature, intuition, thought or events, but through words written in inspired books. Is there any support for this thesis? First, the primary function of language is to convey information. The other means of revelation, noted above, do not have transmission of information as their exclusive or even primary goal. Since God created the language-communication system, it logically follows that He is going to employ it to communicate information about Himself.

Second, words transmit information more precisely and faithfully than other methods of communication. If God wanted us to know Him and His will, He certainly would have used words to communicate His self-revelation to people. In addition, information is best preserved by writing. In such a way, what God has revealed in the past can be available to future generations.

Third, another advantage of verbal communication is that the possible meaning of such communication is limited by the definition of the words and the usage of the grammatical constructions employed. These factors are fixed by the structure of the given language. Any native speaker of that language can thus verify the correctness of a saying’s interpretation.

One must also consider that God created people in His image (Gen 1:26-27). He created us similar to Himself, possessing reason and linguistic ability, in order to communicate with us. Henry comments, “Issuing from the mind and will of God, revelation is addressed to the mind and will of human beings.”[[46]](#footnote-46) Finally, the disciples of Jesus and the Lord Himself taught that God’s authoritative revelation is contained in words. Praying to the Father, Jesus said, “Your Word is truth” (Jn 17:17). The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews spoke of God, speaking through the prophets (Heb 1:1).

We must clarify, though, that in considering revelation through words, one must include the concept of context. God does not give revelation through words in isolation, but as component parts of sentences. These sentences are part of a bigger grammatical complex as well – paragraphs, which, in turn, are interpreted in light of the whole. So then, to determine the meaning God intended in the text, one must consider all these “circles of context.”

Some qualify the concept of “propositional revelation” that is, revelation through words in sentences, by saying that the revelational aspect of God’s communication is not the words He used, but the intention behind the words. Further, it is claimed that that intention may be communicated equally well by a different word choice. One may paraphrase the words of Scripture, then, or translate it into another language without any loss of communicative meaning.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Nonetheless, as we shall discuss later in this volume, the inspiration of Scripture applies not to the intention of the author, but to the choice of words he employed. In this regard, the apostle Paul wrote, “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16). We notice here that Paul specifically says, “All Scripture is inspired by God,” i.e., what was *written* was inspired.

We heartily acknowledge that God did inspire the thoughts and intentions of the biblical authors. Yet, according to the doctrine of full and verbal inspiration, which we will study later, God also directed the word choice of the authors to communicate His intended meaning.

Concerning paraphrases and translations of God’s Word, we have no guarantee that God’s intended meaning is being faithfully communicated in them. There is no assurance that God’s Spirit is active in the paraphrase or translation to the same degree He was active in the recording of Scripture. It seems that the human factor involved in these endeavors unavoidably compromises their quality. The surest way to secure God’s intended meaning is study the Scriptures in their original languages.

Finally, some fear that human language is too limited to express God’s truth adequately – too much meaning is lost via communication in human words and expressions. Scripture, therefore, can only present us with a limited or even distorted version of God’s revelation.

On the one hand, we concede that human language, and humans themselves, are incapable of comprehending or expressing the fullness of God’s essence. On the other hand, this fact does not hinder God from giving propositional revelation sufficiently precise to communicate truth to the hearer. The revelation we receive in propositional form is certainly not exhaustive, but it is nonetheless true and adequate.

We also note that “human” language is not a creation of humans at all, but of God. God graced humanity with the gift of language to enable communication between parties. It logically follows that if God’s goal is fellowship with people, then He would create a language system that is sufficiently developed to ensure quality communication between Himself and others.

### G. Conclusions

In answer to the question, “How does God reveal Himself,” it is best to conclude that God is not limited in how He may communicate with us. He may make Himself known in any way He chooses: through creation, history, intuition, reflection, etc. At the same time, it is imperative to determine which method of revelation is most authoritative in order to resolve conflicts and inconsistencies that arise among those who claim to have God’s revelation.

As stated above, one could hardly deny that the most excellent means of revelation is God’s personal appearance among men in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet, Jesus is no longer personally with us, and no one in our time enjoys such direct and uninterrupted contact with God.

Based on the considerations noted above, we conclude that, at the present time, the best and most reliable means of revelation is through God’s communication to us through language. De S. Cameron rightly asserts, “Certainly, the prevalence of quoted divine speech, which peppers the canon, suggests a presumption in favor of speech as *the* category within which to understand God’s communication with his creatures.”[[48]](#footnote-48)

At the same time, we do not deny that God may reveal Himself to people by such means as visions, dreams or prophetic words. Yet, these means of communication are to be evaluated in the light what God is known to have said to inspired recipients, as recorded in Scripture. Whatever does not line up with the biblical witness is to be rejected.

Finally, we can add Helm’s comment that verbal communication is not only the best method of revelation, but also an irreplaceable one. In other words, what God communicates through special, verbal revelation cannot be fully obtained by other means: not by reason, intuition, observation, or any other means.[[49]](#footnote-49)

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