

# The Bible as Revelation

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Many moons ago evangelicals could be relied upon to hold a generally agreed-upon opinion on the revelatory character of Scripture. There were some who tried to formulate the “Scripture Principle” using evidentialist apologetics (Warfield, Sproul, Pinnock), and others who laid stress upon the Divine initiative in revelation by employing ‘presuppositionalist’ approaches (Turretin, Kuyper, Van Til), but, for all that, the Bible was thought to contain God’s verbal disclosure in propositional form.

Sadly, this is no longer true. Since Karl Barth there has been an incessant attempt to treat propositionalism as naïve and rationalistic. The alternatives put forth as replacements have all advertised themselves as more dynamic than the older view. And they have joined chorus in their efforts to disabuse the church of its “static” view of the Bible.

Certainly, it is true (as I have pointed out) that 19<sup>th</sup> century theologians sometimes portrayed the Bible as a repository of retrievable proof-texts to fit any question. But even then it has been demonstrated that such men as Charles Hodge can be construed more charitably than has often been the case in the books and articles of their opponents. I believe the issue of whether the Bible comes to us as propositional revelation is crucial for Christians and ought to be settled in the affirmative. Here, then, are some of my thoughts on the matter:

## **Beware of Divinizing the Bible**

It is important to take some care in making sure that we fully understand what *function* the Bible plays in the world. In the first place we ought to beware of divinizing the Bible. For example, we must be cautious of too closely linking the Bible as the Word of God with Jesus Christ, the Word of God. Although the Bible is the Word of God it is not a Person, it does not think. It is a printed book, individual copies of which can be destroyed, and can be corrupted, although the Bible can never be eradicated. It is the verbal enunciation of the Creator God to mankind. It is, therefore, qualified as supremely authoritative on account of it being the *Bibliion of God*. Holy Scripture needs the

protection of God to stay extant in this world, and it needs the power of God if it is to be truly effectual in this world. Christians do not worship the Bible, they worship the God who has inspired the Bible and who reveals Himself in the Bible. All Scripture is *Qeopneustos* (2 Tim.3:16), so it carries an inherent authority far above any word that can be spoken by man. This is why our Lord answered the Tempter with the Scripture. This is why He told the Devil, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” (Matt. 4:4). Scripture is not, however, God Himself. It is, as Bavinck called it, “the instrumental efficient cause of theology.”<sup>1</sup> As such theology is not reachable without a Biblical base, for as Bavinck stated elsewhere, “The science of the knowledge of God stands on the reality of his revelation.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Scripture as Propositional Revelation**

Holy Scripture is the faithful written testimony of God's special revelation to men, and is, by virtue of its inspired nature, *the sole* source of special revelation. In written form special revelation (the Bible) is propositional in character. By "propositional" we mean an objective disclosure in contradistinction to a purely personal subjective impression. Carl Henry has said:

The Bible depicts God’s very revelation as meaningful, objectively intelligible disclosure. We mean by propositional revelation that God supernaturally communicated his revelation to chosen spokesmen in the express form of cognitive truths, and that the inspired prophetic-apostolic proclamation reliably articulates these truths in sentences that are not internally contradictory.<sup>3</sup>

This kind of definition is being challenged even within evangelical circles by theologians who have drunk too deeply from the cup of postmodernism and who, as a result, have over-applied the objections to classical foundationalism. They claim that to refer to the Bible as propositional turns it into a rationalistic “concordance” for theology.

One writer of the “the Evangelical Left” has recently objected that this leads to viewing Scripture, as a source of information for systematic theology. “As such” it is viewed as a

rather loose and relatively disorganized collection of factual, propositional statements.”<sup>4</sup> This account reveals a reaction to certain statements made by men like Charles Hodge, which seemed to imply that the Bible was simply a repository of proof-texts to be sorted into the respective corpora of systematics. But this was never what was intended. Besides, whatever definitional failings may be found in Hodge, the same cannot be said of Henry. Indeed, that author offers one of the clearest and best definitions of propositional revelation available when he writes, “The inspired Scriptures contain a body of divinely given information actually expressed or *capable of being expressed* in propositions. In brief, the Bible is a propositional revelation of the unchanging truth of God.”<sup>5</sup> (Emphasis added).

God has revealed factual information about Himself in Scripture. This Revelation is not put over in visuals or sound-bytes, but is set down rationally through linear argumentation and objective declaration. The prophet Isaiah outlined the method of learning the Scripture.

Whom shall He teach knowledge? And whom shall He make to understand doctrine?...For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little and there a little. - (Isaiah 28:9-10).

It is necessary to learn the doctrines of Scripture by laying one proposition upon another so that the truth dawns upon us as it gradually starts to loom larger in our thoughts.<sup>6</sup> This consideration is what ought to give shape to our daily life, not to mention our hearing of sermons. It is the lack of proper attention to the propositional character of the Bible that is partly to blame for the evangelical downgrade that has enveloped the western churches in our day.

### **The Attack on Propositional Revelation**

Scholars from across the theological spectrum whether Neo-Liberal, Neo-Orthodox, or Neo-Evangelical, are quick to argue against the more conservative view of the propositional character of the Bible. One objection, as we have seen, is that of treating the Bible as a sort of theological concordance irrespective of the original contexts of the

passages. Another objection has to do with the propriety of associating the “ineffable” God with human linguistic forms. Some scholars balk at the idea that God could employ what they consider to be the relativistic and culture-bound norms of human language. To them the very thought of propositional truth is archaic nonsense. All propositions are up for grabs as our knowledge moves forward.<sup>7</sup> How can the ineffable and infinite God employ the indefinite symbols of language to communicate “Truth” to us?<sup>8</sup> Surely one must search for “religious truth” (as opposed to scientific truth) in another sphere - the sphere of existential experience.<sup>9</sup>

These are some of the major bones of contention between evangelicals and their more radical counterparts. The issue could also be seen as a disagreement around whether doctrine comes before experience, or experience goes before doctrine. Conservative Christians have traditionally held firmly to the former.<sup>10</sup> For us, doctrine, in the tangible form of Holy Scripture, always precedes experience. To put it another way, the objective external witness of revelation is prior to its internal reception. The external principle of knowledge (*principium cognoscendi externum*) in the Holy Scriptures comes before the internal principle of knowledge (*principium cognoscendi internum*) associated with the Holy Spirit’s illumination of His Word to the individual heart and mind. There are many who do not see this. Moises Silva observes:

It is sometimes argued that what really matters in our relationship with God is the *personal* element rather than the *propositional* and that, consequently, when Evangelicals insist that revelation conveys information – and infallible information, no less, - they are not only misconstruing the nature of revelation, they are also committing “bibliolatry” by putting the Bible where God belongs.<sup>11</sup>

The only way that opponents of this teaching can avoid the more conservative conclusion is to separate God’s revelation from His words in Scripture. So, for the more liberal scholars, experience, which takes the form of some kind of personal “Encounter” with God, but without especial regard for His words, is above any doctrinal formulation. In their opinion the best that the Bible can be said to be is a fallible account of the divine

disclosure vouchsafed to a few chosen individuals whose lives are only known to us by the writings of mostly anonymous authors (whose regard for facts was not what we would be comfortable with today). Thus, the Bible is merely “a sign of a sign” (Barth), and should never be mistaken for the *actual* revelation of God to men. This sort of argument is heard more frequently today within the broader evangelical community. The respected theologian Donald Bloesch is representative. He states his more nuanced view in these words:

[T]he law and the gospel cannot be equated with objective propositions either in the creeds of the church or in Holy Scripture. They indicate the divinely given meaning of these propositions, a meaning that is never at the disposal of natural reason. To be sure, the divine promise and the divine command come to us through objective statements and words. But they always connote much more than a surface understanding of the text in question. These objective statements are not themselves revelation but the vehicle and outcome of revelation.<sup>12</sup>

Bloesch is saying that although the words and propositions we read in the Bible are objective, God’s revelation transcends what is written on the page.<sup>13</sup> His distinction between the words of the Bible and the words of God is not easy to grasp, but it is, perhaps, captured best when he states, “I heartily agree with Carl Henry that God reveals himself not only in acts but in words. But does God reveal words and statements, and, if so, are they identical with the biblical words? Is there a qualitative difference between the speech of God and the writing of humans?”<sup>14</sup> Bloesch recommends evangelicals to look upon the Bible as “the document of the revelation of God’s word.”<sup>15</sup>

We need to address these concerns, but we also need to note what appears to be a driving impulse in the author that produced them. Bloesch believes that evangelicals are held in the “epistemic bondage” of the Enlightenment, as well as the “cultural bondage” of “patriarchalism and capitalism.”<sup>16</sup> He regrets that there are still people who will not allow any divergence between what Scripture and science say about the world, and he

advises evangelicals “to recognize that not everything reported in the Bible may be in exact correspondence with historical and scientific fact as we know it today.”<sup>17</sup>

What is interesting in this last statement is how totally it reflects the epistemology of the Enlightenment that Bloesch chides “old school conservatives” for maintaining. It refers to “scientific fact” as if it were a collection of incorrigible truths that are just there, existing independently of their Creator.

More criticisms of propositionalism come from the pen of Kevin Vanhoozer of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, although he is much more constructive. He thinks that, “The main theological complaint to be lodged against propositionalism is that its view of language, Scripture, knowledge and, for that matter, God, is too small.”<sup>18</sup> What he means by this is that propositionalism is too reductionistic, paying less attention to the character of science and the text than it should.<sup>19</sup> Within certain parameters we think he has a point. There was always a tendency for propositionalists to emphasize the external value of Scripture-language and not to pay attention to how that language affects the reader.

Vanhoozer notes two things in particular which he thinks are problematical: what he calls respectively, “monologization” and “homogenization.” Under the former he asks: “*Can any one point of view – any single voice, perspective, literary genre, or conceptual scheme – adequately articulate the whole truth of the text?*”<sup>20</sup> (Italics in original). He believes the answer to the question must be given in the negative, for the reason that the nature of the Bible story is dialogical. Hence, a system based upon propositionalistic analysis would undercut the message of Scripture by underplaying its dramatic sweep. Propositionalism wields too much “conceptual power,” and does so inconsiderately.<sup>21</sup> Relying on the textual literary analysis of Mikhail Bakhtin<sup>22</sup>, Vanhoozer avers, “Dialogical form cannot be reduced to monological substance; yet this is precisely what propositionalism quixotically attempts.”<sup>23</sup>

By the epithet “homogenization” he means “proof-texting” or the concept of language which proceeds on the mistaken judgment that the job of exegesis is to extract

propositions from the text in order that a system of “ostensive reference” can be pulled together. This, he states, is a positivist<sup>24</sup> outlook which looks only indifferently at the various genres of Scripture.<sup>25</sup> He proposes a “cognitive-poetic” and “postconservative”<sup>26</sup> approach which respects both the dialogical tensions within the text (e.g. the perspectives represented in the answers provided by the Gospel writers to Jesus’ question, “Whom do people say that I am?”),<sup>27</sup> together with the requirements of the particular genre being used. “A *postconservative theology recognizes the cognitive significance of literary forms other than assertorical statements.*”<sup>28</sup> (Emphasis in original). His “cognitive-poetic” method is recommended as a corrective to the “cognitive-propositional” attitude of people like Carl F. H. Henry, which he wishes to replace.

## Response

How are we to respond to Bloesch’s and Vanhoozer’s criticisms? We submit the following brief thoughts:

- a. If all revelational language is suspect at the propositional level then so is the language of those who make reference to it in order to assert their own theological views. To cite Bernard Ramm’s observation about Karl Barth (written prior to his defection to a similar position):

The neo-orthodox insistence that revelation is non-propositional must be considered in the context of statements ... in which ineffable mysticism is rebutted, and a content of revelation insisted upon. It must also be viewed in terms of Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* which, when finished, will run to 12,000 pages and 6,000,000 words. Surely there is an undigested something here, for the denial of propositional revelation hardly accords with a 6,000,000 word report of it!<sup>29</sup>

Ramm carries on by saying that though revelation may be Encounter, it must also have *content*, and that content must perforce be propositional.<sup>30</sup>

- b. The prophets and apostles, not to mention our Lord Himself, employed propositions which were meant to be understood as from God. This can be

demonstrated from numerous places in both Testaments (e.g. Exod. 20:22; 1 Ki. 14:18; Isa. 30:8; Jer. 36:1-32; Num. 23:19; Psa. 12:6; 119:140; Prov. 30:5; Jn. 5:45-47; Rom. 9:17; Rev. 22:18-19, etc).<sup>31</sup>

- c. Much modern language theory is sustained by the unsupportable and fantastic dogmas of naturalistic evolutionism.<sup>32</sup> This presumption cannot sustain itself factually, particularly since all propositions require intimate association with the laws of Logic and Order. Evolution simply is not a powerful enough mechanism to produce language in the first place. There needs to be a biblical explanation for language. If God has not revealed truth about His world in propositional form, there seems to be no good explanation available for the language we all have to use.
- d. As Bible-believing Christians, then, we assert that language is a gift from our Creator for the purpose of meaningful communication between Himself and His creature (Exod. 4:11).<sup>33</sup> We grant that God “stoops” (Calvin) to declare His mind to us, but this does not rule out the ability for truth to be conveyed to us both clearly and accurately in words.<sup>34</sup> If He does not, then there can obviously be no such thing as a worldview, since one cannot build a worldview on propositionless statements.
- e. Objectors often misrepresent those who, like Carl Henry,<sup>35</sup> strongly avow propositional revelation as “rationalists.”<sup>36</sup> But one need not be a rationalist to hold such a teaching. All would agree that the Holy Spirit must work with the Word to bring conviction and fuller understanding (see the next section), but the statements of Scripture are, nevertheless, revelatory to the world of men. Furthermore, they are not merely *prescriptive* of what men ought to do, they are *descriptive* insofar as they speak about the kind of world that God has made and still governs.
- f. If revelation is separated from the Bible then there cannot be any objective revelation from God to any other but an elect individual (to whom He chooses to make Himself known). This would mean that God is not interested in

commanding, reproofing or guiding the non-elect world. This, in turn, would create a discontinuity between general revelation and special revelation.<sup>37</sup> On that score, what is one to make of Paul's words to the Athenians that God now commands all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30)?

- g. One may agree with Vanhoozer that there is a dialogical quality in much of Scripture. Still, the question remains if that dialogue may be represented with all its integrity intact by the possibility of its being put in propositional form. We believe it can.<sup>38</sup> If it cannot, then it would seem that there is something ineffable in the communication process that cannot be bridged by human reason, even when it is guided by the Spirit of Truth. Yet, as Nash says, propositions are the minimal vehicles of truth<sup>39</sup>, and truth is not presented in the Bible as a partly mystical thing. Perhaps we are being unfair to Vanhoozer here, since he only seems to be stating an obvious limitation of propositionalism which, if altered, might encourage evangelical theologians to be more 'involved' with their subject-matter?
- h. Although he does not wish to caricature propositional revelation<sup>40</sup>, this is what it ends up looking like. For Vanhoozer, any "dedramatization" of the text strips crucial meaning from it. But granted that propositionalists have not always factored in the concerns of genre and structure, this seems to be a fault of the fallible interpreter, not of the overall methodology. Indeed, owing to our dilatory insufficiency to fully comprehend the depth of meaning of any text, we do not see how Professor Vanhoozer can escape the same criticism down the road.
- i. Finally, following Vanhoozer's prescription would take the art of theologizing and interpretation quite out of the reach of the average Christian and onto a whole new academic level; and not one that accords well with the reason why revelation came to man in the first place.<sup>41</sup> This is something which, all other reasons aside, one would instinctively oppose.<sup>42</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1.213.
- <sup>2</sup> Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 20.
- <sup>3</sup> Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 3.456-457.
- <sup>4</sup> John R. Franke, *The Character of Theology*, 88. In a footnote on the same page the author notices that Carl Henry develops his definition of theology, based on Biblical propositions, in Volume I of his *God, Revelation and Authority*. But interestingly, Franke neglects to refer his reader to Henry's thorough examination of the pros and cons of propositional revelation in Volume III of his opus, pages 403-487.
- <sup>5</sup> Henry, 3.457.
- <sup>6</sup> See also Nehemiah 8:8.
- <sup>7</sup> George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Authority in a Postliberal Age*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 119-120, 192f.
- <sup>8</sup> At this point Bibliology and Epistemology touch.
- <sup>9</sup> This follows the thinking of Kant who walled-off 'God-Talk' in the unknowable realm of the Noumenal, while placing the empirical sciences with us in the Phenomenal.
- <sup>10</sup> See, for example, the insightful remarks in Iain Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2000), Chapter 7.
- <sup>11</sup> Moises Silva, *God, Language and Scripture*, Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 215.
- <sup>12</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, Christian Foundations, (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), 52.
- <sup>13</sup> E.G. "The Word of God is not to be reduced to objective rational statements: it is God in action, God speaking and humans hearing." – Ibid, 48.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid, 67.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid, 68.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid, 33.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid, 37.
- <sup>18</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2005), 268.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid, 270.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 269.

<sup>22</sup> Especially Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>23</sup> Vanhoozer, 270.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 271.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 272.

<sup>26</sup> By “postconservative” Vanhoozer means that evangelical theology must cut through the dichotomy between God *saying* and God *doing*. He is as fastidious as anyone could be in believing that God’s meaning is to be discovered in the text. See Ardel B. Caneday’s essay, “Is Theological Truth Functional or Propositional? Postconservatism’s Use of Language Games and Speech-Act Theory,” in Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, Justin Taylor, eds., *Reclaiming The Center*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 156 n.89.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 274.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 278.

<sup>29</sup> Bernard Ramm, *The Pattern of Religious Authority*, 97.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 98.

<sup>31</sup> For a full examination of this topic see Wayne Grudem’s essay entitled, “Scripture’s Self-Attestation and the Problem of Formulating a Doctrine of Scripture” in D. A. Carson & John D. Woodbridge, *Scripture And Truth*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 19-59.

<sup>32</sup> We look at the Biblical view of language further on.

<sup>33</sup> For more on this subject see Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 16ff. A fuller treatment can be found in John Warwick Montgomery’s essay “Biblical Authority” in his *The Suicide of Christian Theology*, 314-379.

<sup>34</sup> Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 3.480.

<sup>35</sup> There is not space here to proceed further along this line of inquiry. Henry has come under fire from many quarters, but it seems to us that he has either been misread or else has gone unread. For an excellent refutation of the charge that Henry is a “modernistic-rationalist” which also discusses Henry’s views on the matter at hand, see Chad Owen Brand, “Is Carl Henry A Modernist? – Rationalism and Foundationalism in Post-War Evangelical Theology,” - *Trinity Journal*, 20:1 (Spring 1999).

<sup>36</sup> Maybe this has something to do with the fact that men like Donald Bloesch call themselves “fideists”? See Donald G. Bloesch, *A Theology of Word and Spirit*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 1992), 21. Bloesch does make it plain that he does not want to be labeled a fideist “in the narrow or reductionist sense because our faith has a sure anchor and basis in an objective revelation in history.” Yet this “objective revelation” is not given in objective language!

<sup>37</sup> Henry, 2.72.

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. Henry, 3.457-460.

<sup>39</sup> Ronald Nash, *The Word of God and the Mind of Man*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 45.

<sup>40</sup> Vanhoozer, 268.

<sup>41</sup> For instance, the set of semantical rules that Vanhoozer lays down in an earlier essay. See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Semantics of Biblical Literature," in D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986).

<sup>42</sup> One can see that our criticisms of Vanhoozer are sympathetic of his overall strategy. In fact, we think there is much in his work that is worthy of serious consideration. We do wish, though, that he would write more clearly!