

Notes on Ch. 2: Revelation and the Knowledge of God

[The exercise of scaling down a chapter into short notes is a bracing but frustrating exercise, insofar as I regard the present chapters themselves as notes inviting further discussion. So, the notes are no substitute for one's own careful reading of the chapters as they now stand.]

A. The church speaks because God has spoken.

1. In almost every age of the ecumenical church—that church that has existed down through centuries since biblical times—it has repeatedly understood itself as being founded on God's self-revelation, however *internally contested* the grammar of that belief might have been.
2. This chapter provides a brief review of biblical and ecclesial claims about that revelation and then provides a constructive grammar of God's self-revelation for the church today.
3. Yet the subject matter of this chapter necessarily extends into the Chapter 3: Sources and Norms of Theology as Dialectical Confession and Profession, connecting revelation talk to the status of the Bible, Tradition, and other norms in the discourses and practices of the church.
4. Obviously, these grammatical remarks about revelation and authority arise in the church through its own engagement with the writings of the traditions of Israel and through the ecclesial process of determining what writings about Jesus comprise a truthful—canonical— witness to the reality of God.
5. I reaffirm and intend to examine the claim that the church's discourse about God's revelation is in the mode of *confessional theology*—and as such, there is no claim that that the belief that God is self-revealing is a belief that can be demonstrated as true or epistemically compelling apart from the discourses and practices of the church. Again: **talk of God's self-revelation is church-talk; it is not the language of historical research or philosophy, though those discourses and practices too might bear on how the church speaks of and confesses God's self-revelation.**

B. The grammar of revelation bears on how the church understands its own calling and mission.

1. In my proposed definition of the church, I claimed that the church was “**called into being by the Gospel of Jesus Christ**” and in the proposed definition of the **Gospel** there were **three primary identifications of God**: 1) “the God of Israel, the Creator of all creatures”, 2) who became “incarnate in... Jesus of Nazareth to enact and reveal God's gracious reconciliation of humanity to Godself”, 3) who “through the Holy Spirit calls and empowers human beings to participate in God's liberative and redemptive work”.
2. These three primary self-identifications/self-revelations of God will also be the basic frame for developing the doctrine of the Trinity.

C. Consider carefully what I call ‘the model of informative revelation.’ [pp. 63-66]

1. I claim the model, as a coherent but flexible set of beliefs and practices, facilitated the determination of the biblical canon and remained a powerful pattern of understanding in the development of the church's creeds, liturgy, and catechetical practices.
2. I claim the model held sway in the church even through the Protestant Reformation, but fell into steady decline thereafter and seemed to collide with the rise of so-called ‘modernity’.
3. That decline increasingly posed the question as to whether the revelation of God was simply identical with the biblical texts as such or whether those texts were witnesses to the revelations of God in Israel and in Jesus Christ.
4. Or, as the issues unfortunately came to be formed: is God's revelation primarily a matter 1) of **inerrant** texts bearing truth-claims about God or 2) of human texts bearing **witness** to God's activities in Israel, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and in the movements of the Holy Spirit.

D. A Proposal: The basic model of revelation in Christian discourse is that of God’s self-revelation—or self-objectification, self-communication—in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus Christ is that primary self-revelation of God—of the God of Israel—without which the church would lose its own identity as called by the Gospel that is Jesus Christ.

1. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is the definitive revelation of the God of Israel and transforms how the church understands the God of Israel.
2. But God self-manifestation in Jesus is for Israel without being also the repudiation of Israel. The church does not supersede Israel.

[see the careful discussion of the relation between Jesus Christ, the church, and Israel—pp. 80-82]

E. Notice now the grammar of ‘self-revelation’:

1. God’s self-revelation is an **event or a series of events**, not primarily a text.
2. God is the **subject or agent** who is self-revealing—only God can reveal God—negation: revelation is never something done to God by another.
3. God is **free** to reveal Godself—there is no ontological compulsion necessitating God’s self-revelation.
4. Godself is the primary **object or content** revealed—not primarily a truth-claiming proposition.
5. God’s self-revelation is truly who God is—negation: there is no more-real-god hidden behind the self-revelation.
6. God’s self-revelation is God’s **self-identification**—conveying to persons who God is and what God does.

[see pp. 83-84]

F. Jesus of Nazareth as the self-revelation of the God of Israel.

1. Strongly asserts that God’s self-revelation in a human creature is not impossible for God.
2. Yet the human Jesus both reveals and hides God presence.
 - a) many were they who saw the human Jesus without seeing God.
 - b) it is the life and destiny of this human being in which God is manifest.
3. Only God can reveal God, but now God as this human Jesus.
This tension cannot be eliminated.

G. God’s self-revelation is always received and understood by human beings in and through their traditions of discourse and practice.

1. The self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ is witnessed to by the NT writings and received by later church traditions through that witness.
2. I propose that the biblical writings themselves be construed as **deputized signs** of God’s self-communications in the life of Israel, in Jesus Christ, and in the calling of the church through the power of the Spirit; the term ‘**deputized**’ signals for the church the **chosenness and givenness** of the biblical witnesses for the later church.

H. Some difficult—easy to forget or neglect—implications:

1. God is never under the control of the church and its discourses.
2. That God does speak through the church’s discourses and practices—the church’s witness to God—it always under God’s self-acting agency.

I. Two Provisos of all talk of God’s self-revelation:

1. the **Ultimacy Proviso—only God can reveal God.**
2. the **Penultimacy Proviso—that God has chosen or deputized some definite signs in the history of Israel and of Jesus Christ as the special media of God’s self-revealing activities**

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3. The Ultimacy Proviso is empty and abstract without the Penultimacy Proviso.
4. The Penultimacy Proviso is unfaithful and idolatrous without the Ultimacy Proviso.
5. **The dialectic between these two provisos is essential to and formative of Christian discourse about God and God's self-revealing actions.**

J. Epistemology, Proof, Witness, and World Views

1. After exploring some considerations concerning 'epistemology' [pp. 70-79], I propose that there is no good reason to suppose that there is some noncircular reasoning that will secure for the church and for the believer that their discourses and practices are defensible and compelling for any presumably 'objective rational inquirer'. Persons interested in some of the anti-foundationalist arguments in so-called 'post-modernism' should read these pages carefully. Note how I strive to keep inquiries into truth closely rooted in contextual considerations and practices.
2. While reasoning plays an inevitable role in the life of the believer, coming to faith is invariably an *ad hominem* affair—how the believer comes to construe her life as life before God.
3. There are **life routes** along which persons find themselves in the living and the striving to understand their life in the world; so too, there are **faith routes** for persons that are scattered with events, pursuits, decisions, inquiries, questions and doubts and much more as they come to live in faith. I do not suppose that persons first become convinced that indeed God revealed Godself in Jesus and then ask 'what does that involve?'; more nearly what's involved and the believing go hand in hand. Of course, the language of believing and following can be uttered emptily.
4. Admittedly, the language of '*worldview*'—*Weltanschauung*—is tricky and sometimes elusive, yet I do propose that the full workings of the discourses and practices of the church amounts to entering into a view of the world as life before the triune God that is not anti-intellectual, not fearful, not obscurantist; rather it is full of encounters with God, praying to God, discussions as to who God is, sermons invoking God and God's grace and forgiveness.
5. Remember, we still have before us the explication and exploration of the full contours of Christian discourses and practices.

K. Grammar of 'faith' as knowledge of God. [pp.88-95]

1. It is often argued by scholars that they have unfolded the 'real meaning' of 'faith/*pistis*' in the NT. I think this claim is misguided and that the word '*pistis*' has several interrelated uses in the NT and church traditions.
2. I propose that the grammar of '*pistis*/faith' is a complex and interrelated **family of uses** that cannot be reduced to a single 'definition' or use, yet are surely intelligible as a family of uses.
 - a) faith as gracious gift of the Spirit
 - b) faith as orientation of the heart to God
 - c) faith as grateful acknowledgement
 - d) faith as epistemic: a knowing, believing, construing of God
 - e) faith as trust in God
 - f) faith as knowledge of self
 - g) faith as trust in Christian witness
 - h) faith as intentional action and knowing-how
 - i) faith as relationship with the Triune God

L. Revelation and other 'Religions'??

There is a briar patch of thorny issues awaiting us on the down the way as to the status of other 'religions' and their truth claims. There is more to say about these matters, but I briefly propose:

1. All humans exist under the endowment of the 'original grace' of God, however confused and forgotten it might in existential fact be—but it cannot be eradicated!
2. It is a highly contested matter as to whether there is some neutral theory of religion under which all 'religions' might fall.

M. The dialectic between God’s revelatory presence and the Church’s witness [101]

Read carefully:

“The church witnesses to God in discourses and practices that it regards as warranted and authorized by God’s self-revelations in Israel, in Jesus Christ, and in the apostolic church as these are witnessed to in the Bible. But the church’s witness **cannot finally defend** and **verify** its own discourse about God by any worldly criteria. It speaks under the authorization of the **penultimacy proviso** as it has received that proviso in its own life. It speaks also under the **ultimacy proviso**, which it learned from the witness of Scripture, knowing that there is no **place** or **position** from which it can **demonstrate** God’s actuality to the world or from which it can **control** God’s **self-communicating presence** to persons. But the church witnesses to God under the promise that God will indeed confer God’s salvific presence in the midst of the church’s discourses and practices.

But the church can explain its discourses and practices and present the world with the **rationale** of its witness. That the world or anyone in the world will ever **encounter** the self-communicating and salvific presence of God is something at the disposing of God and is beyond the simple control of the church and its witness and of all of its particular witnesses!”

N. Further Notes on a Christian Grammar of ‘Truth’

For those with an appetite for thinking slowly and complexly, this section [pp. 101-109] is challenging. Give it a slow, careful read.

O. In retrospect, what questions might you raise about my earlier discussion in this chapter of the distinction between ‘general revelation’ and ‘special revelation’? [67-70]