

## CHAPTER 3

# REVELATION

Revelation has been defined in four different ways. 1) Revelation may refer to a doctrinal statement, like the Trinity or Incarnation. 2) Sometimes revelation is a synonym for inspiration: revelation is the divine light shining from within. Hence we talk about the Bible as revelation because it inspires us. 3) Dialectical theologians like Brunner have criticized the propositional<sup>1</sup> definition of revelation as too intellectualistic and the inspirational definition as too subjective.<sup>2</sup> For Emil Brunner, revelation refers to a dialogical personal encounter between man and God. Revelation reveals a *who*, not a *what*. Revelation originates from a personal relationship, an I-Thou relationship. It therefore involves persons, not ideas. Friedrich Gogarten, another Neo-orthodox theologian, corrected Brunner; revelation is not an I-Thou relationship, but a Thou-I relationship. God comes first; He initiates the process. We do not discover Him; rather, He reveals Himself to us. God is always the subject, and can never be turned into an object. 4) Biblical theologians say God reveals Himself not in words or ideas but in events. Revelation then refers to God's saving acts in history—like the exodus or the resurrection of Jesus. So it is not doctrine that saves men, but history that is saving. God reveals Himself in His mighty historical acts. The history of Jesus Christ in particular was the self-disclosure of God's nature.

Revelation is needed because God's presence is hidden from us. There would be no need for Him to disclose Himself if He could be naturally seen by everyone. God is hidden behind the universe; we cannot know Him in the way we know other things.

In his classic book, *The Idea of the Holy*, Rudolf Otto of Marburg (1869-1937) emphasizes the inexhaustible mystery of God: the "*mysterium tremendum*." When we discover God, He evokes in us great awe, fear and fascination.<sup>3</sup> Our knowledge of God comes out of the incomparable mystery of God. God is unique; there is nothing like Him. He is in a class by Himself, the only one of His kind. By His very nature He is a mystery to us; we have nothing to compare Him to. God is "the Wholly Other" and is intrinsically hidden from our view by the fact that He is God. If He is to be known at all, He must reveal Himself. Hence, all our knowledge of God must come by revelation.

In one sense, our knowledge of God can be compared to our knowledge of human beings, but even here the resemblance is only analogous. The differences are always greater than the similarities.

How do we get to know another person? Not by external perception only. The only way to know anyone is for him to tell you about himself. He has to reveal himself; I am able to know him when he discloses his inner self.

Our knowledge of God is of a similar nature. God has to disclose Himself to us; revelation means God's self-disclosure. However, the initiative comes from the divine side. God unveils the mystery of His innermost being.

In spite of revelation, God always remains a mystery. We never comprehend Him fully, because we are limited by our finitude. Revelation has been compared to lighting a lamp on a dark, foggy night. We see a little, yet at the same time, we become aware of how foggy it really is.

Sometimes Christians think that God fully revealed Himself in the incarnation, but this is not quite true. Even in the incarnation God veiled Himself. Jesus was not an obvious, unmistakable revelation of God; most people did not recognize him. Faith was needed to see God's revelation in Jesus. Even his disciples were not sure of his nature until after the resurrection. Thus, despite revelation, God's essence remains unfathomable.

Macquarrie reminds us that there are two kinds of revelations: primordial and repetitive. Primordial or classic revelations create a new religion; they are rare. Repetitive revelations are more common; they make the original religious vision come alive for us. Not everyone receives revelations; most people merely live on revelations they inherit from others.<sup>4</sup>

Traditionally theologians also distinguish between general revelation and special revelation. General revelation is the natural knowledge of God's existence and power obtained through the observation of creation and the use of reason. Two verses from Paul's letter to the Romans justify this idea: "For all that may be known of God by men lies plain before their eyes; indeed God himself has disclosed it to them. His invisible attributes, that is to say his everlasting power and deity, have been visible, ever since the world began, to the eye of reason, in the things he has made" (1:19, 20).

Then there is special revelation. The call of Abraham, Moses' experience with the burning bush and his reception of the Law at Sinai, the messages given to the prophets, and particularly the advent of Jesus are examples of special revelation. The revelation of God in Jesus was an historical event which had an unparalleled impact, affecting our lives and demanding action from us.

Revelation takes many forms. The spirit world manifests itself in visions and dreams, ecstatic trances and astonishing faith cures. Revelation is not limited to the Bible, but takes

place in every age, among all kinds of people and throughout the world. This fact does not weaken the scriptural reports, but reinforces their truth and value.

In most cases revelation comes not directly from God but through spiritual intermediaries. God reveals His will and offers His guidance through various mediators such as angels, saints and discarnate ancestors. Such revelations are of two types. Sometimes spiritual help is of a very private and specific kind. One receives personal help in a time of need or a personal message by way of a medium. This type of spiritual communication occurs frequently. However, much more important are revelations which deal with the overall course of God's providence. These are rare and of far greater significance, because they serve to shape the future direction of mankind.

Samuel was only a little boy when he heard God call him to life-long service as a kingmaker in Israel and the leading religious spokesman for his age. Isaiah, a nobleman, saw the elevated throne of God in the temple of Jerusalem and heard the angels singing praises, a vision which made him a prophet for his time and an inspiration for all subsequent generations. The priest Ezekiel, in Babylonian exile, envisioned every detail of the plan for a new temple for his people. The light and voice on the Damascus Road turned Saul the persecutor into Paul the apostle and made him a divine instrument for the world mission of the new faith. St. Francis' encounter with spirit world revitalized medieval Christianity, and produced an order of friars whose dedicated service continues to the present day. And who can forget Joan of Arc, a simple young girl who heard supernatural voices directing her to lead an army to victory and put a new king on the throne of France? In such cases, revelations have molded the course of Christian advance and greatly altered world history.

Revelation continues to the present day. For example, the visions and revelations of Rev. Sun Myung Moon have pro-

duced remarkable effects in our time. Who could have guessed that a Korean would originate a new church with a worldwide membership? With divine guidance he has revived the ancient Judeo-Christian hope for the realization of the kingdom of God on earth. With direct inspiration and continuous aid, God challenges Christians to cooperate with all men of goodwill, to reawaken their faith in Him, to reconcile science and religion, and to reconstruct a God-centered global civilization in conformity with the ultimate purpose of creation.

### NOTES TO CHAPTER 3

- 1 Propositional revelation: a revelation is a doctrine that must be believed.
- 2 Inspirational revelation: scripture is revealed if it is inspiring; if it is not inspiring (i.e., Leviticus), it is not revelation.
- 3 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970). Otto was a student of Christian and Hindu mysticism; so he felt mystical experience was the heart of religion.
- 4 John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), pp. 80, 81.