

DELIVERED ONCE FOR ALL: THE CANON AND CONTINUING REVELATION

BY
STAN MCMAHAN

Introduction

John Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, counters the claim of some during his day to receiving new revelations from God. In doing so, he highlights the specific role of the Holy Spirit in the life of believers. He writes, “Hence the office of the Spirit promised to us, is not to form new and unheard-of revelations, or to coin a new form of doctrine, by which we may be led away from the received doctrine of the gospel, but to seal on our minds the very doctrine which the gospel recommends.”¹ Calvin’s underlying assumption in this argument is the classic Reformed reason for rejecting claims of continuing revelation: the Spirit and the Word which He “breathed-out” are inseparably united, and this union is such that the Spirit will not speak against His will, character, and plan revealed in the written Scriptures (“the received doctrine of the gospel”).

This argument has not been made without controversy. Advocates of continuing revelation have not been lacking in the church and have spoken out from disparate denominational perspectives. The Roman Catholic Church has continued its claim for revelation today by pointing to God’s communication through both private revelations and the ecclesiastical hierarchy--the church councils and Pope speaking authoritatively for God. From the other end of the ecclesiastical spectrum, Pentecostals have claimed the communication of the Spirit in private prayer and prophecy. What are we to make of such claims? Is denying ongoing revelation not a way of “quenching” the Spirit?

The answer to these questions is found by considering God’s self-identified purpose and method for his revelation to man. God is generous in his revelation to man, but he is not

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 44.

disorderly. His communication has a definite purpose: to make known Christ for the salvation of sinners. God's communication to individuals--even in the Old Testament, when His ways of communicating were more varied--has been to advance this great purpose. With the full revelation of Christ in the incarnation, therefore, God's self-disclosure to humanity reached its climactic conclusion. For this reason, God does not add to Scripture or speak apart from it today. Rather, he opens up and applies that Word to us by the Holy Spirit. In the following, we will consider this claim from three perspectives: first, we will consider it exegetically by examining how God's revelation is related to his work of redemption in the letter to the Hebrews; second, we will set this relationship in the broader biblical context; and third, we will consider the potentially problematic pastoral question of how we hear from God today.

Long Ago and In These Last Days: *Hebrews* on Communication from God

Context of Hebrews

The author to the Hebrews writes to a discouraged community of early Christians. Converts to the Christian faith from Judaism, these Christians were familiar with the details of redemptive history and God's revelation in the Hebrew Scriptures. The gospel of Christ had come to them through the preaching of the apostolic witness, and they had responded in faith through much suffering. At the time of writing, however, the author has to try to persuade them not to abandon their hope. Most likely, a return to "the unbelieving Judaism" of the day was tempting them.² The message of this letter addresses this temptation by pointing to the excellency of Jesus Christ. All that they needed was found in him and returning to a life without him would result in their serious impoverishment.

² Robert Rayborn, "Hebrews," *The Baker Illustrated Bible Commentary*, ed. Gary Burge and Andrew Hill (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 1495.

God's Revelation: Redemption Once for All

To make his case for the excellency and finality of Christ's work, the author starts by making a point about God's revelation to humanity. This point cannot be missed in a discussion of the canon and continuing revelation. The author outlines God's revelatory program in the letter's opening words: "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by His Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the universe" (Hebrews 1:1-2). God's self-disclosure to humanity began when God revealed himself in a variety of ways to the forefathers. This period, which from the perspective of the first-century reader was "long ago," is the Old Testament era. "Fathers" is a category of recipients of God's revelation that stretches from Adam through to the end of the prophetic period. God's chosen instruments were the prophets, and His chosen ways of speaking varied greatly (i.e., dreams, visions, direct speech, miracles, and even a talking donkey!). But the purpose of these divine words was focused. The author explains that those days "long ago" have now (in the first-century) given way to "these last days," a period in which God's revelation takes new form. In these days, God has spoken by his Son. Christ's arrival completes God's self-revelation.

The author expresses this completion in two important ways. First, he uses the aorist tense to say that God "has spoken (ἐλάλησεν) to us by His Son." The aorist indicates a past event.³ The author, as Kistemaker points out, "is pointing out that the fullness of revelation is unique, final, and complete" in the Son. Writing in the first-century--by best estimates just thirty

³ Simon Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1984), 33; Max Zerwick, *Biblical Greek illustrated by examples*, English ed., adapted from the fourth Latin ed., Vol. 114. (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico., 10963), accessed October 13, 2013, Logos Bible Software.

years after Christ's death and resurrection--the author already views God's revelatory work by the Son as a past event, completed but with ongoing effects in the present. The entire final period of human history ("these last days") is the period of God's completed speech through his Son. Second, the author continues to highlight the completed and climactic nature of the Son's work in the remainder of the letter. The Son, he argues, is greater than the angels (through whom the former revelation had been delivered), Moses, and the Levitical priesthood (Heb. 1:6-18; 2:1-6; 7:1-10:18). All of these were aspects at the forefront of God's revelation "long ago." Given Christ's supreme excellency, God's revelation through him is supreme and ultimate. He calls this revelation a "great salvation" that was "declared at first by the Lord" and then by "those who heard, while God bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit" (Hebrews 2:2-4). Leaving Christ, then, would result in serious consequences since his salvation is "great" because it is the fulfillment of all that preceded it in God's Word.

The description of the "great salvation" in Christ reaches a climax in chapter 9. He explains Christ's sacrificial death in order to emphasize *its completeness*: "As it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Hebrews 9:26). "The end of the ages" in this verse is parallel to "these last days" in the opening verses of the letter. According to the author, the first-century Christians lived at the headwaters of the final move of redemptive history, a move made through the sacrifice of Christ to "put away sin"--a sacrifice which was "once for all." The word he uses (ἄπαξ) signifies finality, a cosmic summing up of a purpose.⁴ God's work through the prophets "long ago," his ministry through the angels, the establishment of the nation through Moses, and the sacrificial system imposed through the

⁴Henry George Liddell, et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), accessed July 30, 2013, Logos Bible Software.

priesthood were all summed up at the cross of Christ. ἄπαξ signifies completion of a far-ranging work in *one particular event*, and the author goes on to use it to describe Christ's work three more times in the letter (Heb. 10:10,12; 12:25-29). The point he is making is that the finality of God's word spoken by his Son is demonstrated by the fact that God has now accomplished his plan of redemption once for all. Nothing further needs to be added to this redemptive work. Consequently, the word spoken through the Son is the fulfillment of the former word delivered through the prophets and is its climactic end (τέλος).

The “End” (τέλος) of the Covenant Word

The point made in Hebrews is echoed in the overall teaching of Scripture. In this connection, it is important to remember three lines of biblical evidence: first, that God communicates to humanity to advance his covenant purposes; second, that in the New Testament period the gospel is referred to as “the faith” that has been fully given; and third, that the Spirit, given to all believers in the “last days,” is said to work with and not apart from the Word.

The Formation and Purpose of the Covenant Word

God's revelation was delivered and collected in the context of his covenant with his people. God's covenant with Adam, Noah, and Abraham involved God speaking to his covenant partners (Gen. 2:15-17; 8:20-9:17; 12:1-9; 15:1-21; 17:1-21). It was at the establishment of God's covenant with Israel through Moses that the covenant word of God was first committed to writing. The written law through Moses became the constitution for the people of God, rehearsing God's saving work, guiding them in right living, and pronouncing blessings on obedience and curses on disobedience. Subsequent revelations through the prophets drew the attention of the nation back to this constitution and expanded on God's continued work to bring

salvation through the promised offspring of Abraham. The goal of revelation remained the same through the long years of God's dealings with his covenant people.

When the covenantal goal of revelation is recalled, questions about its continuation are resolved. It helps us to remember that God's purpose has been consistent through the ages: He has been unveiling his plan (the *μυστήριον*, as the New Testament authors describe it) to save sinners through his Son. Paul describes the Old Testament revelation as the "covenants of promise" (Ephesians 2:12). God spoke to the fathers in the Old Testament in ways that prepared them for his future work in Christ, but the New Testament revelation, Paul says, is the final unveiling of the mystery of Christ. The mystery was "not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit" (Ephesians 3:4-5). The mystery is not a befuddling riddle; rather, the mystery is the "plan . . . hidden for ages in God" and "now made known"--a process of unfolding revelation that was "according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Ephesians 3:9-12). God's work in history is according to his eternal plan, and that plan finds its climactic fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Therefore, Paul is able to describe the age of Christ's arrival and unveiling as the "fulness of time" and the "end of the ages" (Ephesians 1:10; Galatians 4:4; 1 Corinthians 10:11). The birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and Spirit-giving of Christ are epochal and unrepeatable. It continues to shape world events, to be sure--especially those concerning the church--but the ministry of Christ and his apostles is a once-for-all act of God. And so Paul is able to describe the church as "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:20). Indeed, this seems to be the reason why Paul is able to write to Timothy, a member of the next generation of

church leaders, in terms of “guarding the good deposit entrusted to you” (2 Timothy 1:14).

Timothy was to think of himself not as a purveyor of new revelations from God, but as a steward of *what had already been delivered* to the church. This is very much in keeping with the author to the Hebrews’ insistence that Christ’s finished work means that God has spoken his final word in “these last days.”

The Faith Delivered

On that note, Jude describes the Christian faith as “once for all (ἅπαξ) delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Like the other New Testament authors, Jude writes during the last several decades of the first-century. Even at that early date, however, the Christian faith is being described as having been delivered (παραδοθείση) to God’s people. The faith was not at that time still in the process of formation. It has already been formed and was now to be “contended for” (Jude 3). We are also to “build ourselves up in it” (Jude 20). What is the substance of this faith, according to Jude? It is the message regarding the “love of God” and the “mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life” (Jude 21). This message is the core of the apostolic teaching and constitutes God’s speech to his people by his Son in these last days.

Marriage of Spirit and Word

Another important perspective on the question of continuing revelation is the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Word. The claim for continuing revelation often hinges on the concern not to quench the Spirit. This is a worthy concern. To quench the Spirit would be to oppose him from doing his work in his way. The gift of the Spirit to all believers is one of the signs that the “last days” have come. But has God said to us anything about the way in which the Spirit speaks? The previous discussion of the purpose of God’s self-disclosure indicates that he

has. God's aim in revealing himself has been to show Jesus Christ to sinful human beings. The work of the Holy Spirit is presented in Scripture as in full harmony with this aim, a fact that should not surprise us given the unity of the three persons of the Godhead.

Jesus makes plain the purpose of the Spirit's work during the Upper Room Discourse in John 13-17. He clearly defines the ministry of the Spirit in terms of God's covenant aim to show Christ to sinners. The Holy Spirit is "another Helper" and the "Spirit of Truth" that Jesus promises to his disciples. The Father will send him in Jesus' name, and "he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (John 14:16-17; 26). In addition, the Spirit will "convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment" and guide the apostles into all truth. Why will the Spirit do this? What is the purpose of his ministry? The Spirit convicts the world because "they do not believe" in Christ who has gone to the Father and is now unseen. The Spirit leads the apostles into all truth because he will glorify Christ, "not speaking on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak." The mode of his speaking is to take what is Christ's and declare it to the apostles. The apostles in particular were to receive the Spirit in order to pass the message on to others. This is apparent in Jesus's prayer in John 17, where all other Christians are described as "those who will believe in me through their word" (John 17:20). So the Holy Spirit's work, as Calvin argued, is married to God's Word.

The ministry of the Spirit to the apostles was enabling them to publish the word of Christ. And the ministry of the Spirit to subsequent generations of believers is to enable them to "guard the good deposit"--that is, the Word given by inspiration of the Spirit to the apostles and prophets. For us in the post-apostolic church, that means that we should not listen for the Spirit speaking outside the canon of Scripture.

For the apostles and those who preceded them, the situation was different. God's revelatory program had not been completed, and they received new additions to that revelation until it was. But they were never to discount what had already been added to the developing canon.⁵ The principle of canon was already in force. The Old Testament prophets were unmistakably the recipients of new revelation--their calling card was "thus says the LORD"--but the revelation that they delivered was always consistent with the Law, a fact about which they were rigorously self-conscious. The apostles, too, published what they had experienced of Christ, and yet they work hard to convince their hearers of the consistency of their message with the Old Testament. This is the principle of "canon" as seen during its development. But after it had fully developed, there is no more an expectation that God will add more--the Scriptures have reached their fullest sufficiency, a deposit received in full by the church. The calling now--and the work of the Spirit to enable us to answer it--is to guard that deposit, to contend for the faith.

Counter Claims

Those who claim that revelation continues today raise important questions at this point. If we do not acknowledge God speaking continually, are we not relegating him to a certain age, and cutting off the chance that God might be at work in the present? The Roman Catholic Church makes its claim for continuing revelation by distinguishing between types of revelation and asserting the magisterial authority of the Church. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the official guide to Catholic doctrine, "public revelation" is distinguished from "private revelation." "Public revelation," which the Catechism says does not continue, refers to what we find in the

⁵ This is what John Frame calls the "Particular Sufficiency" of Scripture as opposed to its "General Sufficiency" (see John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillisburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2008), 161-164.)

Scriptures, the Old Testament and the “new and definitive Covenant.”⁶ In contrast, the Catechism teaches the possibility of “private revelations, some of which have been recognized by the authority of the Church.”⁷ As for these revelations, “it is not their role to improve or complete Christ’s definitive Revelation, but to help live more fully by it in a certain period of history.”⁸ The Catechism’s teaching raises the question of who has the ultimate authority in the process of judging the validity of “private revelations.” The Catechism tells us that the Catholic Church has this authority since “our redeemer has shown himself to be one person with the holy church whom he has taken for himself”: in the words of Joan of Arc, quoted in the Catechism, “about Jesus Christ and the Church, I simply know that they’re just one thing, and we shouldn’t complicate the matter.”⁹ The identification of the church with Christ means that she continues to wield his authority in the world, a power that is not merely ministerial--received as a servant from his master--but is in actual fact Christ’s direct rule in the world. Therefore, the Catechism’s strong statements about “public revelation” completed in Christ are to be read and understood in view of a church that currently exercises divine authority. The church has to interpret Scripture authoritatively and progressively deliver its true sense to the world, and “private revelations” can become sure guides to God’s will if the church judges them genuine. According to the Catechism, then, God continues to speak today through the Catholic Church.¹⁰ The Scriptures, the unwritten tradition, and the magisterium are authoritative expressions of God speaking to

⁶ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, chapter 67.

⁷ *Ibid.*, paragraph 67.

⁸ *Ibid.*, paragraph 67.

⁹ *Ibid.*, paragraph 795

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, paragraph 79: “The Father’s self-communication made through his Word in the Holy Spirit, remains present and active in the Church: ‘God, who spoke in the past, continues to converse with the Spouse of his beloved Son . . .’”

humanity. The Scripture alone is not sufficient. Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Emeritus, argues that since recently articulated beliefs of the Catholic Church (such as the Immaculate Conception and Bodily Assumption of Mary) have no basis in Scripture, there can be no use of appealing to Scripture's sufficiency. "None of them," he writes, "is to be found *sola scriptura*," so "what sense is there in talking about the sufficiency of Scripture?"¹¹

On the Protestant side of the issue, Gordon Fee sees asserts that a "prior hermeneutical and theological commitment" leads students of Scripture to conclude that revelation has ceased.¹² Fee sees this as sheer capitulation. He writes, "the greater tragedy for the church is that it should have lost such touch with the Spirit of God in its ongoing life that it should settle for what is only ordinary and thus feel the urgency to justify itself in this way."¹³ As a result, Fee argues for the continuation of the gift of prophecy today. Fee defines prophecy as "the spontaneous word given to God's people for the edification of the whole."¹⁴ Does Fee mean by "word" a new revelation from God? It seems that he does in the sense that each new prophecy is a unique communication from God and not simply an illumination or application of Scripture. It is this unique revelation that has not ceased, according to Fee, although he places Scripture in the center and recognizes its canonical status. But Fee believes that saying new revelation has ceased is to dishonor the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit, to lose "touch with the Spirit of God."

¹¹ quoted in Don Kistler, ed., *Sola Scriptura: The Protestant Position on the Bible* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), 213.

¹² Gordon Fee, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 600.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 600.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 660. See also his discussion on 595.

Along with Fee, Wayne Grudem in his *Systematic Theology* argues that prophecy continues in the contemporary church. He argues this based on a definition of “New Testament congregational prophecy” that stands in distinction from Old Testament prophetic utterance. He defines such prophecy as God’s message “not spoken in words that were the very words of God, but rather in merely human words.”¹⁵ This view, he says, is that typically held by charismatics and Pentecostals on prophecy: they claim that God continues to communicate through these fallible human expressions, but not in a way that adds to or challenges Scripture. But, as other writers have shown, Grudem’s argument fails to give a satisfactory treatment of the Scripture’s description of prophecy and leaves unsolved the tension between the sufficiency of Scripture and claims to hear God speaking apart from Scripture.

Assessment

The arguments advanced in support of continuing revelation must be judged theologically and exegetically mistaken. The question is not, as they have framed it, whether God will speak to people today or not. The question is, “how will He speak?” Our answer to that question must take into account two realities: our historical position (“the last days”) and the relationship between the Holy Spirit and Scripture. Therefore, we should not look for God to speak apart from His completed revelation in Christ (which from our perspective has already been delivered). “By His Son” is how God speaks “in these last days,” and we can know Christ only through the Spirit-inspired Scriptures.

Believing that revelation has ceased is not, therefore, a way of “quenching the Spirit.” Rather, this belief is a biblical way to define *how God speaks today*. Since God is consistent with

¹⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 1039.

himself, the information in Scripture about the purpose and method of his communication should not be ignored. According to Scripture, God speaks today through creation and providence and as the Spirit applies the Word to the life of his people. His speaking no longer takes the forms it did prior to Christ's finished work. As the Westminster Confession of Faith puts it, "those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people" are "now ceased."¹⁶ But His speaking has not ceased: "Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word."¹⁷ It is biblically essential to acknowledge the ongoing work of God to speak to His people by Word and Spirit and to manifest Himself through providence. Far from quenching the Spirit, this view submits to the Spirit's work on the Spirit's terms. It acknowledges, along with Puritan John Owen, that God "*speaks* the same content now" that he *spoke* long ago and committed to writing--in other words, "the Scriptures remain his contemporary utterance to every generation."¹⁸ This is why the author to the Hebrews, for example, is able to write both that God "has spoken" once for all and of what God "says" currently through the written Word (Heb. 1:2; 3:7).

Hearing from God Today

So can we expect to hear from God afresh today? That God speaks is a foundational principle of the Christian faith. But, as we've observed from various passages in the New Testament, Scripture provides us with a framework for God's orderly self-disclosure. God's revelation through the prophets in *various ways* came to an end with the coming of Christ since it

¹⁶ *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Lawrenceville, GA: Christian Education and Publications, 2007), 1.1

¹⁷ *WCF*, 1.6

¹⁸ quoted in J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 88.

was in him that God summed up his revealing and redemptive work once for all. That means Christians today should not expect God to speak new revelations. The last days are upon us and God's message has once for all been delivered. That message is about our salvation which has been once for all accomplished. The hymn, then, is right to ask: "What more can He say than to you He hath said, to you, who unto Jesus for refuge have fled?"¹⁹

But how should we treat claims of continuing revelation? It is a common pastoral situation to have someone claim that "God told me . . ." or "the Lord said to me . . ." The best way to approach such claims is to test what is claimed by the Scriptures. If God is speaking to the person it would be through the Spirit's clear and searching application of God's Word. Such experiences are best termed "illumination" in order to distinguish them from the once for all "revelation" that has been committed to writing in the Bible.²⁰ These experiences are needed for our full understanding, acceptance, and appropriation of God's Word. A claim to hearing God speak, then, should be treated as a possible work of the Spirit to apply God's Word. In that case, the way you test its validity is to compare what was learned with the Bible. Can the message be demonstrated from the Scriptures? Does it agree with the whole canon? Does it, as Paul says all "sound doctrine" does, accord with godliness (1 Timothy 6:13; Titus 1:1)? If our claim to hear God's Word meets these tests, it should be considered an instance of God speaking to us through the Word. Following Jesus's lead, we should thank the Father for so working by the Holy Spirit (Luke 10:21-22). It is also possible that someone comes to a clearer understanding of God's will

¹⁹ from the hymn, "How Firm a Foundation"

²⁰ Admittedly, though, the Bible sometimes calls such experiences "revelation" (i.e., Ephesians 1:17). See Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 137.

through creation and providence. Here again we should ask whether such understandings accurately reflect what we see when looking through the “spectacles” of Scripture.²¹

How, then, should pastors encourage people to listen for God’s voice? We should always point ourselves back to Scripture. Instruction and practice in reading, studying, and meditating on the Scriptures is an essential part of the pastoral task. Christians are called “disciples” because they are called to be continually learning Christ’s Word, and prayer for the Spirit’s work in these “ordinary means” should attend our every use of them. We should expect that God will honor efforts to hear from him and that he will guide us as we do. All parts of Scripture are given for our instruction and training (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Each book of Scripture should be read in context in order to understand its *single meaning*. The one divine author communicated a single truth through the human author to the original audience in each passage of Scripture. It is the task of every student of Scripture to humbly seek that meaning. The first task in hearing God’s voice today is not to ask what he is saying to us, but what he *said* to the Israelites on the Plains of Moab, Judah in Exile, and the scattered and persecuted Christians of the first century Roman Empire. But, once we have grasped the original meaning of the passage, this meaning should be extended back into our own lives as we seek its *various applications* to us today. This task is only possible by the Spirit’s work along with the Word, not least because it requires our naturally proud hearts to be humbled.

Does this task seem far less impressive and romantic than receiving messages from God by direct voice or vision or impression? If so, we should bear in mind that this sentiment is of our own making. We need to take seriously what God communicated to a group of beleaguered

²¹ Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 26-27.

Christians through Peter: “we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And *we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the more star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation*” (2 Peter 1:19-20; emphasis mine). Although Peter had been with Jesus and heard God’s own voice from heaven, he counted the revelation of God in the Scriptures as a “more fully confirmed” form of revelation. This revelation has been completed and committed to writing, making it the full disclosure of all things necessary for life and godliness. Would we hear God speak to us today? Then we must pay attention to this once for all delivered Word.

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