

A BRIEF THEOLOGY OF REVELATION

Colin Gunton, the author of this text, was a professor of Christian Doctrine at King's College, London. The book is divided into six chapters which were originally delivered as the 1993 Warfield lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary (ix-x). At the time they were given, the lectures were intended to offer a corrective to what Gunton perceived as either the neglect, or overuse, of the doctrine of revelation (ix). Broadly speaking, these lectures offer "a series of explorations of different ways in which revelation can be understood to be mediated" (105).

In his first lecture Gunton tackles the problem of revelation in modern theology. He observes that since the time of Hegel, "theology has been dominated by quests for different forms of immediacy" (3). He suspects this is a major reason why so many modern people are uncomfortable with the notion of a "revealed religion" (4). But what exactly is meant by the term "immediacy" and what are some of the forms it has assumed? According to Gunton, "the development of a form of immediacy" occupied an important place in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* (3). He notes that for Hegel, "revelation is the function of an immediate relation of God to the mind" (3). The idea seems to be that divine revelation, however this is defined, is directly (or "immediately") apprehended by the human mind in some way. If this understanding is correct, then the idea seems to be relatively straightforward and easy to understand. But as Gunton proceeds to multiply examples of the various "forms of immediacy" that he wants us to consider, the idea becomes a bit more slippery and difficult to grasp.

For example, Gunton refers to "what can only be called a revelatory immediacy, a direct apprehension of the content of the faith that will in some way or other serve to identify it beyond question" (4). As an example he mentions biblical fundamentalism. He describes this "form of immediacy" as getting "the truth straight out of the text" (4). Here the idea seems to be that the text, at least in the minds of some fundamentalists, is propositional revelation that

doesn't require interpretation. But wait a minute! Isn't the revelation still "mediated" *through* the propositions found in the Bible? Apparently Gunton doesn't think that this is what the particular fundamentalists he has in mind would say. He later provides some clarification of this point by noting, "Propositions may not be revelation, but they may in a derivative sense be revelatory" (105). In other words, the difference between Gunton and the biblical fundamentalist would seem to be this: Gunton believes the propositions in the Bible are a *medium* of revelation, whereas the fundamentalist believes they *are* revelation.

Gunton concludes this section by observing: "Some kind of immediate experience appears in modern times to have replaced a traditional view of the mediation of the faith in propositional terms" (7). So can the "traditional" view still be defended? Gunton believes that it can, at least with some additional qualifications. He writes, "Whatever it is, revelation in Christian theology is mediated" (18). In part, he thinks it is mediated by propositions—but only in part. In the remainder of these lectures, then, he proposes to examine some of the various ways in which revelation is mediated to us.

In the second lecture, Gunton aims to lead us toward a general theology of revelation. But this immediately confronts us with a difficulty. In the minds of many people today, Gunton thinks, we are forced to make a choice between revelation, on the one hand, and reason, on the other (21). And how could it be *reasonable* to choose against *reason*? That would be absurd! Gunton, however, thinks the absurdity lies in "making the matter an absolute choice" (22). He intends to show not only that revelation is *not* contrary to reason, but that we actually "require revelation if we are to understand our neighbor and the world" (22).

Think for a moment about how we acquire knowledge of other persons. In our interactions with others we are constantly giving and receiving some measure of personal information. For example, what a person says and how he says it, the way he dresses, walks, and spends his money, all reveal something about who that person is (23). In other words, we come to know others through a kind of revelatory process.

Not only is this how we acquire knowledge of other persons, it's also how we learn about the natural world. Gunton observes that people often want to argue that "science does not depend upon authority or revelation, but upon the autonomous exercise of free enquiry" (25). But this view seems clearly mistaken. In the first place, science is surely dependent for most of its findings upon the *revelations* of nature (25). For example, one way in which nature reveals itself to us is through scientific experiments (28). Experiments provide a way of eliciting information from nature. We formulate questions (e.g. at what temperature does water freeze?) and then construct an experiment that allows us to get at nature's answer. In addition, although it doesn't concern science *per se*, it's nonetheless important to remember that what any particular scientist knows is largely based on authority. That is, most scientists have not personally demonstrated, via the scientific method, all the things which they think science teaches. Rather, they've learned these things by reading journal articles written by those scientists who have performed the relevant experiments. In other words, their knowledge is based on the *authority* of other scientists. From this it seems evident that science is just as dependent upon authority and revelation as any other method of human inquiry.

But Gunton goes even further. He notes that "nature does not reveal its secrets apart from structures of human rationality" (34). Science must assume that human rationality is more or less able to accurately understand the world. Without this assumption, science couldn't even get started. But within the confines of a naturalistic worldview, this assumption is questionable at best. After all, why should we trust our rational faculties if they are ultimately the product of non-rational, undirected physical processes?¹ Any reason that can be offered must presuppose the validity of reason. But *that* is the very thing in question, the very thing that needs to be proved!

So what is the best explanation of man's ability to understand the natural world? Gunton argues that the Christian concept of God provides a ready explanation as to why "our

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1960), 15.

experience of the world as a place of revelation and understanding should be as it is” (37). Unfortunately, many modern thinkers have rejected the concept of revelation “because it represents oppressive authority, against which human freedom must assert itself” (38). But if Gunton’s argument in this chapter is valid, then revelation may actually be the necessary prerequisite to *all* human knowledge.

In lecture three, Gunton addresses the topic of revelation and the theology of nature. He begins by noting that general revelation refers to God’s making Himself known through the things He has made (40). However, he insists on making a firm distinction between general revelation and natural theology. “God may be revealed in the things that have been made,” he says, “but it does not follow that the discernment of this truth is achievable by unaided reason alone” (55). Indeed, Gunton holds that it’s for this very reason that we need special revelation (61). In fact, in his opinion “general revelation is not . . . something that operates in parallel with biblical revelation, but is derived from it” (61). Thus, while he seems to acknowledge a genuine revelation of God in nature, he nonetheless insists that “apart from the Bible and salvation in the Christ of whom it speaks . . . we should be unable truly to recognise the revelation that is there” (107).

In lecture four Gunton turns his attention to the Bible to examine the doctrines of revelation and inspiration. He asks, “In what sense is scripture the mediator of revelation because of the unique inspiration of its writers? What may such inspiration be taken to mean?” (67). He observes that “Jewish and Christian communities have other books which serve their lives, sometimes even the works of theologians” (75). So what is it about the Bible which makes it special? Why should it be accorded a favored status above these other works?

In answering these questions Gunton makes two important observations. The first concerns the ministry of the Holy Spirit and the second the unique historical role enjoyed by the apostles of Jesus. In John’s Gospel the Spirit is the promised agent who will guide the disciples of Jesus into all the truth about His life, ministry, death and resurrection (75; see also John 16:13-15). This observation is extremely important, for Jesus was not just another prophet, but

the unique revelation of God (76). As we read at the end of John's prologue, "No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him" (1:18). The upshot of this is that the apostles personally experienced the revelation of God through their fellowship with Jesus.

Gunton believes that these two observations are very important in accounting for the unique inspiration of the Bible. He writes, "Part of what it means to say that scripture is inspired is . . . to be found in an affirmation that God the Spirit enabled members of a community in a particular time to articulate what it was about that particular configuration of events that is uniquely significant for the salvation of the world" (76). The "particular configuration of events" referred to here have, of course, to do with the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. In a similar way, Gunton believes, we can also account for the inspiration of the Old Testament, except in that case it is prophets, rather than apostles, "who mediate the word of God to the present" (78).

In lecture five Gunton explores the role of the church and tradition in mediating revelation. Like it or not, we are all influenced by tradition. We are each born into a complex web of social, cultural, political, religious, and familial traditions. Every human community has its traditions which it passes down from one generation to another. In general terms, Gunton writes, tradition could be defined as "a form of relation between people, in which those in the present receive from those in their past something that is either necessary or valuable—or intended so to be—for their life" (88). Defined in this way, tradition could include everything from wise advice, such as how to raise your children and get along with your spouse, to training in specialized skills, such as medicine or carpentry. But of course our interest is in the role which tradition plays in mediating revelation from one generation to the next.

Gunton points to two narrative sections in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians as containing possibly the most easily recognizable accounts of "the working of tradition in the New Testament" (93). In both 1 Corinthians 11, where Paul discusses the Lord's Supper, and 1 Corinthians 15, where he refers to Jesus' death and resurrection as the heart of the gospel, Paul

specifically declares that he is delivering to the Corinthians certain traditions about Jesus which he himself had previously received. What's especially interesting about all this is that the biblical writings themselves are seen to be "part of a tradition of interpretation of that which is in certain respects prior to them" (95). In other words, the unique revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ is prior to the traditions about Him which Paul had received. And the traditions which Paul had received, including the meaning given them by the early church and Paul himself, are prior to his deliverance of them to the Corinthians, as well as the subsequent generations of people who have read this letter. Tradition, it seems, cannot always be easily disentangled from the Bible itself.

Of course, very few Christians would disagree that traditions like those passed on by the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians are "authoritative for the faith and life of the church" (95). The problem rather arises with how the original revelation "is interpreted and handed on by those who follow the prophets and apostles: the way in which revelation is mediated by tradition" (95). How should we understand the relationship of the original revelation to the tradition by which it is mediated? This tradition will, of course, primarily mediate the revelation through words, through propositions—and that makes some people nervous. Gunton, however, doesn't think we need to fear this process so long as we remember that "propositions are secondary and therefore dependent for their truth on the personal presence of God to the world which is revelation" (100).

If we bear this in mind, then we can also grant a certain freedom to the way in which the tradition is articulated, in response to the Spirit's guidance, in different cultural and historical contexts (101). This has the added benefit of allowing the tradition to grow in a healthy way which, at the same time, is also amenable to correction when necessary. Granted, we are speaking here of the development of tradition in something like an ideal setting, and the world in which we currently live is certainly not ideal. But be that as it may, Gunton's proposal may be about the best we can hope for as we await the return of Christ. If tradition is one of the means which God has chosen for mediating revelation from one generation to the next, then for better or for worse, it will (and should) continue to play an important role in the life of the church. As

Gunton observes, “although we may and must be critical of tradition, as the action of fallible and sinful human beings, we may not lay aside the means which God has himself chosen” (102-03).

In all the lectures considered so far, Gunton has been exploring the “different ways in which revelation can be understood to be mediated” (105). In his final lecture, he wants to examine “the revelation . . . at the centre of the mediations” (109). In other words, what is the primary thing that the different forms of mediation are concerned to communicate? What is their reason for being?

In order to answer this question, Gunton takes a careful look at the Gospel of John which, he suggests, offers possibly “the definitive treatment of revelation in the New Testament” (117). As his analysis of this Gospel proceeds he develops what is essentially a trinitarian theology of revelation, in which the Spirit reveals the Son and the Son reveals the Father (122). But in saying that the Spirit reveals the *Son* and that the *Son* reveals the Father, we see something of the centrality of the Son in the act of revelation. Indeed, John’s Gospel begins by proclaiming: “In the beginning was the *Word*, and the *Word* was with God, and the *Word* was God” (1:1). It goes on to identify this Word as the Creator of all things (1:3), who became incarnate (1:14) to reveal the Father (1:18) and bring salvation to the world of men (1:29; 3:16-17; see also Gunton, 118). As Gunton observes, “we are given a picture of a personal creator, whose relation to the world is defined from the beginning through his Son, and whose sacrificial love is the means by which God’s relation with his sinful people is re-established” (118-19). He concludes the lecture (and the book) by briefly recapitulating the primary argument of the series:

There are varieties of mediation, but there is one Lord. When we speak of revelation, we are speaking first of all of Jesus Christ, who thus forms the focus of all that we have to say. The centre of our attention is the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, and that glory is mediated in all kinds of ways: through the Bible, church traditions and confessions; through the creation that is from and to Christ; and even sometimes through the propositions of theologians, those scribes of the kingdom whose calling is to bring forth from their treasures things both old and new (125).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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