

ARTICLE 2

Revelation of God

God's Self-Revelation

We believe that God has made Himself known to all people. God's power and nature have always been evident in creation. The Old Testament reveals God as the one who established a covenant relationship with Israel to make known to all people the eternal plan of salvation. God revealed Himself supremely in Jesus Christ, as recorded in the New Testament. The Holy Spirit continues to make God known to individuals and the church; this revelation is always consistent with the Scriptures.

The Written Word of God

We believe that the entire Bible was inspired by God through the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit guides the community of faith in the interpretation of Scripture. The person, teaching, and life of Jesus Christ bring continuity and clarity to both the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament bears witness to Christ, and Christ is the One whom the New Testament proclaims. We accept the Bible as the infallible Word of God and the authoritative guide for faith and practice.

Genesis 9:1-17; 12:1-3; Exodus 6:2-8; Psalm 19:1-11; 119; Matthew 5:17-18; Luke 24:27, 44-47; John 1:16-18; 16:13; Acts 8:34-35; Romans 1:18-21; Hebrews 1:1-2; Colossians 1:15-23; 2 Timothy 3:14-17; 2 Peter 1:16-21.

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COMMENTARY

Revelation is the act or process by which God makes Himself known to human beings. Since all people are made in the image of God, they have the potential for receiving light from above and for responding to divine revelation.

God's Self-Revelation

Because of our fallenness and spiritual blindness, we are all in desperate need of divine help if we are to come to a saving knowledge of God. Such a knowledge of God and His salvation plans for the human race cannot be attained by diligent research or by religious strivings. It must come to us from outside of ourselves and is beyond our own ability to discover (Job 11:7).

That God was willing to make Himself known to a sinful and lost human race is a sign of His marvellous and infinite grace. Left to ourselves, we could not truly know what God is like, nor discover His purposes for humanity.

Although we are deeply grateful that God chose to make Himself known, our knowledge of God and His ways is limited (Job 26:14). It is the hope of Christian believers that they will know God more fully in the coming heavenly kingdom (1 Corinthians 13:12).

God reveals Himself to human beings in a variety of ways. God's self-disclosure is often divided into two categories: "general" and "special" revelation. General revelation implies that God has not left Himself without a witness to humanity in general. God reveals Himself in nature (Psalm 19:1-4; Acts 14:17; Romans 1:20). God also makes Himself known in His judgments (Romans 1:18) as well as in His gracious acts in human history. Our consciences also bear witness to a general revelation.

However, it is only by God's "special" revelation that humans can come to know His saving plans. This revelation too was given in a great variety of ways—in dreams and visions, by angelic visits and divine theophanies, by the voice of God and by the interpretation of His mighty acts in the history of His people Israel. Always God acts with sovereign freedom; God speaks when and as He chooses.

Recipients of Divine Revelation

From the beginning of human history, God in His sovereign grace chose the recipients of His self disclosure. These human agents who responded

in faith and obedience to God's revelation in turn became messengers who shared with others the insights into God's will which they had received.

Although God had made Himself known even in pre-Patriarchal times (Genesis 3:13; 9:1-17), it was with the call of Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3) that God began the process of revealing Himself in a special way to the people of Israel. By restricting His self-revelation primarily to one particular people, God was not indifferent to non-Israelite people. Rather, God chose Israel to receive the light of salvation and to become a channel of blessing to all the peoples of the world.

Beginning with Moses, whom God chose to be the deliverer of Israel and the mediator of the covenant which God established with this redeemed people, God continued to make His purposes known progressively through the messages which He gave to Israel's prophets. And in the fullness of time (Galatians 4:4) God made Himself known supremely in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:1, 2), in whom the prophetic promises of salvation were fulfilled. Jesus is called the "Word" of God (John 1:1, 14).

Revelation in Christ

By his incarnation, his life among the people, his marvellous teachings, and above all, by his death, resurrection, and glorious exaltation, Jesus revealed God the Father, who so loved this world of humanity that He sent His only Son to deliver it from eternal death (John 3:16; 14:8-11). No one has ever seen God, but God's Son, who is close to the Father's heart, has made God known (John 1:18; Matthew 11:27).

Christ stands at the very centre of the Christian faith; in him God brought His many acts of self-disclosure in human history to a climax (Ephesians 1:9, 10). But the process of revelation continued for some time even after Christ had completed his work on earth, had returned to glory, and poured out his Spirit. It went on in the life of the early church, as written in the New Testament where the events of the life of Christ were recorded and interpreted.

The witnesses to this final revelation in Christ were the apostles, whom Jesus had chosen to be the depositories of his words and works. The church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 2:20). The apostles who were witnesses of the Christ-event were not replaced when they passed off the scene. Their writings are the foundation documents of the new people of God, the church, and they remain authoritative for Christian believers for all time. With the writing of the apostolic books, the biblical canon came to a close.

The Record of Revelation

Moses and the prophets have left us a record of the revelation given to them in the pages of what Christians call the Old Testament. Although the books of the Old Testament are not God's final word to humanity (Ephesians 3:5), they were inspired by God (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20, 21). Jesus and the apostles viewed the Old Testament Scriptures as the Word of God without any reservation (Matthew 5:18). Not only did they constantly quote the Old Testament, but found people and events in these Jewish Scriptures which foreshadowed the coming of Christ and his saving work.

Since the people of Israel spoke Hebrew in the days of the prophetic writers, God's revelation came to Israel in that language (with a few portions in Aramaic). In the providence of God, an alphabet was available by which God's messages could be put into writing, as were the necessary writing materials. The writers who put God's revelation into this very human form availed themselves of a variety of literary genres—narrative, poetry, wisdom sayings, and a unique type of literature called prophecy.

Although Jesus and his contemporaries spoke Aramaic, the witness of the apostles to the words and deeds of the Messiah were recorded in Hellenistic Greek, the language spoken in all the Mediterranean lands. Since Christ established a new covenant, the collection of apostolic books is called the New Testament.

From the early centuries of the Christian era up to the present, the Bible has been translated into many languages, and so today God continues to reveal Himself through the message of the Scriptures. When people embrace God's self-revelation in this written Word of God, they become members of the new people of God, the church. The church stands in continuity with the genuine Israel of the Old Testament and its members are therefore called children of Abraham (Galatians 3:29).

Understanding Revelation

For Christian believers, the Bible, in which prophets and apostles have left us the records of God's self-disclosure, remains normative in matters of doctrine and ethics. It is therefore of great consequence that Bible readers interpret God's Word carefully. Although the people of God may never fully agree in their understanding of the details of the books of the Bible, it is of utmost importance that they agree on the fundamental message of the Scriptures.

The Bible is the story of how God in His grace carried out His plan of redemption for a lost human race. The Scriptures, however, should not be read simply as a history book. One can find valuable information on many areas of human knowledge in the Bible, but God's revelation, as recorded in

the books of the Bible, focuses primarily on the salvation of humankind by a holy and gracious God.

Since most Christians read the Bible in a translation, it is important that they recognize that all translations are attempts to render the original texts in the current languages of the peoples of this world, and are to some degree already interpretations of the biblical texts. We should therefore be grateful that God has given the church biblical scholars who are conversant with the original languages in which the books were written.

The writers of the Scriptures were divinely inspired and so the Bible reader needs the help of the Holy Spirit to comprehend the basic message of God's Word (John 16:8-11; 1 Corinthians 2:4). Satan has so blinded the minds of unbelievers that they cannot grasp the saving message of the Scriptures until God by His Spirit opens the eyes of their hearts (1 Thessalonians 1:5; 1 Corinthians 2:14; 2 Corinthians 4:4; Ephesians 4:18).

Believers too need the help of the Spirit of God to understand what God has revealed in His Word (Ephesians 1:18; 1 Corinthians 2:10-16). Jesus promised his followers the help of the Spirit in their effort to understand the teachings and works of Jesus (John 14:26; 16:13). This should not, however, be understood to mean that the Spirit will explain the textual and literary intricacies of the biblical books. Although prayer and godliness are prerequisites for obedient listening to God's Word in the Bible, they do not by themselves guarantee a correct interpretation of the biblical text. It is therefore of importance that we test our understanding of biblical teachings in the fellowship of believers and in the light of the long history of the Christian church.

In our efforts to understand God's messages in the Scriptures, we must make sure that we understand the meaning of the words of the biblical writers and the context in which they are found. We also must pay attention to the grammatical structures of sentences and paragraphs. Moreover, we must take into account the many literary genres of both the Old and the New Testament books. The New Testament, for example, makes use of a new type of literature called "Gospels." There is also a great amount of epistolary literature, not to mention narrative and even apocalyptic literature.

The biblical writers used many figures of speech to express themselves and often there are no exact equivalents in modern languages. To interpret the Bible literally would then mean that we seek to understand the imagery of the Bible and discern what message the inspired writer wanted to convey to readers. The writers had specific meanings in mind when they recorded the messages conveyed to them by God, and it is our duty to discover these meanings and then to apply them to new situations that arise in the life of the individual believer and the church. Establishing the original meaning

of a text is our first task; the second is to ask ourselves what this text might mean for us today.

All literature reflects the culture of its day, and that holds for the biblical books as well. God's revelation has come to us in the dress of ancient cultures, Semitic and Greco-Roman. We should then be careful not to carry the cultural practices of an ancient world over into our contemporary life. Our task is to discover the permanent and universally applicable teachings of the Bible and to apply these to our life in today's world.

Old and New Testaments

The relationship of the Old Testament to the New is one of the more difficult questions believers face in the interpretation of the Bible. Since the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is also the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we can assume the fundamental unity of the message of the Bible. In fact, individual passages should always be understood in the light of the wholeness of the Scriptures.

However, Jesus and his apostles clearly indicate that the books of the Old Testament belong to the period of preparation. The New Testament books, by contrast, come from the time of fulfillment. It follows, then, that the Old Testament should be seen in the light of God's final revelation in Jesus Christ. One can see this clearly from the recorded sermons in the book of Acts, which begin with a review of salvation history and conclude with God's final revelation in Christ. Although the Old Testament like the New was inspired by God, it was God's preliminary word. This approach to the Bible was underscored particularly by our Anabaptist forebears at the time of the Reformation in the 16th century.

The ongoing self-disclosure of God in human history, leading to the climax of divine revelation in Christ, can be called "progressive" revelation. Progressive revelation means, among other things, that God in His grace spoke to men and women in past ages in ways they could understand. From time to time, God made His saving purposes for humanity known more plainly to the recipients of this revelation. Finally, God made Himself known through His own Son, Jesus Christ, in whom the hopes and promises of the Old Testament were fulfilled.

From the high point of God's final revelation in Christ, the church now looks forward to the end of the present age when Christ will come again. His glorious appearance at the end of human history is also called a revelation (1 Corinthians 1:7; 2 Thessalonians 1:7).

A question that arises from time to time in the life of the church is whether God continues to reveal Himself directly to His children. The word "revelation" is used occasionally for insights which God gives to individual

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believers. Theologians prefer to describe such insights as “illumination.” Paul prays that the Ephesians might receive a “Spirit of wisdom and revelation” (1:17). He speaks of the things “God has revealed to us” (1 Corinthians 2:10). Moreover, He assumes that a word of revelation may be spoken when believers gather for worship (1 Corinthians 14:6, 26, 30). Such insights into God’s ways, however, must always be in harmony with the revelation of God in the Scriptures. For the Christian church, the written and inspired Word of God remains the authoritative guide for faith and practice.

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PASTORAL APPLICATION

We confess that God has revealed the truth about Himself to all people. God began by revealing Himself through creation. Just as we learn about an artist from her work, we learn about God through creation. If creation were all we had, we would not know about God's mighty acts of salvation: the incarnation, the cross, the resurrection, the ascension, Pentecost, the *Parousia* (Christ's second coming). If creation is a good but incomplete picture, the Scriptures guide us to a more complete knowledge of God and open to us a relationship with Jesus as the fullness of God's revelation.

Mennonite Brethren have long been known as people of the book. As a church, our focus has not been on creedal statements but on the study of Scripture. We try to be people of the Word because we believe that in the Scriptures God has revealed His heart to us. The oft-repeated phrase, "What does the Bible say?" is understood to be the dynamic equivalent of the question, "What is God telling us about how to live?" Historically, Mennonite Brethren at their best have lived with the passion of the early Anabaptist reformers, the passion that right understanding must be followed by obedience. Although Mennonite Brethren have not been unaware of more personal, subjective communication from God, these insights of illumination are characteristically checked with Scripture and with the community of believers. The written Word of God is accepted as inspired and as the authoritative guide for faith and practice.

Public Scripture Reading

Getting to know God's heart through Scripture will help us become grounded in God and in faith. At the heart of God's revelation is an invitation to a special relationship with God. The Holy Spirit uses the Scriptures to build us up in faith and to expose things in our lives that need change.

The Lord Jesus made the reading and interpretation of Scripture the starting point of his ministry. As a boy in the temple, Jesus was disputing with the teachers of the law about its interpretation (Luke 2:46-49). As he opened his public ministry in the synagogue, Jesus interpreted his mission by reading Isaiah 61 (Luke 4:18-19). On that occasion, Jesus was concerned not only with the reading of the text but with its dynamic fulfillment in his ministry. In his disputes with the Pharisees and priests, Jesus showed great facility with the Hebrew Scriptures. His ministry was capped by a day-long

walk with two disciples in which Jesus used Moses and the prophets to interpret his life. Jesus modelled the centrality of Scripture in community life and worship.

The New Testament church made the reading and interpretation of Scripture a central component of its worship gathering. In the book of Acts, the sermons of Peter, Stephen, and Paul are marked by Scriptural citations and interpretation. The believers at Berea received special commendation for their eager examination of the Hebrew Scriptures (Acts 17:11). In Romans 10:17, Paul reminds us that faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. The emphasis is placed on hearing the message, a good reminder of the significance of audible expression. In 1 Corinthians 14:26, Paul instructed the Corinthians to be orderly in their worship, using among other liturgical elements “a word of instruction.” Based on what we know from contemporary Jewish worship, it seems most likely that the early church depended on individuals to use Scripture readings in their informal liturgy. To the Ephesians, Paul wrote that they should sing psalms (Ephesians 5:19), another creative use of the Bible in worship.

Traditionally, Mennonite Brethren have used the liturgical element of Scripture reading to encourage the broad use of gifts by church members. Often church leaders whose capacity for proclamation is limited have been asked to read the Scriptures and pray. Young persons with potential in biblical proclamation have been invited to make brief comments about the passage they are about to read. With proper instruction, Scripture readers can develop gifts in proclaiming the gospel.

Worship planners are encouraged to make Scripture reading a key part of worship gatherings. Lectionary readings are one method being used to introduce the voice of God into congregational worship. The common lectionary, available in the *Book of Common Worship*, offers a planned three-year reading schedule. Each week, readings from the Old Testament, the Psalms, the Epistles, and the Gospels are suggested. Worship leaders may wish to develop their own systematic plan for reading the Scriptures in public worship. Public reading of the Bible is not to be neglected.

Personal Scripture Reading

Personal Bible reading and study are also modelled by biblical figures. Philip the evangelist encountered the Ethiopian court official reading Isaiah and interpreted the text for him (Acts 8:26-40). Paul continued to be a student of the Scriptures, asking from prison for scrolls and parchments (2 Timothy 4:13). Scripture study, meditation, and memory characterized early believers.

Churches should foster the disciplines of Bible reading, study, and

memorization. Club programs and Sunday school activities help motivate Bible study. Life-changing Scripture study involves prayerful preparation, careful observation, thoughtful meditation, personal application, and faithful obedience (Rumford 227-232). Daily reading in various parts of the canon, including the Gospels, the Epistles, the Psalms, and so on, should characterize Christians.

Translations and Versions

A proliferation of biblical translations and versions has come to characterize the North American Christian milieu. Confusing arguments about the superiority and “unique authority” of various versions can befuddle many Bible readers. Pastors and congregations help bring unity to their community by choosing to follow a single or primary version for public worship. Students of the Scriptures broaden their understanding by using a variety of versions.

How should one reply to those who insist that the King James Version has greater merit than others? Experience shows that logical argumentation alone may not be enough to counter the strong attachment some have to the King James. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the newer translations benefit from superior textual witnesses, more contemporary language, and greater accessibility for those who are new to Bible study.

The New International Version maintains great popularity among Mennonite Brethren because of its readability. Those who prefer to use inclusive language to refer to humans favour the New Revised Standard Version. The New American Standard Version gives the closest word-for-word translation from the original languages.

Words of Knowledge and Prophecy

Dissatisfaction with the Enlightenment perspective seems to have rekindled interest in the paraphenomenal dimension. People want to know God’s will. They want to be able to anticipate the future. Uncertainty about personal life becomes increasingly unacceptable when science claims to control the public domain, and yet huge paradigm shifts destabilize society. Reliance on supernatural or magical insight increasingly tempts Christians as well.

Several words of caution are in order. First, all claims of prophetic illumination must be consistent with the biblical revelation. No prophetic word can be granted greater authority than the Bible itself (Deuteronomy 13; 18:9-22). Second, the Old Testament prophets in their struggle with false prophets warned against accepting oracles of salvation when God had announced judgment. Similarly, words that promise prosperity and health should be tested with special scrutiny. Third, every word that claims special insight must be tested within the community, especially by local church

leaders. Fourth, be aware of the increasing penchant for the magical. Exercise caution in following those who promise insights that avoid community discernment in struggling to know God's direction.

Community Hermeneutics

The commentary on this article of faith outlines the need for hermeneutical sophistication in understanding the various genres of biblical literature. One will pursue the study of poetry with different exegetical tools than are used with historical literature, for example.

The commentary also insists that interpretation of Scripture is the work of the Holy Spirit within the community of believers. God promises that the Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth. God's followers, guided by the Holy Spirit, enter into active dialogue with others in the Christian community and discover that God reveals the truth, giving people confidence to live in challenging, changing times.

There are several practical implications of this truth. First, teachers who have learned both to discern the will of God and to use exegetical tools that include facility with the original languages are to give leadership in biblical interpretation. Although they have no greater authority because of their academic preparation, the church does well to show them respect as they proclaim the Word of God. Second, when issues become too complex or divisive for a single congregation, we do well to consult with other congregations in our conference. The Acts 15 model is appropriate for us today. Third, mutual discernment may test our unity. In an increasingly diverse world, consensus will not always come quickly. Mutual trust will need to be nurtured especially in times of dissension. Fourth, discussion should be characterized by charity. Fifth, healthy conflict can actually build church health (1 Corinthians 11:19).

Knowing God

The Creator invites the created into relationship. As we meet God in the Scriptures we find ourselves—like the women and men whose stories are captured in the Scriptures—invited into an intimate relationship with God. As we get to know the heart of God through Scripture and as we serve God's purposes, we grow in a dynamic relationship with God. Getting to know God changes us. As we get to know God as revealed in the Bible, we develop convictions about the kind of people we ought to be. As we come to understand the Scriptures, we come to care deeply about a daily, moment-by-moment obedience to God. We learn to know God as revealed in creation, the Scriptures, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the Christian community.

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