Basic Christian Theology

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Special Revelation

God has revealed specific truths about himself, his creation, his will, and his plan of redemption by supernaturally inspiring human writers to record his Word in Scripture. In the words of the Belgic Confession (1561): "He makes himself more clearly and fully known to us by his holy and divine Word, that is to say, as far as is necessary for us to know in this life, to his glory and our salvation." (Art. 2)

1. The Personal Revelation of God

    a. **Principle**: The concept of special revelation begins by understanding an important truth about God and his will. Rather than being a Creator who is removed and isolated from humans (i.e., deism), God decided to glorify himself by being present and involved with humans (i.e., theism). Such involvement includes God communicating his truth and will by speaking to those he created. In ancient times, God spoke through audible words, dreams, visions, theophanies, and miraculous events. However, the most basic element of special revelation is that God has spoken.

        - **Examples**: In the beginning, God spoke to Adam and Eve in the garden, sharing his truth, giving them instructions and warnings, and outlining his specific will for their lives. God would continue to speak personally to people like Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and many others. "*And behold, the word of the LORD came to him…*" (Gen. 15:4).

        - **Hebrews 1:1-2** – "*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.*"

    b. **Disclaimer:** Not everything that God said to his people was intended to be recorded and passed down to future generations (cf. John 21:25). However, God did select a specific portion of his truth to be recorded and obeyed throughout history, and this portion of truth is called Christian Scripture (i.e., the Bible).

2. The Inspired and Authoritative Revelation of God

    a. **Inspiration**: The work of God through the Holy Spirit to place his authoritative message in the minds of human authors to be written through their personalities and cultures and preserved for future generations. A more detailed description is "verbal plenary inspiration,"

which indicates that every word throughout the entire Bible was inspired by God. In other words, there is not a single word in the Bible that God doesn't approve.

- 2 Timothy 3:16-17 – "*All Scripture is breathed out* (Gk. Theopneustos; God-breathed) *by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*"

- 2 Peter 1:21 – "*For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*"

- 1 Thessalonians 2:13 – "*And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.*"

- 2 Samuel 23:2 – "*The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me; his word is on my tongue.*"

- John 14:26 – "*But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.*"

- 2 Peter 3:16 – "*Our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.*"

b. Clarification: It would be wrong to think of God dictating his message to the human authors. Just as God didn't drop a completed Bible down from heaven, he didn't speak audibly for the biblical writers to write down everything he said. Rather, the Holy Spirit filled each writer in such a way that they were given the freedom to write down God's truth through their own languages, vocabularies, personalities, and cultural settings. The miracle of inspiration is that God's truth was perfectly communicated and recorded in the ordinary language of imperfect humans.

   - Quote: "Human beings do not necessarily err. Even unregenerate people sometimes speak the truth. So we should not think it impossible that God could reveal himself through human agents, keeping them from error, without violating their humanity" (John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 73-74).

c. Entire Process: In addition to inspiration, God oversaw the entire process of reception, transmission, and preservation, so that what we have today in our Bibles is what God intended for us to have. Some have questioned how the early church and councils determined which books should be in the canon of Scripture. However, the church didn't "decide" which books belonged, but through the Holy Spirit the church "recognized long ago which books were inspired by God and belonged to the list of authentic writings of the

Holy Scriptures" (Beeke, 59). In other words, God oversaw the entire process from inspiration to canonization.

d. Authority: Because the Bible is the inspired Word of God, it is fully authoritative for all matters pertaining to faith and life. This doctrine is what the Reformers referred to as "*Sola Scriptura*," or Scripture Alone. Luther described Scripture with the Latin phrase, "norma normans non normata" ("the norm of norms that can't be normed"). Nothing rules over the Bible.

- Affirmation by Jesus: Throughout the Gospels, Jesus adamantly confirmed the authority and reliability of Scripture. He often appealed to God's truth with phrases like, "*It is written*," "*Have you not read*," "*Scripture cannot be broken*" (John 10:35). He considered the people and events of the Old Testament real history (Adam and Eve, Noah and the flood, Jonah, Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, Daniel, etc.).

- Confirmation: The authority and reliability of Scripture has been confirmed by the fulfillment of predictive prophecy, secular history, geography, archaeology, etc.

- The Geneva Confession (1536) – "First we affirm that we desire to follow Scripture alone as a rule of faith and religion, without mixing with it any other things which might be devised by the opinion of men apart from the Word of God, and without wishing to accept for our spiritual government any other doctrine than what is conveyed to us by the same Word without addition or diminution, according to the command of our Lord." (Sec. 1)

- The Baptist Faith and Message (2000) — "The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God's revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. It reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation." (Art. 1, "The Scriptures")

e. Additional Characteristics of Scripture

- Inerrancy: The word "inerrant" means without error. Thus, the Bible "does not declare anything contrary to what is true and real" (Beeke, 64). In essence, places in Scripture that skeptics regard as errors can be explained by understanding more about the meaning of words and context, the limits of inerrancy, etc.

- Infallibility: The word "infallible" means that Scripture will never lead a person wrongly. The Bible will always lead to God's truth.

- Necessity: The Bible is completely necessary to know God and live in obedience. Natural revelation isn't enough to know about God and his plan of redemption. Moses stated, "*The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of the law*" (Deut. 29:29). Paul writes, "*So faithful comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ*" (Rom. 10:17).

- Sufficiency: The Bible is all humans need to know God and live in obedience. In other words, we don't need an additional message from God or extra divine truth. Paul writes, "*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work*" (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

- Clarity (perspicuity): The Bible was written with such clarity that any believer can understand its basic message through the illumination of the Holy Spirit. The psalmist writes, "*Blessed is the man whose…delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night*" (Ps. 1:1-2). Jesus indicates that the Bible is clear to those who read it with a right heart. "*He said to them, 'Have you not read…'*" (Matt. 12:5). The New Testament epistles were written to entire congregations, not merely to their pastors/bishops. However, Scripture is only clear to those who have been redeemed by Christ and filled with God's Spirit. Paul writes, "*The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned*" (1 Cor. 2:14).