

SPECIAL REVELATION

“God speaking in many portions and in many ways”

Key question

Can a person, by his or her own reason and wisdom, come to faith in Christ or is faith linked to a special act of God’s Spirit?

Key text

Hebrews 1:1-3

“¹ God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, ² in these last days has spoken to us in {His} Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. ³ And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high;

Key Definition

Special Revelation

Special revelation is that self-disclosure of God and unveiling of truths that expand and transcend the General Revelation of creation, culture, and conscience.

Introduction

1. Why do Christians believe that God has spoken through the Bible in ways that he has not through other great religious books?
2. Does God speak in special ways to those who have never been exposed to the Biblical message of the gospel? How?
3. Is it fair for God to condemn those who have never heard the gospel?

A. **What is truth?**

1. Truth is most basically understood as defining the issues of life and living in harmony with reality. It is helpful to understand two different spheres of truth claims.
 - a. Truth claims that are based on reason and science as applied to the space-time-mater issues of life can be verified through objective criteria. People from very different cultures and world-views more easily embrace this sphere of truth. Illustration: $2+2=4$, There is a

positive coloration between smoking and lung cancer. Few people question the objective nature of this kind of “**hard**” truth.

- b. Truth claims that have to do with values are harder to objectify in that they include some subjective elements. Illustration: Love your enemies. Be true to your vows. This kind of truth has come under attack in that it is harder to prove. We might call it a “**soft**” truth.
- 2. There are basic assumptions that most Christians make with respect to knowing “soft” truth.
 - a. There is a real, absolute, internally consistent world that can be partially accessed by fallen people and more fully but not completely by redeemed people.
 - b. The meta-narrative of the Biblical record is an authoritative revelation of the bigger picture of God’s nature and relationship with His covenant people.
- 3. There are criteria that screen out untruths or falsehoods.
 - a. **Empirical sense experience** – Does what I observe and what science observes exclude the possibility of an assertion being true?
 - b. **Existential authenticity** – Does the assertion of truth address and satisfy the deep longings of my inner soul?
 - c. **Rational coherence** – Is the assertion of truth internally consistent?
 - d. **Community consensus** – Is there a broad agreement about what is true coming from differing historical and cultural communities of people?
- 4. The fullest dimensions of knowing the truth is experienced through the gift of and walk in the Holy Spirit. In this sense truth is both prepositional and personal.

B. Special revelation differs from general revelation?

- 1. If there is evidence that God exists (from general revelation) then we must seek to know more about Him and expect that such knowledge is or will be made available so that we might understand the purpose of life and death.
- 2. **Hebrews 1:1-3** reveals five basic truths of special revelation.
 - a. God was not only there (as general revelation teaches us) but He also spoke to us.
 - b. God spoke through mediators (prophets) in language that our ancestors could understand. His revelation was not subjective and private to every individual.
 - c. God spoke in many different ways – actions, history, proclamations, poetry, etc.
 - d. God’s final revelation was Jesus. His followers recorded for us the significance of His words and deeds.
 - e. God’s nature was revealed fully through Jesus.
- 3. Special revelation is that self-disclosure of God and unveiling of truths, which expand and transcend the General Revelation of creation, culture, and conscience. Heb.1:1-3; II Pet.1:3-4

| | <i>General Revelation</i> | <i>Special Revelation</i> |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| <i>Outer or Public aspect</i> | Creation Culture | God’s deeds in history and the Scripture’s explanation |
| <i>Inner or Private aspect</i> | Conscience | Illumination of the heart |

4. Whereas general revelation is God’s self-disclosure STATION TO STATION, special revelation is God’s self-disclosure PERSON TO PERSON.
 - a. It consists of God’s special acts in history and their interpretation by inspired participants, observers, and/or prophets.
 - b. Not everyone is exposed to it, although it is to be shared with others by those who have it.
 - c. It pertains (principally) to our involvement in the drama of life and death (both physically and spiritually).
 - d. It involves the sovereign grace of God in illuminating the heart to understand so as to see and receive.

5. **ILLUSTRATION:** Truth is like light. General revelation is like our ability to feel warmth. Special revelation is like our ability to use sight. In a limited sense we can feel the effect of the light and if we are sensitive can say a lot about light by just feeling and not seeing. When our eyes are opened we have a much more dramatic sense of the light.

General revelation is a “large mesh” net that weeds out certain propositions and renders others possible or probable.

| General Revelation | Special Revelation | |
|---|--|----------------------------------|
| Universally available | Restricted availability | |
| Non-specific truths | Very specific truths | |
| Points to God's power and justice | Points to God's holiness and mercy | |
| Sufficient for condemnation | Sufficient for salvation | |
| Station to station | Person to person | |
| Received through reason | Received through illumination | |
| Given through Creation, Culture, & Conscience | Given through Scripture, Special inspiration, & Illumination | |
| God's immanence | God's transcendence | |
| | Light (Scripture) Propositional | Sight (Illumination) Personal |

C. Special revelation can be divided into two types.

| Public Revelation | Private Revelation |
|------------------------|------------------------|
| Openly available | Personally available |
| Normative Prophecy | Individual Prophecy |
| Scripture | Impressions |
| Universally applicable | Local application only |

D. Because of “the fall” special revelation is necessary to overcome man’s blindness.

1. The spiritual sense of man is dulled by the “the fall.” **Rom.1:18-23** indicates that humans have exchanged the known truth for a lie.

2. The message of nature is distorted by “the fall.” **Rom. 8:20-21** indicates that the creation was subjected to “futility.”

E. The modes of special revelation come together in the Scripture.

1. Historic events
 - a. Mundane - i.e. History of Israel - I Cor.10:1-6
 - b. Miraculous - i.e. Resurrection - Jn.20:30-31
2. Divine speech
 - a. Prophecy - i.e. Jer.18:1. Hos.1:1, Joel 1:1 & etc.
 - b. Visions, dreams, & etc.
3. Christ’s Incarnation
 - a. His words - i.e. sermon on the mount - Matt.5-7
 - b. His deeds - i.e. sensitivity to people

NOTE: The events of history have no conscious meaning to us until they are given explanation in the Scripture.

- a. Old Testament - Hebrew Scriptures - II Tim.3:16
- b. New Testament - Apostolic witness - II Pet.3:16

F. Special revelation leads us to expect a personal encounter with God.

1. Regeneration - **Acts 2:41-47** gives us a clear picture of what a regenerate community looks like.
2. Indwelling Holy Spirit - **I Corinthians 2:14-16** “But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no man. For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he should instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ.”
3. Kierkegaard’s stages of spiritual development:
 - a. **Aesthetic stage** (seeking salvation through pleasure) leads to boredom and -
 - b. **Ethical stage** (seeking salvation through duty) leads to despair and -
 - c. **Religious stage** (divine encounter) or true Christian faith.

G. Special revelation has often been misunderstood.

1. Some wrongly believe that it does not exist. What is called “special revelation” is really only the fanciful wish fulfillment of primitive man. (LIBERAL VIEW)
2. Others wrongly believe it is limited to “acts of God” in history and personal encounters with God in life. It does not include the interpretation of the acts of God or propositional statements of information about God. (NEO-ORTHODOX VIEW)
 - They say, “The liberal is wrong in identifying the thoughts of God with the thoughts of man, and the orthodox are wrong in identifying the thoughts of God with the thoughts of the Bible's human writers.”
 - They say, “Revelation does not convey information about God - God reveals Himself.”

- They say, “The Bible is not the Word of God or infallible but rather it is an historical witness to the Divine events and encounters of that period of history.”
- They say, “True faith does not require assent to truths about Jesus but rather trust in Jesus.”

H. Claims to special revelation today should be examined critically.

1. Some believers claim that God speaks to them personally on a regular basis. What do they mean by this?
 - a. Seldom is this described as an audible voice that comes as though others could also hear it.
 - b. Sometimes it means no more or less than God’s leading the person through circumstances and feelings of peace.
 - c. For some believers it is associated with the reading of Scripture and impressions of personal application that come from a particular text.
 - d. In many cases it is best described as a strong impression (often coming during prayer) in the realm of the spiritual part of our lives. This impression is identified with the leading or voice of God based on past experiences.

| | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| Impressions from Scripture. | Impressions from circumstance. | Impressions during prayer. | Impressions through the ministry of others. | Impressions from Visions. |
|---------------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|

2. How are we to evaluate claims of God speaking to others and ourselves?
 - a. We should not exclude the possibility of God’s Spirit speaking to a person in a supernatural way.
 - b. We should be willing to ask hard questions of others and ourselves before we make bold claims that God has spoken to us directly.
 1. If I feel a sense of peace about what I feel God has revealed, am I sure that the peace is coming from the Spirit and not from one of a number of other worldly sources?
 2. Am I misinterpreting circumstances that seem to others and to myself to be the Lord’s leading?
 3. Is my understanding of the Scripture, as an instrument of specific guidance, consistent with sound principles of interpretation or am I reading something into the text?
 4. Am I open to the counsel of others. Prophets are to judge other prophets.
I Cor.14:32 “and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets:”
 5. Am I confident that in the revelation of Christ and our knowledge of Him we have everything that we need for godliness.
II Pet.1:3-4 “seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, in order that by them you might become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust.”
 - c. We should develop a balanced Biblical understanding of how God reveals His will to us. (See notes on Knowing the will of God)

The Point

While individuals can know much of God's presence and power from a careful observation of nature, they can not know the good news of His redemptive plan apart from His special acts and words revealed through the Scriptures.

Response

Head

I am to understand that:

God's acts and words in history are vital to a knowledge of His redemptive purposes.

Heart

I am to believe that:

God's acts and words are a lifeline to his heart and redemptive purposes.

Hands

I am to behave by:

Seeking to learn from what God has done and said.

Pastoral advice

What is the correct understanding of special revelation?

1. Man is created in the image of God (transcendent) mentally or intellectually so that he can think God's thoughts after Him. The fall has not obliterated this capacity at least insofar as receiving the communiqué from God. If it has, the capacity has been restored by common grace.
2. God has made known His redemptive plans and purposes in assertions or propositions through prophets' and apostles' miracles and messages now recorded in the Scripture. God's communication is informational, and it has a conceptual content. These concepts originated with God and their teachings are true, or without error.
3. God has inspired the recording of these truths in the Bible so that the wording adequately conveys these truths. The Bible, though written in the words of men, is the word of God as disclosed to men. The revealed words are infallible.
4. The response to this divine revelation is a faith which involved assent to revealed information (the gospel facts and meanings) and commitment to Jesus Christ Himself.
5. The Holy Spirit utilizes this truth as the key to reality in religious experience of God's grace, peace with God, assurance that we are thoroughly and spiritually sons of God.

Questions that you should be able to answer.

1. Specific facts you should know.

- a. How is special revelation distinct from general revelation?
- b. Where, in the Bible, do we find references to special revelation?
- c. What are the vehicles of special revelation?

2. Issues that you should be able to discuss.

- a. How are inspiration and illumination related?
- b. How has special revelation been misunderstood?
- c. How do Kierkegaard's stages of spiritual development relate to modern experience?

3. Questions you should wrestle with.

- a. What is the relationship between God's special revelation and human evangelism?
- b. Can special revelation take place apart from the preaching of the gospel?