**UNDERSTANDING THE DOCTRINE OF REVELATION IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY**

Revelation is the supernal proclamation of Divine Reality and divine truths, which is the supernatural initiative that permeates into the peculiar knowledge, for it is fashioned of supernatural truths, as the result of sovereign plan and purpose of its initiator, to humanity. Nowhere does the crisis of theology find a more critical center than in the controversy over the reality and nature of divine disclosure, because of the position of revelation as the postulate of the Christian realistic world-view. Therefore, our attention will be centered in this paper on the basic conception of revelation, especially its means, content, and nature, in Christian Theology.

**Idea of the Revelation**

The idea of revelation expresses the ubiquitous dogma of Christian theology to the effect that we need to be "told what God is like", for the human attempts to perceive the Divine Reality are ultimately unsuccessful[[1]](#footnote-1). The English word 'revelation' comes from the Latin word *revelatio* which means a "removing of the veil". The Greek word for revelation is *apokalypsis* which means an "uncovering". The term *apokalypsis* derives from two words- viz. *apo* and *kalyptein*. *Apo* means 'away' and *kalyptein* means "cover"; hence *apokalypsis* means a removal of the covering.

All knowledge of God comes to mankind by the way of the divine disclosure. Therefore, the knowledge of God is revealed knowledge at His own will and God Himself is the source of knowledge about Himself, His ways, and His truth. Knowledge of God is truly a mystery, which is a supernatural truth, and that is not attainable or graspable by either human reason or human experience, but made known only by divine disclosure. Divine revelation is not the breaking through of some new knowledge from the world of man or nature, rather it refers to his own manifestation[[2]](#footnote-2).

Revelation is a divinely initiated activity, God's free communication by which He alone turns His personal privacy into a deliberate disclosure of His reality. All merely human affirmations about God curl into a question mark. Mankind cannot fathom the secrets of God by obtrusive curiosity. Even in this technological era, there is no apparatus to permeate the mysteries of God's being and ways. "The things of God knoweth no man but the spirit of God" (I Cor 2:11 b, KJV). Apart from God's initiative, God's act, and God's revelation, no confident basis exists for God-talk. To speak anything of God is only possible by revelation[[3]](#footnote-3). The fact that God is God and not man signifies mystery and the otherness of all knowledge relating to Him. God is the *mysterium tremendum*[[4]](#footnote-4), a vast mystery, and not possible to comprehend in any ordinary manner. Though the things of God are mysteries, He doesn't forever keep His working in secret (Deu 29:29). Apostle Paul says, "By revelation He made known unto me the mystery" (Eph 3:3, kjv). Therefore, revelation refers to the disclosure of what had hitherto been obscure or speculative.

The content of the divine revelation is extravagant for human speculation, for it is paranormal in nature. The Greeks thought of truth is "unhiddenness" (Gk-*aletheia*). God, in His mercy, divulged the knowledge of the supernatural truth which was concealed and is made unhidden or brought into the light[[5]](#footnote-5). This knowledge of God palpitates with human surprise, for it comes from eternity, from beyond an absolute boundary that distinguishes man from God[[6]](#footnote-6). In his book, *Revelation and Reason*, Emil Brunner delineates of divine revelation as an "incursion from another dimension". It nullifies the human speculations and prompts to postulate on the supernatural truth.

Thus the divine revelation is divinely initiated activity, not human initiative to reach out the divine reality, which distinguishes Christianity from other religious.

**General Revelation**

General revelation is the active manifestation of God to the perception and consciousness of man which come to him in the constitution of the human mind, in the whole framework of nature, and in the course of God's providential government. Divine thoughts are embodied in the phenomena of nature, in the human consciousness, and in the facts of experience or history. Therefore, general revelation is not in verbal form; it is in *res* not in *verba.* The existence of the some sense of Deity in the human mind and nature, to prevent any man from pretending ignorance, has contributed all men with some idea of His God head which he constantly renews and occasionally enlarges[[7]](#footnote-7).

General revelation is described under two categories- revelation in nature, and in human mind. The revelation in nature is recognized as *Principium cognoscendi externum*. The question of general revelation in nature is inextricably tied to the question of natural theology.Most proponents of natural religion appeal to the general disclosure of God. Those natural theologians often utilize the scripture portions such as Ps 19:1-4 and Ps 97 which assert that the heavens proclaim the glory and righteousness of God[[8]](#footnote-8). Multitudinous Scripture portions advocate that God has left evidence of Himself in the world He has created. Belgic confession says:

"We know Him by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a most elegant back, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to see clearly the invisible things of God, even His everlasting power and divinity..."[[9]](#footnote-9)

This revelation in nature is a general awareness of God that the fallen humanity has but not a true understanding of God. However, humanity is misguided that rather to decipher the God's glorious eternal power from the nature, it sadly worships the nature itself. The noetic effect of sin prevents the revelation in nature from setting the humanity on the road to salvation[[10]](#footnote-10). However, the universe as a whole, the macrocosm, both in its structure and in its functioning, is a channel of God's self-disclosure.

The knowledge of God presupposes, not only that God has revealed Himself, but also that man is capable for he is made in the “image” and “likeness” of God, either constitutionally or by virtue of a gracious work of renewal, of receiving and appropriating this revelation. In his high place of dominion over the world; in his capacity to think, imagine, and feel; in his freedom to act, and much else, man is God's unique workmanship. The fact is that man's sense of right and wrong, the stirrings of conscience, is instilled in him. If man did not have that ability, the divine revelation, while existing objectively, would forever remain foreign to him and exercise no influence on his life. All knowledge and consequently also all science, requires a certain correspondence between subject and object. This means that alongside of the *Principium cognoscendi externum* there must be also a *Principium cognoscendi internum*; a *principium* in man, in the form of human understanding, speculative reason, devout feeling and moral consciousness, which enables him to discern and to appropriate God's special revelation[[11]](#footnote-11).

Thus, this knowledge of God, general revelation, is sufficient only to render us inexcusable because it is clouded by a sinful proclivity within the very heart of humanity this sort of the knowledge of God does not acquaint man with the only way of salvation. Neither does it convey to man any absolutely reliable knowledge of God and spiritual things nor furnish an adequate basis for religion. Therefore, the general revelation does not lead directly to God but only reinforces our prideful self-sufficiency and self trust[[12]](#footnote-12).

**Special Revelation**

A Christian derives his theological knowledge of God from special revelation only; this is his *Principium Unicum*. In divergence with general revelation, Special revelation comes to a limited circle for the reason that it springs from the sphere of the supernatural through a specific self-disclosure of God. This specific self-disclosure of God is, in John Baillie's terms, "very God Himself incarnate in Jesus Christ our Lord[[13]](#footnote-13)". Our knowledge of the reality of the existence, attributes, and being of God is not depended on our speculative aptitude, but on His sovereign will to reveal Himself. Thus, the word became flesh, Jesus Christ who is the exact representation of God. The incarnate Son revealed the attributes of God. When the question comes, "What is God like?” the answer will be, "Look at Jesus!" Is God compassionate? Yes, He is, for Jesus wept and was moved in compassion toward people[[14]](#footnote-14). In this sort of revelation, God wanted to reveal Himself. The reason that this sort of revelation is revealed in Christ, the incarnate son, is that a personal God can be known only through a personality. And this special revelation is redemptive whereas general revelation is non-redemptive.

However, the non-redemptiveness of general revelation should not lead to an under-valuation, for the special revelation is placed on general revelation. The good news of God's special revelation is the correction of our distorted apprehension of general revelation because of a perverse will. Thus, the defect of our understanding caused by sin is corrected through the new understanding in God through Jesus Christ, which was fragmentary and distorted in the general revelation became comprehensive and evident through the revelation of the very substance of God in His Son[[15]](#footnote-15).

God is not an immediate object in experience that we could have not had any theoretical knowledge of Him on the basis of human experience, but even though inaccessible to our senses and reason, God made Himself accessible in His revelation. God cannot be objectified by the human inquirer, but he objectified Himself in Jesus Christ so that we can know Him truly- not only his effects on us but His very being. We do not have exhaustive knowledge of God,but we have real and adequate knowledge. Revelation is not mere communication of God's will and purpose for the world but an encounter with the power that rejuvenates and redeems. Though the revelation is intelligible, its significance is not on intellect but on the redemption, for it does not impart information about God, but it carries existential impact as we are confronted by the reality of God[[16]](#footnote-16). Therefore, responding positively to the special revelation, that is to have faith in Christ, is so imperative to be redeemed. However, revelation is not merely the prerequisite of salvation, for it confronts one directly with God in Christ and produces a transforming and cleansing effect through its own inherent action. And the illumination of the spirit is also important to shed the light on truth which is Christ Himself. Jesus Christ stood before men as the truth, yet they needed light to shine, even upon Him, in order to realize who he was[[17]](#footnote-17).

Thus, the concept of revelation in fact does not differ from Jesus Christ Himself as the personal and eternal word who is the exact representation of God. To say revelation is to say, "The Word became flesh..."

**Content of Revelation**

Beside the means of divine disclosure, it is so vital to decipher the content of revelation. In a radical term, truth itself is the content of revelation. Indeed, this revealed supernatural knowledge of truth serves as a foundation for Christian religion. Though the content of the revelation is asserted in a single term, it will be described in detail under this sub-title.

As far as general revelation is concerned, the contents of revelation are God's eternal power and deity, His benevolence and concern, and His righteousness. God eternal power and deity which are the invisible things, are made known through His visible creation, and are clearly perceived[[18]](#footnote-18). God's vast power in the structure and operation of the whole universe and in the forces at work in man and history is clearly seen. His deity, His reality as God and the fact of His existence are so evident for they shine through all handiworks of God. Then God's benevolence and concern are shown in his provision of all that man needs for life on earth. And there can be certitude that someone who cares, not only in the provision of human wants but also in the maintenance of life itself. Ultimately, God's righteousness is manifested in the history of the peoples and nations and also in the moral conscience of mankind. The fact, that “righteousness exalts a nation” (Pro 14:34), points to the righteousness of God. In the fact of conscience, God is revealed in the inward knowledge of good and evil[[19]](#footnote-19).

When the special revelation is concerned, it’s content is the Gospel- the goods news of God's redemptive love in Christ, calling men out of their sin and need into the righteousness and peace of the kingdom of God. In the narrow sense Christ Himself is the Christian revelation; since all that is distinctive in Christianity centers in Him[[20]](#footnote-20). So, the content of special revelation is primarily God Himself. In the Old Testament many such manifestations occur; for example, God revealed Himself to Abraham, Jacob, and Moses. In all these instances the infinite God is revealing Himself to the finite people. The marvel of special revelation is that the theophanies of the Old Testament climax in the incarnation of Jesus Christ as God's self-revelation. The word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth with the amazing result: "We have beheld His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" (Jn 1:14).

How true the words of Jesus to His disciples; "He who has seen me has seen the Father (Jn 14:9). Secondly, special revelation contains the disclosure of divine truths. It is the declaration of truth about God, His nature and ways, His dealings with the world and people. In sum, special revelation from this perspective is revealed truth and it is, accordingly, meaningful self-disclosure, for God does not come in unintelligible mystery, but enlightens the mind and heart to understand and communicates His truth. Finally, the content of special revelation is the declaration of God's ultimate purpose. God wants His people to know His plan for the world and humanity. Though God's own ways are far beyond human comprehension, for human capacity is finite, God does draw back the veil and points unmistakably to the final consummation. Special revelation is climactically the message of God about the ultimate fulfillment of all things[[21]](#footnote-21).

Thus the ultimate intention of divine disclosure does not contain the mere illumination of the intellect or intellectual impartation, but the spiritual transaction[[22]](#footnote-22). Though it is the communication of the divine truth, it is far from the bare communication of truths to the mind but the divine initiative of the redemptive acts of God, for it reveals with increasing clearness of the triune God in His personal distinction and the divine intention of redemption.

**Propositional Revelation**

Divine revelation consists of knowledge of what He has done, of His creation, of the nature, and of the relationship between God and man. The record of revelation expresses its cognitive content that the revelation is real, objective, rational information communicated from God to man; it is the communication of information (or Propositions) for we have seen already in the previous sub-title that content of revelation includes divine truths and purpose of every entity that exists.

The Christian view has always maintained that the revelation of God has had written embodiment, and that in the Scripture there is such an embodiment. The propositions of Scriptures constitute the content of revelation. The Scriptures are, therefore, the supreme source of Christian theology. Scriptures, with great uniformity, contain the revelation of God which is a form of real knowledge. The knowledge of truth that we acquire is intelligible and agrees with best reason. The reason is satisfied because the truth of revelation may be presented in a coherent system which has unity and self-consistency.[[23]](#footnote-23) If revelation includes propositional truths, then it is of such a nature that it can be preserved. It can be written down or inscriptured.

In fact, revelation is not only propositional or only personal, but both because it includes both the personal presence of God and informational truth. When God reveals Himself, He does so at least in part by telling us something ‘about Himself and His works’.[[24]](#footnote-24) Though the divine revelation is propositional, it cannot be only propositional or dominate the personal nature of divine revelation.

**Personal Revelation**

Divine revelation is uniquely personal both in content and form, for it is a personal communication between God, who is its personal originator, and humanity, which is the personal recipient, and it involves personal thought and speech[[25]](#footnote-25). God shows Himself to be personal uniquely by His self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Since God has incarnated Himself in the person of Jesus Christ, this affirms that personal reality is the true expression of the divine being He does not come to man primarily through the speech of Christ, nor even through His action, but through the totality of His person. Since God is conceived to be personal, the affirmation of the personal nature of divine revelation can also be conceived[[26]](#footnote-26).

Scripture depicts God as the one who speaks as "I". Whatever being can say "I" is a person and whatever is communicated by such being can be primarily personal. And scripture describes of God having personal name. It does mean that God is a person and cannot properly be thought of other than in personal terms. Omitting personhood from the divine attributes will culminate in the conception that personhood is not intrinsic to the divine character but accidently projected upon God out of human needs[[27]](#footnote-27). If it is so, then revelation would not be personal in character, and the language would not be expressive of an I-Thou relationship but of an I-it relationship, and impersonal in nature. However, the divine revelation is primarily personal and secondarily propositional, and the former is the language of devotion and the latter is the language of discourse.

1. Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An introduction*, 2nd edn, (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 181-182. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. J. Rodman Williams, *Renewal Theology: God, the World and Redemption* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 32-33 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Carl F. H. Henry*, God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 2 (Texas: Word Books Publisher, 1976),8. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rudolf Otto's expression for God in his book, *The Idea of the Holy.* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Charles Seribner's Sons, 1966),77. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996),128-129. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Donald G. Bloesch, *A Theology of Word and Sprit* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 159-160. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Donald G. Bloesch, *Holy Scripture* (Carlisle; Paternoster Press, 1994), 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Berkhof*, Systematic Theology*, 170 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Donald G. Bloesch, *God the Almighty* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1995), 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. John Baillie*, The idea of Revelation in Recent Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Wesley and others (eds*), Basic Theology Applied* (Illinois: Victor Books), 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Samuel Southard, *Theology and Therapy* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1989),64-68. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, 241 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Devern F. Fronke, *The Ultimate Intention* (Cloveradale: Sure Foundation, 1977), 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The 'aorata' are 'Kathoratai' which means "imperceptible things are clearly perceived. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Williams, *Renewal Theology*, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. William Adams Brown, *Christian Theology in Outline* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Williams, *Renewal Theology*, 41-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Edgar Young Mullins, *The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1917) ,141. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Mullins*, Christian Religion*, 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Millard J. Erickson*, Christian Theology*(Grand Rapids: Baker Book House,1989), 191-196. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Williams, *Renewal Theology*, 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Thomas C. Oden,*Systematic Theology:The Living God*, vol.1(San Fansisco:Harpercollins Publishers,1992), 85,87. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)