

## THE REVELATION OF GOD

### GENERAL AND SPECIFIC REVELATION

God is a hidden God. The Almighty God, the Creator of heaven and earth, does not fit into our comprehension, but remains hidden. However, He has revealed himself to us, so that we would come to know Him. Our Christian Doctrine teaches us how God reveals himself. First, it describes God's general revelation: "God meets us in nature, in the fates of our lives and the phases of nations. He speaks to us in our conscience." Then Christian Doctrine speaks of specific revelation, "God especially reveals himself to us in the Holy Scripture and our Savior Jesus Christ" (CD 4).

In the general revelation, God reveals His strength, righteousness, and love, but it is impossible for fallen man to come to know God by general revelation. In this respect, the understanding of man has darkened. Apostle Paul states in the Epistle to the Romans, "Because that, when they knew God, they became fools" (Rom. 1:21–22). God has given us His Word to help us know Him. If we do not allow the Scriptures to guide us, we will not find answers to our most basic and important questions. Above all, we will not come to know our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. In Him, God reveals himself to us, His righteousness as well as His love.

### DISCUSSION ON THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE

Is the Bible the Word of God? Does one have to believe it literally? Does the Bible now have the authority that it had in past times? These are some of the questions that we have heard in recent times. They tell us that the Bible and its authority are being discussed. This discussion is not only a phenomenon of the current decade. It has continued throughout the entire period of Christendom, actually, since the serpent asked in Paradise, "Did God truly say...?"

An objective of the biblical discussion of the last decades has been to break down the authority of the Scriptures as the Word of God by depending on so-called critical Bible research. In their studies, young people become familiar with a world view, that differs from the Bible's teachings. In this way, they come to ponder the trustworthiness of the Bible. The critique of the Scriptures has attained more favorable response than before, since the modern person is averse to any authority. He would want to determine for himself what God is like, and decide, himself, what is right and what is wrong. It has been shown previously that a person does not go far with his own ability. We need God's Word, the Scriptures.

### THE BIBLE'S ORIGIN

The Bible contains all that God has seen necessary to reveal to people. It describes God to us, His will and what we sinful people are like. God, himself, has not written the Bible, rather people have written it as a God-given task. God, however, has been present at the origin of the Bible through the Holy Spirit: "For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man; but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Pet. 1:21, 22).

The Bible came into being over a long period of time. At first, its content was in oral form. The Bible was written and collected into a book over a period of more than a millennium. The Old Testament was written almost entirely in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek. The original texts have not been preserved till our time. If some text got worn in use, it was carefully copied and the old text was destroyed. Most of the books of the Old Testament had been in use for centuries already before the canon or holy book was compiled of them. The same applies to the New Testament, whose canon was finally

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established as recently as 390 AD. There were two bases for selection. First of all, the writing needed to be of apostolic origin, and secondly, it had to have been used in the teachings and divine worship of the congregation from the beginning.

The history of the origin of the Bible has raised a question, “How unchanging has the revelation of God remained when it has been continually copied?” We could only achieve an answer to the question if we could find manuscripts that are noticeably older than those known at the present time. The interest in Scripture’s original texts arose only as a consequence of the Reformation in the 1500s. The best possible source text was needed to make reliable translations. The original texts were collected and compared to each other. However, the destroyers of the texts had done a thorough job. The oldest manuscripts of the Old Testament were from 900–1000 AD. Only at the end of the 1800s, were parchment scrolls found in Cairo; the oldest of them were from 600 AD.

In 1947, shepherds found manuscripts in a cave in Qumran, near the Dead Sea, which included portions of almost all of the Old Testament books. The most important of them was the entire Book of Isaiah. These texts were almost a thousand years older than the oldest books known thus far. Comparison of the texts has shown that the copiers have done conscientious work. The differences have been minor and they have not affected the factual content.

Also an abundance of Greek manuscripts of the New Testament have been found. There are two texts dating back to about 200 AD, which contain almost the entire New Testament. The oldest portion of New Testament text is from 120 AD. It contains portions of the 18th chapter of the Gospel of John.

For centuries, scholars have worked to trace a biblical text as close as possible to the original. They have worked toward their goal also through linguistic methods. A jigsaw puzzle of thousands of pieces has been put together to form a reliable basic text, which has been published. It is not the original, but the differences are apparently quite minor.

No one can read the original Bible in his native tongue, for the languages in which the Bible was originally written are no longer in use. Exclusive of experts in the original tongues, we need to depend on translations when we read the Word of God. Already in 200 BC, the Old Testament was translated into Greek (Septuagint) and in 400 AD, the entire Bible was translated into Latin (Vulgate). We also have had our own Finnish [and English] Bible for centuries already. We understand through faith that God has protected and preserved His message all the way from oral tradition through the various phases of translation efforts. He has taken care that His message has been passed on to people throughout the millennia. Understanding this reveals the Bible’s value to us: it is a unique book.

Due to the manner of its birth, the Bible also has a human side. The saints of God, who spoke and wrote the Word of God, were bound to the image of the world and the culture of their time. This is seen also in the writings of the Scriptures. However, the divine and the human aspects are so intertwined in the Scriptures, that there is no reason to ponder what is divine and what is human in them. The Bible is the Word of God in human words. Therein He has revealed himself, His love, and His will to us. “He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” (Micah 6:8) [Finnish Bible translation also says, “*että kätket Jumalan sanan,*” meaning “that you would heed the Word of God”].

The Bible tells about historical events at length. It also contains descriptions of nature, animals, and stars, but, above all, the Bible is a textbook for salvation. The most central question of the New Testament is: What must I do that I would be saved?

Some people say that the Bible does not need to be interpreted so literally, nor do its teachings hold any longer, for it has originated within the sphere of the old Semitic and Hellenistic cultures. We cannot agree with these statements, if we consider the Bible to be God’s Word.

## JESUS AND THE SCRIPTURE

During the time of Jesus, the Old Testament was already in written form. The authors of the New Testament tell us that He honored the Word of God. The 12-year-old Jesus tarried in the temple discussing the Holy Scriptures with the scribes. He both listened and asked questions. The teachers marveled at His knowledge of God's Word (Luke 2:46). Jesus' response to His parents is His earliest speech preserved for us. It contains something prophetic, which, for all its brevity, reveals the house of God to us and the authority of God's Word. It is worth our while, too, to be interested in God's Word and to study it.

Jesus responded with God's Word to all the temptations and enticements of the enemy of the soul (Matt. 4:1–11). The Word was so respected by Him, that He did not need to justify it or prove it to be right. Jesus told of the rich man and Lazarus. In the narrative, Father Abraham responded to the rich man, who was in torment, "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them" (Luke 16:29). Unless a person believes the teaching of God's Word, he will not believe, even if someone rose from the dead and counseled him. The Bible guides us in our temporal life to the way of salvation.

Jesus was critical of the scribes and the traditions, that they had drawn up to interpret the Law of Moses. But His criticism was never directed toward the Holy Scriptures of the Old Testament. Somewhat to their surprise, he admonished people to listen to the scribes, who sat on the seat of Moses. According to Jesus, they cared for the teaching office of Moses and the prophets (Matt. 23:2).

After His Resurrection, Jesus appeared to two of His disciples on the road to Emmaus. He rebuked them, as they had not believed the prophets, who had prophesied precisely of Him. Then Jesus explained Moses and all of the prophets to them (Luke 24:13–35). The examples show that the Bible was the authority for Jesus, although He, himself, was the center and fulfillment of the revelation of God. "But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name" (John 20:31).

## THE REFORMATION AND THE BIBLE

During the Reformation in the 1500s, the authority of the Scriptures became a crucial question. Luther and his friends could not accept that in the church of that time the decisions of the church councils, the thoughts of individual teachers, and church tradition had sidelined the Bible from its original position. Their position crystallized to become the formal principle of the Reformation, which is revealed in the confessional books of the Lutheran Church, "We believe, teach, and confess that the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged" (Book of Concord, p. 464).

Luther wrote in his preface to the German Bible, "We must always allow the prophets and the apostles to sit in the teacher's place and listen at their feet to what they say, and we will not dictate what they should hear." When this formula was followed in the Reformation, it led to a second principle: "Alone by faith, alone by grace, and alone by the merit of Christ."

Luther explained graphically the general and specific revelation, "According to merits, one cannot be called a theologian, who strives to know the invisible characteristics of God in creatures, but he [can], who knows the visible and hidden characteristics of God in suffering and the cross" (Heidelberg Disputation 1518, Theses 19 and 20). He did not belittle the general revelation, but stated that one does not come to know God by it. He added that God does not reveal himself even in one's reading of the Scriptures; for this, one needs Christ, His cross, and suffering. "Who being the brightness of his glory,

and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins” (Heb.1:3).

#### CHRIST IS THE LORD OF THE BIBLE

The Bible is a rich book. It provides answers to many problems and questions. Above all, it is the message of Christ. Our Christian Doctrine teaches, “The principle content of the Holy Scripture is the message of Jesus Christ and the salvation that He has prepared” (CD 7). The Bible calls this message the gospel of Christ. Luther writes in the preface to the Old Testament, “What is the New Testament but the public sermon and revelation of Christ, given in the Old Testament and fulfilled through Christ?” Peter writes, “We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts” (2 Pet.1:19).

#### READING THE BIBLE

According to the example of Jesus, it is worth our while, also, to be interested in the Bible and to study it. Apostle Paul writes to young Timothy, “But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; and that from a child thou hast known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Tim. 3:14–17).

Reading the Bible is important to us starting already from childhood. In this way many narratives become familiar to us. We learn from them how God helped the former saints. Many narratives and teachings come close to our own lives, and it is easy for us to identify with the people of whom they tell. We receive encouragement and strength to trust in God’s help and to fight against sin.

The reading of God’s Word is a good thing. However, the Bible teaches that faith comes by hearing and accepting the gospel. Study and knowledge of the written Word of God is necessary for us, because it leads us to seek Christ and His grace kingdom. It also teaches a child of God to grow in the knowledge of God and the Savior, Jesus Christ. When Jesus fought against the tempter, He drove off the enemy with God’s Word, and then the angels came and served Him. God’s Word is a place of refuge. It is a lamp for our feet and a light for our paths.