

Revelation in Worship¹

Revelation

Revelation is from God, to make known the hidden aspects of the character of God, of humanity and its relationship with God and of what is to occur in the future through the providence of God. Revelation occurs in information or through God's self-manifestation.

The agents of Revelation in the Old Testament include nature, visions, dreams, history and hearing God's word (personal communication.) Generally the concept of Revelation in the Old Testament is that it concerns God revealing specific events, information, message or plans (cf. Moses, the Prophets.)

The purpose of Revelation in the New Testament concerns supernatural knowledge, judgment, salvation and the Messiah.² The term is also used in connection with the post-Resurrection appearances and the Parousia. However the central concept of the New Testament is that God is revealed in Jesus Christ, so the Incarnation becomes the foremost self-revelation of God. John's gospel expresses this in terms of the "Word become flesh" (John 1.) Christ is considered to be the fullest Revelation of God, so the Incarnation becomes central to our understanding of Revelation. Calvin considered that before Christ, God's appearance and image was indistinct and shadowy, and that the Gospel reveals the mystery of Christ and he in turn reveals salvation.³ The Bible then becomes the Revealed word of God, as it reveals Christ to us.

Within the Reformed tradition God is understood to be revealed primarily through the Word, Jesus Christ, who is revealed through the Word, the scriptures. Therefore the focus on the reading the scriptures and preaching is a recognition that in worship God and God's purposes are revealed. The Declaration of faith of the Congregational Church in England and Wales (1967) declares "In all worship, God is present in his Word of Grace. Our part is to respond, in adoration and fidelity, by hearing and obeying."⁴ This may be slightly ambiguous implying that God is present in many ways, as God's grace can be manifest in different ways, and the Word could be the scriptures of Jesus Christ, but it still highlights the Scriptures as the place of revelation.

The Bible can be understood as a document in which the divinely conveyed propositions are expressed, or as a record of the events of Revelation and the perceptions of their significance. It can also be seen as Revealed Truth or the Self-revelation of God. For the Reformed Church, the Bible became the place of God's Self-revelation, because God's Revelation has always focused on the Word, particularly the spoken word, e.g. "Thus saith the Lord..." Cornick writes:

"Scripture is where the Word spoken before all time, the Word incarnate and the words written about the Word become, through the activity of the Spirit, the living Word."⁵

However God's self-revelation is not restricted to the scriptures but can be found in all of worship. Alan Sell refers to 18th century liturgy of the Independent Meeting in Bury Street, London which prescribes that the evening meeting should start with a psalm "then a short prayer follows to desire the Divine presence in all the following parts of worship."⁶ So this suggests that the Risen Christ can also be experienced and

¹ This paper is a slightly revised version of the one presented at the conference, taking into considerations comments made at the conference.

² Palin D. A., (1983), Revelation *in* Richardson A. And Bowden J., *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, London: SCM Press, pp. 503 – 506.

³ Calvin J., *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book II, Chapter IX. (Library of Christian Classics edition, Tr. F.L. Battles, ed. J.T. McNeill, (1960), Westminster John Knox Press, vol 1. p. 424.)

⁴ Sell Alan, The worship of English Congregationalism *in* Vischer L. (ed.), (2003), *Christian Worship in Reformed Churches Past and Present*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, p. 99.

⁵ Cornick D., (2008), *Letting God be God: The Reformed Tradition*, London: DLT, p. 55.

⁶ Ibid. p. 94.

hence revealed through worship, whether that is individual or communal worship. One clear case of a communal experience of the Risen Christ is cited by Paul in 1 Cor. 15: 6.

Revelation as understanding and knowledge of God.

Focusing on the centrality of scripture, revelation can be seen as propositional. Natural Theology proposes that God can be revealed through reason and intellect, while Revealed Theology proposes that God is only understood through God's self-revelation. Protestantism stressed two main aspects of Revelation: revelation as Divine intervention and revelation as human reason. The former focuses on God's transcendence while the second on God's immanence. Pailin considers that:

“Karl Barth maintains that God ... is only ‘thought and known when in his own freedom God makes himself apprehensible’, not only by giving revelation but also giving to individuals the capacity to apprehend it.”⁷

Calvin also believed that we can only know God through God's self-revelation, but before God is revealed a person first needs to trust in God.⁸

God's self-revelation is always partial and incomplete. Garvie⁹, reflecting on the Kenotic theory (Phil 2: 5ff) understands that God is always self-limiting in all God's activities as they relate to humanity. Therefore God can never be fully known, or fully revealed because the finite cannot understand the infinite (1 Cor 13: 12.) God's self-revelation is always approximate, but it is also contextual. God's self-revelation to Moses, the Judges and the prophets relates to the situation of the time and speaks to a specific issue whether that is religious, political or moral (if these can be separated out!) and is one of warning, comfort, promise and salvation. God is revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3) because God wants to respond to the situation of the Hebrew people in Egypt. Gideon has a word from the Lord when he is fighting the Midianites (Judges 6 – 7). Samuel is called from his sleep in the Temple because God wants to give him a message about the corruption of the times (1 Sam 3). God reveals the message of judgment and salvation to the prophets which is a message for the people of the prophet's own time. This is specifically seen in the 8th century prophets who largely speak about the corruption of their times and the ensuing judgement that will come through military and political means. The books of the prophets are also, generally introduced with a dating of the ministry of the prophet (Amos 1: 1; Hosea 1: 1; Isaiah 1: 1; Jer 1: 1f; etc.)

P.T. Fosyth writes:

“[R]evelation is the self-presentation of the triune God, the free work of sovereign mercy in which God wills, establishes and perfects saving fellowship with himself in which humankind comes to know love and fear him above all things.”¹⁰

Studies in Spiritual Experience¹¹ indicate that many experiences will include an element of knowledge (noetic revelation) about God. This may be through a direct communication, such as we find in the story of Moses and the burning bush, or that the experience challenges or confirms a belief about God already held.¹² In most cases the encounter spoke to very specific concerns or situations.

⁷ Op. cit.

⁸ Peel D., (2002), *Reforming Theology*, London: URC p. 29.

⁹ Quoted in Peel D. (2002).

¹⁰ John Webster quoted in Allan R. M., (2010), *Reformed Theology*, London: T & T Clark, p. 19.

¹¹ This term is now in general usage, although other terms are also used for similar phenomenon such as ecstatic experiences, mystical experiences, peak experiences and religious experiences.

¹² See Burgess J.H. (2005).

Revelation concerns the relationship of humanity to God.

Secondly Revelation is also experiential. This partly relates to the nature of God and God's work of salvation but can also be concerned with the actual encounters with God – hence Religious and Spiritual Experiences. Forsyth¹³ dismisses religious experience as “hallucination, emotional and dealing only with the feelings.” He considers that a real encounter with Christ changes a person morally. He considers that the true revelation is the Cross, which is an experience of Christ that leads to personal change, because revelation always deals with sin and forgiveness.¹⁴

“It is not merely that [Christ] spoke to me of God or God's doings, but in him God directly spoke to me; and more, he did in me and for me, the thing that only God's real presence could do, Who can forgive sin but God only, against whom it was done?”¹⁵

He focuses on Revelation as the work of God, in Christ, because if we rely on the individual experiences of believers, then human experience or the church's experience would take precedence, and the Bible would be reduced to a supporting role for the experience. However Forsyth is presenting individual experiences as emotional encounters only and, as a good Protestant, perhaps is somewhat afraid of a faith that is expressed through the emotions and feelings. Being a man of the enlightenment, does he want to stress the intellectual aspect of faith?

Otto¹⁶, however, who considered that religion is grounded in the non-rational (not irrational) but is an interaction between the rational and non-rational, would consider that all spiritual experiences involve a revelation of the nature of God as transcendent, (“mysterium and tremendum”) and of its affect (relationship?) on the experient which results in a sense of unworthiness and sinfulness. And while not all scholars would accept these terms, most would acknowledge that spiritual experiences (and therefore Revelation) include both aspects of the understanding of the nature of God and the relationship to humans in a context of time and space.

Wheeler Robinson¹⁷ writing in the 1920's acknowledges that society has changed and that the Bible no longer has the authority that it used to have and by implication no longer is a significant source of revelation, but instead there is greater reliance on experience and observation (the scientific approach.) Experience has replaced reason and this needs to be taken seriously, but not necessarily at face value.

My study of reported spiritual experiences¹⁸ indicates that all such encounters are transforming, challenging and develop faith. They may contain an emotional element, but no such experience is purely emotional. A spiritual experience includes the actual encounter and the faith reflection on it. However all the experiences were an encounter with the Divine in some form and therefore were relational, and many of them were at a time when the experient was at worship. The stories of God's Self-revelation in the Bible always include both elements of knowledge and experience (e.g. Paul on the Damascus Road) and many seem to be set in the context of worship.

The discourses in John's Gospel are largely propositional revelations of God in Jesus Christ. Those that include the “I am” sayings, clearly are presenting a knowledge and understanding of God and Jesus Christ to the disciples and the readers. The story of Jesus and Nicodemus (John 3: 1ff) is a story of revelation where the disciple of the night needs to understand what it means to be “born again.” However the encounter does not only involve the cognitive. There are also elements of relationship and emotion in the meeting and the

¹³ Forsyth P.T., (1909), *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ* (reprinted 1999, ed. Thompson D.M. London: United Reformed Church p. 199.)

¹⁴ Forsyth P.T., (1909), p. 193.

¹⁵ Forsyth P.T., (1909), p. 198.

¹⁶ Otto R., (1950), *The Idea of the Holy: an inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational* (2nd ed.), Oxford: OUP.

¹⁷ Wheeler Robinson, (1928), *The Christian expression of the Spirit*, London: Nisbet and Co., p. viii.

¹⁸ Burgess J.H. (2005.)

required response is more than an intellectual ascent. The stories of the encounters with the Risen Christ in this Gospel focus much more on the experiential and emotional than the propositional.

Worship as a place of Revelation

In many of the examples of Revelation in the Old Testament, the setting is either worship or has an element of worship. Moses is on Mount Sinai and God promises that his word will be fulfilled when the people worship on the mountain. Gideon built an altar to the Lord, when he heard God's voice (Jud. 6 23f.) Samuel and Isaiah are both in the Temple (1Sam 3; Isaiah 6) – although different Temples! The Glory (doxa) of God is also an element of his self-revelation. The Shekinah cloud is found at Mount Sinai and comes down on the Temple when it is inaugurated in worship. Saliers considers that this glory (now also manifest in Christ and through the cross) is the self-giving of God and that as worship has the purpose of meeting God in our human lives, this is one place where we perceive who God is.¹⁹

The New Testament witnesses to the importance of the experience of God, or the risen Christ, for the Christian life and for worship. Matthew 18: 20 speaks of the importance of the presence of Christ in meetings. The promises and threats to the Churches in Revelation all hinge on the continued presence or the withdrawal of the presence of the Risen Christ from the community of faith, and this must include worship (Rev. 2 – 4.) The story of the two on the road to Emmaus is a clear story of the risen Christ being revealed at a time of worship – in this case the breaking of bread. And while the story may simply be speaking of an evening meal the liturgical overtones are clear. Paul's discussion about worship in the letter to Corinth (1 Cor. 11 & 12) makes it clear that the presence of Christ or the Holy Spirit is necessary for authentic worship and that the presence can be abused. In 1 Cor. 11: 23f Christ is revealed through the Lord's Supper. Johnson²⁰ considers that meals in the early church are significant as times of revelation of Christ, and this can be supported by one of the oldest prayers of the church, often associated with the Lord's Supper (as in the Didache) of *Maranatha*²¹ – the expression that Christ has come past, is present and will come again.

We do not know if Paul had his vision and was taken through the gates of heaven while he was at worship (2 Cor. 12: 1 – 7) but it seems most likely that he was, but surely the implication is that John the Divine was, because he had his vision on the "Lord's Day." Tradition holds that he was alone in his cave, but there could have been others present. Rev. 1: 10 states that John was in the Spirit and it is not unreasonable to assume that Paul was also when he had his revelation. The presence of the Spirit is essential for worship. 1 Cor. 12: 3ff concerning the exercise of the gifts in worship makes it clear that they are manifestations of the Spirit and in v 11 Paul says they are "activated by the Spirit" which implies both presence and revelation.

The New Testament witnesses to the reality of the Holy Spirit (The Spirit of Christ, the Risen Christ) working in the early church and in the individual. Some contemporary forms of worship, such as "charismatic" emphasise the presence of God in worship through the exercise of the gifts of the Spirit. However the URC, generally, has not embraced this aspect of Revelation in worship.

The Reformed approach to worship is generally considered to be an encounter with God through the Word. The structure of the "Hymn Sandwich" is a litany of hearing the Word of God and responding to the Word. For many, God is revealed (or God's nature or God's teaching) through the reading of Scripture, its exposition (in the sermon) and through the sacraments (the acted word.) However on further exploration, it would probably be found that people also encounter God in other aspects of worship, including hymns and music.

¹⁹ Saliers D.E. (1994), *Worship as Theology: foretaste of the glory Divine*, Nashville: Abingdon, pp. 41, 22.

²⁰ Johnson L.T., (1998), *Religious Experience in earliest Christianity*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, p. 138

²¹ "If any one is holy, let him come (to the Eucharist); if any one is not, let him repent. Maranatha. Amen." The Twelve Apostles (2012-09-27). The Didache (Kindle Locations 108-109). Vook, Inc.. Kindle Edition.

The Church Life Profile results for the URC²² recorded that 63% of people said that they always or usually feel God's presence in worship, with another 32% saying that this sometimes happens. This is a sizeable number, although it is slightly lower than the average for all denominations (67% always or usually and 30% sometimes.) While the report makes note of this difference it is probably not that significant. It could therefore be assumed that worship is an important place where people encounter God and therefore God is Self-revealed.

It is also worth noting that the same survey concluded that most people in the URC (76%) considered that the Bible contained the Word of God in an historical and cultural context.²³ This may suggest that people consider that they believe that God's Revelation is always contextual, but it is more likely a comment on the understanding of scripture.

Within the non-conformist tradition worship is generally described as spontaneous or free. These terms need to be qualified, in that it does not mean that it is "charismatic" or "quietist" (Quaker) worship but that it is free from a fixed liturgy. Good worship normally requires good preparation and traditionally the minister prepares worship "in the study", under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (so is inspired.) This inspiration is an aspect of God's Revelation in a particular context. Also the tradition of extempore prayer has an element of relying on the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

Worship, therefore, in its entirety is an encounter with God and is a seeking for, recognition of and response to the Revelation of God. It was interesting to hear the report a few weeks ago of an Atheist Church in London (3rd February 2013.) Two of those who attended felt that it served the same purpose as the Pentecostal church next door, by providing a place where people could get together and have fellowship. In one respect they were correct that worship provided an opportunity for human fellowship, but they also missed the point that it is about fellowship with God, and for that to be real, worship has to include the experience of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Saliers says true worship is participating in the glory of God.²⁴

²² Escott P. & Gelder A., (2002), Church Life Profile 2001: Denominational Results for the United Reformed Church, Churches Information for Mission, p. 10.

²³ Escott P. & Gelder A., (2002), p. 13.

²⁴ Op. cit. p. 48. Glory as participating in God's presence and activity in the world.

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