

DOCTRINE OF THE SCRIPTURES

The Scriptures I: The Doctrine of Revelation

Introduction

Our previous lesson dealt with a General Introduction to Systematic Theology, considered a definition of Theology and the different branches of Systematic Theology. Now we will start with the Doctrine of the Scriptures.

We Christians affirm that Scripture (the 66 books of the OT & NT) are God's truth and in order to understand God's truth, there are key subjects to consider (as discussed by pastor Sugel Michelen) on the lectures he imparted on this: Revelation, Inspiration, Canonicity, Preservation, Translation and Interpretation.

Under the subject of the Scriptures, I would like to consider **the Doctrine of Revelation** under the following headings:

I - What is Revelation?

It is the way in which God has revealed Himself to man. God has called man to fellowship with Himself; therefore, it is necessary to know, love, serve and worship Him but in order to accomplish this, God has to make Himself known that is, He must reveal Himself.

In Theology there are two common ways to classify God's Revelation to man, Special **General Revelation** and **Special Revelation**

II - What is General Revelation?

It is the knowledge that man can ascertain about God's existence and about some of His attributes by observing creation - including himself -. This includes an internal apprehension of the reality of God and of the Law God has written in man's heart.

Texts: **Psalms 19:1-6; 139: 13-15; Rom 1:18-21; 2:14-15: Acts 14:15-17**

IA) Characteristics of General Revelation

1- It provides a very limited scope of the knowledge of God (**Rom 1:20**) It is not possible to know all of God's attributes through

creation, nor is it possible to know the redemptive work of His son or the Plan of Redemption through “natural means” or “nature”. Some designate General Revelation as: “Natural Revelation”, but this term should not be confused with Natural Theology, which teaches that we could obtain salvation without Special Revelation.

2- It provides a knowledge that may be distorted by sin (**Rom 1:21-28**)

3- It provides sufficient knowledge as to leave man without excuse – sufficient knowledge to condemn, but insufficient to save - (**Rom 1:20; 2:12-15**)

In summary, we quote Wayne Grudem regarding General Revelation as follows: *“The fact that every person knows something about God’s moral laws is a great blessing for society, otherwise, there would not be social restrictions to all of the evil people are capable of committing, nor would there be any restriction of conscience. Because there is some knowledge of good and evil, believers may often find consensus among the unbelievers... The knowledge of the existence and the character of God also provides us with information that allows the Gospel message to make sense to the heart and mind of the non-Christian; unbelievers know that God exists and that they have violated his laws, therefore the news that Christ died to pay for their sins should sound to them as Good News.”* (Biblical Doctrine Pg.57)

Example: Paul with Agripa... “you almost persuaded me to become a Christian”

Practical: this is the principle behind apologetics. God’s Revelation is rationale and “logical”

III- What is Special Revelation?

It is the active (and supernatural) way through which God reveals Himself to man, by the use of special means. **Heb 1:1-2**

A- God’s Special Revelation in Light of Hebrews 1:1-2

The text contrasts how God spoke in the past that is, to believers in the Old Testament (the Fathers), with the way God speaks now under

the New Covenant. In both instances, God has spoken but there has been a change in the way He did it.

In former times, God spoke many times (or in several portions) and in diverse ways through the prophets. When the prophets spoke, they did it on behalf of God; and also, the way in which they received the message to later pass it on to the people, varied as well.

a) What were those active ways (or diverse ways) in which God spoke to the fathers through the prophets?

- 1- By direct speech. (sometimes using elements of nature like the burning bush and Moses, the whirlwind and gentle breeze with Elijah, etc.)
- 2- Through dreams. (Daniel, Abraham, etc.)
- 3- Through Visions. (Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, etc.)

b) How does God speak in these last days?

Our text says that in these last days that is, in this present stage of divine revelation inaugurated at the first coming of Christ and that will end at the second coming of the Lord, God speaks through His Son.

c) What does it mean that God speaks today through The Son?

1- That Christ Himself is the culmination or climax of God's Revelation; He is the fulfillment of it. Christ not only makes God's truth known but He is the truth incarnate in Himself.

2- This culmination of God's truth in the Son was transmitted not only by Himself but also through His special agents namely, apostles and prophets.

Additional Teachings and Implications of this passage:

1- The way God spoke to man changed drastically when the Son came to inaugurate the New Covenant. The revelation of the Son in the New Covenant is superior to that of the Old Covenant, because the former brings a much greater understanding of some of God's attributes, of Messiah's redemptive work, of God's will for man and many others

Many of these teachings are available in the Old Testament, but not as clearly as in the New, because in the former, they appeared through symbols and types and were clouded by many of the limitations that believers in the Old Covenant had. Christ's revelation brings to light and unveils many of these shadows and types, it correctly interprets the teachings of the Old Covenant and develops such teachings to its fullness, since it is the incarnate God who is now revealing Himself to man, and there is nothing greater to be hoped for than He. (**Heb 3:3-6; 4:14-15; 8:6-7,13; 9:1-15; 10:19-22,28-29, Col 2:17 etc.**)

2- In God's written we find a compilation of only a portion of God's special revelation to man. (**Jer 30:1-2; Rev 1:11,19** etc.) It is worth noting, that even when in the written revelation we do not have a compilation of all of the especial revelation that took place in former times (**2 Cr 9:29; Jn 21:25; 2Ts 2:6-7; Rev 10:1-4**), the written revelation of God (Scripture) does contain everything that is necessary to glorify God in our lives (**Jn 20:30-31; 2Tim 3:16**)

In this regard O. Palmert Robertson writes: *"The Bible incarnates God's special selection of His Special Revelation which He determined as necessary for the church through the ages. In this written special revelation of God is contained everything that is necessary for life and godliness"* (The Final Word)

B- Two pitfalls to avoid when we speak about Special Revelation

1- The teachings of Roman Catholicism.

The Roman Catholic church teaches that special revelation has two primary sources: The Scriptures and Tradition.

Someone has said: *"When a Roman Catholic theologian makes reference to the written Word of God, he is referring to the Scriptures. When he speaks of the unwritten Word of God, he is referring to tradition, but if he refers to "the word of God", he is likely making reference to both, Scripture and Tradition. In other words, according to the Roman Catholic Church, the Bible alone is not the complete Word of God"* (McCarthy; op. cit.; pg. 235)

Some Roman Catholic theologians have sought to smooth out this kind of language when they affirm that nothing will ever be decided if

it is not in the Bible, but they add: “...that there may be dogmas of faith which appear in seminal form in the Bible, and that are manifested more clearly throughout history, as a result of the explanations the church is able to make both with the Bible and Tradition...” (Antonio Montero; quoted by Grau; Roman Catholicism; Vol. 2; pg. 848)

The problem therefore remains the same: the importance that is ascribed to tradition – whether real or supposed – takes the same level of authority than Scripture, and in practice, they replace with tradition the teaching of Scripture. Even worse, these traditions continue developing in the church through its infallible “magisterium” and under their dogma of Papal authority.

We should state however, that it is true that we must follow apostolic traditions (**1 Cor 11:2; 2Ts 2:15; 3:6**) but we should never confuse apostolic tradition with ecclesiastical traditions. Apostolic tradition consists in the very teaching of the apostles, which were the messengers appointed by Christ Himself. The only reliable source that has captured apostolic tradition is their very writings, since they wrote inspired by the Holy Spirit, a subject we will consider in the following lesson.

Ecclesiastical tradition in contrast is the interpretation and proclamation that men have made of apostolic tradition. It is possible that at times this proclamation is faithful to the truth, but at times it is not because it is subject to error. The best proof of it is that we see the church fathers making declarations in which they contradicted themselves, or other church fathers.

There is something else to add about this subject: for Roman Catholicism, the authority of the church is above the Scriptures and of Ecclesiastical Tradition. This authority of the church in the person of the Pope is infallible and defines doctrine with their own interpretation of the Scriptures and of Tradition.

This is the way José Grau explains it: “*Rome is compromised with History to such a point, that its doctrines and its very life and development, are in great measure the result of particular historical circumstances because Rome confuses and identifies Revelation and*

Church. One of the reasons why Rome cannot go back is precisely because should it amend its own history and in doing that, it would be denying itself. Rome is compromised with History and it cannot detach itself from it.”

(Introduction to Theology Pg.203-204)

Observing some of the changes within the Roman Catholic Church, we may believe that they seem to be making an effort to rectify some of their doctrines, but what they actually do is to reinterpret some of their own teachings by leaving their doctrine intact but simply making semantic changes by playing on words.

José Grau summarizes all of this clearly when he writes: *“Changing the vocabulary of Trent and Vaticanus I without altering the substance of what they meant, does not make the theology of the New Rome more Biblical. Rome’s problem is insoluble. It opposed the reformation of the church in the 16th Century closing their ears to the Word of God, and their rejection not only divided western Christianity, but Trent formulated its own “doctrines” which later canonized all of their medieval doctrinal deviations. Now, four centuries later and having studied Sacred Scripture more attentively, Rome Theologians realize that even if they so desire it, they cannot affirm that the Protestant Reformation was a movement that opposed Scripture, but on the contrary. What then? Rectify Trent? Impossible! How can they confess that four centuries ago the church made a mistake when according to Vaticanus I, they believe the church is infallible? Every serious attempt for serious dogmatic reformation within the Roman Catholic Church will always face these two walls: Trent and Vaticanus I. There is no other way around it then than to play on words.”* (Roman Catholicism Pg. 852).

2- The teachings of Neo-Orthodoxy.

Neo-orthodoxy teaches that the Bible is the instrument through which God speaks to man. Not that the Bible in itself is God’s Special and Written Revelation, but that it becomes the Word of God, if and when it enables an existential encounter with God. To recognize the Bible as God’s Revelation is conditioned to the fact that God may speak

through it. Outside of this dynamic, the Bible is just a book with much human content with inherent errors.

Addition of Translation:

“Neo-orthodoxy is a twentieth century theological movement that emphasizes the transcendence of God and revelation by a personal encounter with God through Holy Scripture. By definition neo-orthodox theologians displace biblical authority with sinful human authority. Biblical authority for the Christian is a matter of inspired history and faith.

Mr. Brunner would address the subject in this manner: Thus the historical appearance of the human personality of Jesus is not as such revelation; it is revelation only in so far as in this historical human personality the eternal Son of God is recognized.”

The authority of Scripture has no authority according to Mr. Brunner. He claims that an experience, independent of Scripture, is necessary to give life and meaning to Holy Scripture. This experience is an encounter with God as a result of an exercised faith. Actually his kind of faith destroys biblical authority”

What is Neo-Orthodoxy? – Martin Murphy – Quoted from:

<http://www.rationalchristianthoughts.com/what-is-neo-orthodoxy.php>

The Bible does not state that it becomes the Word of God if God is revealed to man through it. It is indeed, the Word of God to man, whether man perceives that it speaks to him or not. It is therefore man’s duty to submit to it, regardless of how he feels about it (**Ex 24:3-4**)

3- The teachings of “Charismania”.

“God revealed me...”

“God told me...”

“The Spirit spoke to me...”

Does God still give revelation?

If someone were to write an anthem for the Charismatic movement it would have to be titled, "God told me! God told me!" you hear that over and over again. Strange prophecies abound in the Charismatic movement; in fact, it is well nigh impossible to turn on a Charismatic

television station or a radio station without being exposed, almost on a daily basis to some new "Words from the Lord." I was watching one today and sure enough, "The Lord said, the Lord said, the Lord said," was repeated again and again.

- John MacArthur – Charismatic Chaos – Does God Still have Revelation Today?

Conclusion

In our next lecture we will consider that the written compilation of God's Special Revelation known as the Bible, was "inspired by God". This teaching ought to produce in us gratitude and praise since He did not leave us to the figment of our own imagination but God has made Himself known through General Revelation so that we may appreciate His grandeur and wisdom.

Above all things, God has made Himself known through Special Revelation so that we may be reconciled to Him through Christ and that we may no longer grope for Him in darkness, regarding how to walk in a pleasing manner to Him, but that we may know Him and have fellowship with Him in His Son Jesus Christ.