

Some Principles of God's Revelation

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Formal theological education encourages the notion that there is an answer to every question, if only one studies hard enough. There is a presumption that if one knows enough of the appropriate disciplines (theology, patristics, Greek, Hebrew, ...), one can find an answer to any question that can be formulated, and that acquiring and applying such detailed knowledge is a necessary function in the life of the church. This vision leads to an emphasis on academic preparation for ministry. Most Bible churches will require their pastor to have at least a Bachelor's degree followed by a Master's from a recognized seminary, and many pastors feel the need to go on for a doctorate as well. Believers without such preparation feel deferential in the presence of more highly educated students of Scripture. Doctrinal orthodoxy becomes the main touchstone for questions of fellowship among individuals and churches.

I believe this orientation is misguided, and at odds with the fundamental nature of God's revelation. Deut 29:29 summarizes three fundamental principles that govern his revelation to us.

1. The secret things belong unto the LORD our God:
2. but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever,
3. that we may do all the words of this law.

This verse is just a convenient summary—all of these principles are abundantly clear elsewhere in the Bible. As I discuss each principle, I'll bring in some of these supporting references.

God's Revelation is Partial

“The secret things belong unto the LORD our God.” There are secret things that we are not intended to know. It is at best a waste of our time to pursue these, and at worst may lead to unnecessary schism in the body of Christ. The admonition was apt for Israel, though the labors of the rabbis on explaining every possible question shows that they did not heed it. Paul confirms this principle repeatedly:

1 Tim 1:3-4 that thou mightest charge some that they teach no other doctrine, 4 Neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than godly edifying which is in faith:

1 Tim 4:7 But refuse profane and old wives' fables, and exercise thyself *rather* unto godliness.

2 Tim 2:22-23 Flee also youthful lusts: but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart. 23 But foolish and unlearned questions avoid, knowing that they do gender strifes.

Tit 1:13-14 Wherefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith; 14 Not giving heed to Jewish fables, and commandments of men, that turn from the truth.

Tit 3:9 But avoid foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and vain.

The teachings of the Bible are rife with “secret things” (not “mysteries,” which has a very specific NT

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meaning of something that was once hidden but now is revealed). Historically, several doctrinal areas have been particularly fertile fields for cultivating “secret things.”

- In the early centuries of the church, ardent debates over the nature of the incarnation and the structure of the godhead dominated, leading to formulations of orthodoxy in terms such as “begotten, not made,” *homoiousios*, and single vs. multiple procession.
- Soteriology invites questions such as the order among the divine decrees (the lapsarian controversies of the reformation), the nature of human responsibility (a debate that Paul cuts off as impertinent in Rom 9:20), or the details of the new birth (which our Lord declares to be unknowable in John 3:8, probably with reference to the cautionary words of Eccl 11:5).
- In our own day, eschatology tempts students with questions about the detailed interpretation of the symbols in Daniel or the Revelation.

The idea that there are unanswerable questions is at odds with the academic mind-set. In fact, the training and instinct of a researcher is to concentrate one's attention on just those questions that have not yet been answered.¹

Moses insists that there are questions I can ask to which I should not expect an answer. It's natural for the flesh to want to ask, but also appropriate for God to keep some things back: Proverbs 25:2, “It is the glory of God to conceal a thing: but the honour of kings is to search out a matter.” An important part of the humility of Christ that we must learn is that we are not entitled to an answer to every question. Sometimes the best answer to a theological riddle is, “I don't know ... and you don't, either.”

How can we recognize these “secret things”? The answer lies in the next two characteristics of God's revelation.

God's Revelation is Plain

“but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever.”--God's revelation is just that, “revealed,” not hidden. It is plain, intended for our children as well as for us. If it's not plain, chances are that it's a secret thing.

Well-intended theologians invest years of their lives in poring over collateral documents from the ancient near east, learning cognate languages in the hope of gaining deeper understanding of the biblical lexicon, and conducting field studies in the lands of the Bible. Many scholars now have far more technical knowledge than the vast majority of godly believers down through the ages. Ironically, the impact of this knowledge is often increased tentativeness in one's convictions. The more one learns, the more one realizes the extent of the even greater ocean of knowledge that one does not yet control and without which one might make an exegetical error. This process leads the student to be “ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth,” 2 Tim 3:7. Again, Paul recognized this principle when he insisted that our “faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God,” 1 Cor 2:5.

¹ One of the great mathematical discoveries of the past century is that there are limits to formal knowledge. However, these limits are accepted only because they have been proven rigorously to exist. Nothing in the questions themselves makes them off-limits. The academy accepts their existence only because its own analytic toolbox forces it to recognize them.

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Let's pause and reflect on the word “revealed.” When God reveals something, he makes it plain! One of the greatest benefits of the reformation principle of *sola scriptura* is that it defines the context within which the Bible is to be interpreted, and protects people from having to know everything else in the world. Indeed, not everything lies on the surface. There is a role for diligent study of the Scriptures, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But we are entitled to expect that if something isn't clear on the basis of what we can access within the canon, it probably belongs to the secret things.²

Sola scriptura has at least two implications: one for **deriving** doctrine, and another for **expressing** it.

The implication for **deriving** doctrine is that all we need to know is the Bible. One consequence of this is that the church councils, the fathers, and the generations of theologians and commentators who have followed after them are historical curiosities, not crucial for defining orthodoxy or guiding our understanding of biblical truth. Sometimes there is illustrative value in bringing in some extra-biblical material. For example, the Talmud illustrates the nature of Jewish teaching in explaining John 7:15-17. But that is icing on the cake, not solid spiritual sustenance. As with icing, if you eat too much of it, you get sick. There is a great deal that one can do within the bounds of Scripture. For instance, the potential of the LXX³ for the exposition of NT words remains largely untapped by most practicing expositors. We should focus our attention on the canon that God has given us, and not feel trumped by those who brandish a wider range of learning or human tradition.

The implication for **expressing** doctrine is that the words of Scripture are sufficient for saying everything that we need to say. Proverbs 30:5, 6: “Every word of God is pure: he is a shield unto them that put their trust in him. Add thou not unto his words, lest he reprove thee, and thou be found a liar.” Cf. Deut 4:2; 12:32; Rev 22:18. This insight lies behind Paul's exhortation to Timothy to “hold fast the form of sound words,” 2 Tim 1:13. He articulates this principle in 1 Cor 4:6 with the exhortation “not to think beyond what is written.”⁴

It is amazing how many theological disputes are over expressions that either do not occur in the Bible at all, or that are used in a way clearly at variance with the biblical usage. For example, debates over whether our Lord's “atonement” is limited or universal overlook the simple fact that the LXX reflexes of the Hebrew word translated “atonement” are never used to describe his death in the NT.⁵ For another example, some Christians still define orthodoxy in terms of whether one believes that the Lord Jesus

2 Avoiding debates over “secret things” does *not* mean that we should disparage the use of Hebrew and Greek in exegesis. In another era, knowledge of classical languages was considered an essential part of an elementary education—that's why it was called “grammar school.” That American believers today view knowledge of the original languages as esoteric is a reflection of our linguistically impoverished society. Any believer who values God's verbal revelation will value the ability to read that revelation in the languages in which it was given. A seminary degree is not necessary. Most colleges and universities offer courses in classical Greek and biblical Hebrew that Christian young people can elect as part of their undergraduate training. Adults without such background should devote some of their time to learning the basic structure of these languages, so that they can make intelligent use of tools such as Strong's numbers and interlinear translations.

3 The Septuagint, the pre-Christian translation of the Old Testament into Greek. The name and abbreviation come from the tradition that it was prepared by seventy scholars.

4 Many English versions miss the force of the article that introduces the phrase. The article sets the phrase apart as a principle or independent saying (cf. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, p. 238). In context, the Corinthians were being exposed to criticisms of Paul and Apollos. These criticisms had no biblical foundation, but were motivated by the desire of the adversaries to advance themselves. Paul exhorts them, in their assessment of himself and Apollos, to heed the principle, “Do not think beyond what is written,” that is, the explicit teaching of Scripture.

5 I discuss this observation in detail in this document: <http://www.cyber-chapel.org/AtonementInTheNT.pdf>

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was “begotten, not made,” though it is clear that the Greek word that describes our Lord as “only begotten” is derived from the verb “to be” (with a single *nu*), rather than the verb “to beget” (with two *nus*), and means “unique,” without any reference to a process by which the Father begot the Son.⁶ As we seek to be conformed to the mind of Christ, let us resolve to use biblical terms in their biblical senses to express biblical truth. Anything else runs the risk of obfuscating what God is seeking to make clear.

God’s Revelation is Practical

“**that we may do all the words of this law.**” God’s revelation is intended to produce godly conduct, not abstract epistemological conformity to some orthodox creed. If a question is concerned more with the content of our minds than the conduct of our lives, we may be considering a “secret thing.”

Here again, Paul follows Moses. Please review the verses quoted under our first topic (“God's Revelation is Partial”), and notice how often Paul emphasizes godliness as the objective that we should pursue. Just before condemning “foolish questions” in Tit 3:9, he writes,

Tit 3:8 This is a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain **good works**. These things are good and profitable unto men.

The purpose of our election is not our doctrinal acuity, but our likeness to Christ, “to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren” (Rom 8:29).

Eph 2:10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus **unto good works**, which God hath before ordained that we should **walk** in them.

Tit 2:11-14 For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, 12 Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, **we should live soberly, righteously, and godly**, in this present world; 13 Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ; 14 Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, **zealous of good works**.

Doctrine is important, but must be evaluated on the basis of its contribution to godliness. Paul characterizes his ministry as “the acknowledging of the truth which is after godliness” (Tit 1:1), and writes at length to Timothy,

1 Tim 6:3-5 If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, *even* the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to **the doctrine which is according to godliness**; 4 He is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, 5 Perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself.

Peter insists that the purpose of “the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue” is “life and godliness” (2 Pet 1:3).

⁶ Let me be perfectly clear: I do *not* believe that the Lord Jesus was “made,” but that “In the beginning” he “was God,” John 1:1. I’m simply observing that there is no biblical basis for the doctrine that he was “begotten.”

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Summary

The realization that God's revelation is partial, plain, and practical has pervasive implications for our lives as individuals and as churches.

- We will not insist on detailed academic preparation for those with oversight of local assemblies.
- We will value godliness of life as much as understanding of the Scriptures in our own lives and the lives of those for whom we are responsible.
- We will be cautious about making decisions over fellowship on the basis of issues that are not clearly revealed in Scripture and that do not have practical implications for godliness.
- We will encourage every believer to engage directly with the Word of God, with the assurance that the message it is intended to convey is accessible even apart from a seminary degree, and relevant to the daily conduct of our lives.