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Pentecostals and subordinate revelation
By Edgar Lee

"You Pentecostals believe in continuing revelation, don't you?" That question, posed years ago by an evangelical friend who probably thought I was a little heretical, pointed out to me how important it is to clarify our doctrine of revelation.

Many groups over the centuries have indeed held heretical notions of revelation, placing greater emphasis on the messages of their prophets than the teachings of Scripture. One particularly notorious example is found among the revolutionary Anabaptists of the 16th century, some of whom took over the city of Munster, Germany, and led the populace in revolt and sexual excess through prophecies and revelations.

In our own lifetime probably all of us have met some Pentecostals and charismatics who seemed to elevate their private revelations or emotions above the Bible. What had previously been wrong to them on biblical grounds was suddenly felt to be right because of some subjective experience.

Since we as Pentecostals believe that God continues to speak in various ways to the church today, we must carefully outline a doctrine of revelation that is truly biblical.

The doctrine of revelation

Christianity is a revealed religion. It teaches that humankind are the fallen creation of a qualitatively superior divine Being who cannot be known unless He chooses to reveal himself. Even so, the Bible shows that our holy God takes the initiative and mercifully reaches out to communicate with an unworthy race which He wishes to redeem. To those who respond to the conviction of the Holy Spirit, God personally reveals himself through Christ and provides both the information and the miraculous regeneration needed for salvation. Thus a sound doctrine of revelation is the foundation of Christian theology.

While several biblical words may be translated revelation, the most common Old Testament verb is *galah* (cf., 1 Samuel 3:7; Daniel 2:22,28; Amos 3:7), and the most common New Testament verb is *apokalypto* [noun *apokalypsis*] (cf., Romans 1:17; Galatians 1:12; Ephesians 1:17, 3:3,5). Both of these words have the idea of "uncovering," thus "revealing." To illustrate, the ancient Greeks used *apokalypto* for the unveiling (uncovering) of

a statue. These words are used over and over again in Scripture as God makes himself and His will known.

Theologians have come to use two basic concepts to describe the way God reveals himself as taught in Scripture. The first is general revelation which denotes that disclosure God makes of himself in the created order and which is available to all human beings everywhere and at all times. Men and women may see evidences of God's handiwork in nature as did David: "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands" (Psalm 19:1*). Paul also taught that "God's...eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen...from what has been made..." (Romans 1:20).

Theologians further understand that there are indicators of God's being and nature both in history and in the constitution of men and women who are made in His image.

However, since sin has marred the creation and corrupted man's moral and spiritual nature, general revelation alone is never sufficient to lead one to a saving knowledge of God.

This leads, of necessity, to the second concept, *special revelation*. Here God reveals himself personally in ways that convey accurate knowledge of himself and His will and that make possible a saving relationship.

The writer to the Hebrews vividly illustrated special revelation: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son..." (1:1,2). Here is a progressive divine disclosure, beginning with God's communications with Adam and Eve, continuing through the patriarchs and prophets, and finally culminating in Christ.

Special revelation, then, comes to a sharp focus in Jesus Christ who is described as "Immanuel...'God with us'" (Matthew 1:23) and as the "Word" who "was God" and "became flesh and lived for a while among us" (John 1:1,2,14). Jesus himself said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). It is Christ who supremely reveals God to man and who becomes the center of the apostolic writings of the New Testament.

This special revelation of Christ recorded in Scripture and communicated by the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit (John 15:26) makes it possible for men and women to respond to God in faith and find salvation. Thus Paul spoke of "the *revelation* [*apokalypsis*] of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now

revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him" (Romans 1 6:25,26).

Canonical revelation

In the providence of God much of His historic revelation is now recorded in the Bible, inscripturated as an authoritative guide for our salvation. God's intention is that we, like Timothy, may know that revelation in "the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:15). We must recognize that the Bible is a unique vehicle for special revelation.

While revelation has to do with communication, *inspiration* is the process by which God ensures that His revelation is written down by providentially prepared human authors in human words which say exactly what He wishes—and that without error. As Paul further instructed Timothy, "All Scripture is God-breathed [inspired] and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16,17).

Obviously, not everything God said or did through all of His prophets has been recorded. As John noted, if all that Jesus did were written down, "the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written" (John 21:25). However, the New Testament understanding is that we have in the Bible everything we need to know for our salvation.

So the key elements of God's revelation are now included in the canon of Scripture and provide guidance for our knowledge of God until He is more fully revealed at the end of the age. This record of God's revelation can never be superseded or altered by any subsequent revelatory experience. It is fixed for all time. The last book of the Bible fittingly concludes the canon with the warning not to add anything nor take words away from the divinely given message (Revelation 22:18,19).

Pentecostals, like their evangelical colleagues, have historically affirmed the Bible is God's revelation in written form, the written Word of God which sets forth Christ the Living Word, and its teachings must always take precedence over any subsequent spiritual experiences or revelations.

Illumination and subordinate revelation

The Triune God revealed in Christ is a living God who continues to communicate dynamically with succeeding generations of human beings. He not only speaks through the Bible but addresses the human heart directly by His Spirit. In so doing He never Contradicts the Bible, for it remains an eternally true record of His revelation of himself and His salvation in Christ. The Author is always greater than the Book, and He finds many ways to reveal himself to men and women, some of which do not involve an immediate reading of Scripture.

Theologians have usually recognized the reality of God's ongoing communications in their doctrine of *illumination*. Illumination is understood to be the work of God by the Holy Spirit to bring to human awareness what God has already revealed in Scripture. Illumination, then, sheds light on canonical revelation. It never adds anything new about God. It is the process by which God opens and applies His Word to each new generation.

Pentecostals concur with the historic doctrine of illumination. However, they also recognize a continuing though *subordinate revelation* through the gifts of the Spirit which rounds out and enriches the illumination process.

The New Testament teaches that spiritual gifts—the word of wisdom, the word of knowledge, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, messages in tongues, and interpretations of tongues (1 Corinthians 12:8-10)—in some sense involve revelation.

To the Corinthian congregation, none of whom were apostles qualified to speak and write special revelation, Paul said, "When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation [*apokalypsis*], a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church" (1 Corinthians 14:26). He went on to point out that one gifted to prophesy might receive a "revelation" [*apokalypto*] while other prophets were speaking (14:30). The apostle dearly understood that the Holy Spirit could and did impart revelations through spiritual gifts to both church leaders and laypersons.

Apparently this language of revelation was rather common to the Pauline churches. In the Ephesian letter we find these words: "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation [*apokalypsis*], so that you may know him better" (1:17).

Now Paul did not mean that any of these believers were to have their revelations raised to the status of Scripture. In fact, he

insisted that their revelations were subordinate to his writings which we now recognize to be Scripture: "If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command" (1 Corinthians 14:37).

Rather, these revelations built upon existing Scripture and the apostolic witness and were primarily for the spiritual development of the local congregation. Prophecy, for example, is said to be for "strengthening, encouragement and comfort" and thus for the edification of the church (1 Corinthians 14:3,4). While prophecy may have on occasion been predictive, as in Agabus' prophecies of famine (Acts 11: 27-30) and Paul's arrest (Acts 21:10,11), it seems to have been more often an apt insight into scriptural and spiritual truth as it applied to the particular situation of the local church.

Sound theology depends upon careful definition of terms. Misunderstandings occur because theologians sometimes, of necessity, use terms more narrowly and technically than does the Bible. This is true of the word *revelation* which, as we have seen, has a broader meaning in the Bible than is recognized in the traditional concepts of *general revelation* and *special revelation*.

To return to our question, "Do Pentecostals believe in continuing revelation?" Pentecostals believe that the Holy Spirit continues to give subordinate revelation through spiritual gifts. However, they do not believe that God adds to the special revelation that He has placed once and for all in the Bible. Every contemporary revelation must be judged by the verbal content of Scripture and be in conformity with its factual, moral, and spiritual nature.

The canon of Scripture is never to be reopened. Its teachings, correctly interpreted, are never to be changed. Contemporary revelations are never to be recorded as an alternate authority for the church.

*Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

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