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THIS BIBLE: THE NEED FOR AND NATURE OF THE BIBLE

It really isn't a very impressive sight. Actually, it's just a small, lily-pad-covered pond like a thousand others in Yellowstone National Park, yet this one is surrounded by a large parking lot. Most of the time the lot is full. Why the attraction? The answer is found on a sign that park visitors stop to read as they take the boardwalk around the lake. The sign tells tourists that this little pond is the "watershed of two great rivers." A few drops of water leaving the pond down a very tiny creek to the west flow through a variety of streams and rivers eventually to reach the Columbia River and finally the Pacific Ocean. Another few drops of water flowing out of the equally tiny creek to the east eventually flow to the Missouri River, on to the Mississippi River, and, finally, to the Gulf of Mexico.

A watershed is the elevated point at which water flows in one direction or another. The Bible, or more accurately our attitude toward the Bible, is a watershed issue in Christian teaching. The Bible teacher's view of Scripture will serve to determine the direction and purpose of his teaching ministry. If the Bible is regarded as a purely human book with doubtful stories told by pre-scientific persons in an effort to understand their world, the teacher will most likely approach the Bible seeking to demythologize its message. On the other hand, if the Bible is regarded as the inspired, inerrant revelation of God to human beings in a specific time and place, then the teacher's approach to the Bible will entail admiration, respect, and even a mandate for obedience to its teachings.

How have Bible teachers understood this Bible we teach? In which directions have their understandings taken the flow of their teaching? What is the nature of the Bible, and how does its nature affect how we teach it? To answer these questions, we must first consider the need for the Bible. Why did God give us this Bible in the first place?

THE NEED FOR THE BIBLE

Consider the words of J. I. Packer.

What were we made for? To know God. What aim should we set for our lives? To know God. What is the “eternal life” that Jesus gives? Knowledge of God. . . . What is the best thing in life, bringing more joy, delight, and contentment, than anything else? Knowledge of God.¹

Packer’s point is absolutely correct. Nothing could better describe the purpose of mankind than to know their Creator in an intimate and personal way. But how does one know God? An even more difficult question is this: How does one know that one knows God? Figure 3 depicts two foundational views of what is meant by “knowing God.” These two primary views of knowing God are both embraced in our day.

Two Views of Knowing God

The immanence view. The first of these concepts of knowing God sees knowledge of God as the result of a search within the seeker. We might term this view an immanence view of God. The word *immanence* means “within” and carries the idea of something completely immersed in another thing. Those who hold this view contend that God is one with His creation. God is believed to be of the same essence as His creation. Immanence views of God understand God to be a force or power and impersonal in nature. God cannot be separated from creation and, in fact, is found within the created order of things. It is contended by immanence proponents that something of the divine spark or force is found in each person. Therefore, to know God, the seeker must know himself and discover within “the self” the qualities of God.

This position has its historic roots in Eastern mystic religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, but today it finds its expression most prominently in the New Age Movement. Several books have helped to popularize this view of God. Author and actress Shirley MacLaine, through her book *Out on a Limb*, brought increased public attention to the New Age view of God as immanent. And more recently, the runaway best-sellers *Embraced by the Light* and *The Celestine Prophecy* have contributed to the widening acceptance of New Age thinking. Prominent

Figure 3

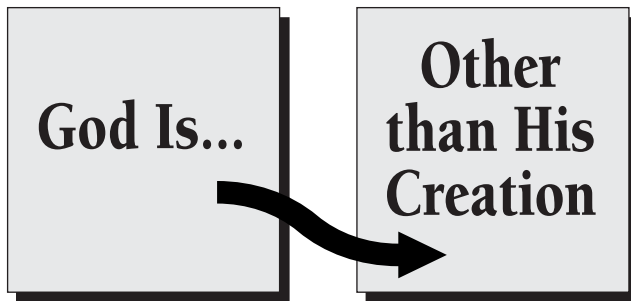
TWO VIEWS OF KNOWING GOD

Immanence View: God Within

**God
Is
Creation**

God Is Discovered Within the Seeker

Transcendence View: God as Other



God Must Make Himself Known Through Revelation

physician Larry Dossey described the immanence view of God in *Healing Words*, his best-selling book on prayer, as the “modern model” for understanding God and prayer. After explaining that prayer is “nonlogical” and “evidence for shared qualities with the Divine—the Divine Within”—he writes,

The way prayer is conceived by most Western religions is far different from this: God is installed outside us, usually high above, as if in stationary orbit, functioning as a sort of master communications satellite. . . . God up there, us down here . . . isolated creatures of the moment locked into a linear, flowing time, confined to the body, and awaiting death, ultimately sinful and unworthy, and whose only hope is to be redeemed by the merciful act of a Supreme Being. Although this version may be comforting for millions of people—those who are convinced they are “saved” or “chosen,” or who belong to some religious in group—it causes immense confusion and guilt for others, and has been the source of untold nastiness in human affairs throughout recorded history. When compared with other religious views worldwide, this exteriorization of God . . . appears to be “pathological mythology.” . . . The old biblically based views of prayer, which are still largely in vogue, were developed when a view of the world was in place that is now antiquated and incomplete.²

For those who hold the immanence view, knowing God does not involve knowing objective information about God or even knowing God as a person. Knowing God involves a communion with an inner force, the “Divine Within.” In the process, the seeker reaches a state of tranquillity and peace. Since knowing God does not involve propositional knowledge about God, knowing God is a personal and undefinable experience that is distinct for each seeker. God does not reveal Himself to the seeker; He instead is revealed by the seeker through a personal search for a God-consciousness.

Those who hold to the immanence view of knowing God have a very definite view of the Bible. To them, the Bible is not God’s revealed and inspired Word. The Bible is a record of human beings’ quest for wisdom and divine consciousness. The Bible is a wise book, among many wise books, but it is to be no more revered than any other book of human sayings and truisms. If one embraces this view of the Bible, teaching the Bible would take on a far different role and nature than it would for those who embrace the Bible as the written revelation of the living God. For those who hold to the immanence perspective, teaching the Bible is simply using the Bible for its illustrative value in showing the learner how to reach a God-conscious state of inner tranquillity.

The transcendence view. The opposite and alternative view of know-

ing God could be termed a *transcendence* perspective. This is the view that is embraced by historical Christianity. This theological truth proclaims God as different and distinct from His creation in essence. He is considered to be “totally other” than that which He has created. “Totally other” does not mean that He cannot be known by human seekers at all, but that He cannot be found in His creation. He does not reside in creation. He is distinct, and He is not dependent on His creation for His continued existence. He is higher and greater than anything He has created, and, therefore, all human efforts to fully understand Him and contain Him are fruitless. Rather, God must make the first move if He is to be known. God truly is immanent as well as transcendent, but it is because He chooses to be; “immanence” in the Christian sense of the word means that God is close to His creation, not that He is part of it.

Imagine taking a stroll through a famous art museum or institute. On each wall is a priceless painting, and throughout the halls are sculptures—all created by one highly gifted artist. As you pass through each hallway and exhibit area you gain an ever greater appreciation for the handwork of the artist. By the time you leave the museum you feel you almost know the artist. You have detected something of his heart and even his attributes. Surely, by studying the artist’s creation you can learn much about the artist. But do you know the artist? Is this kind of intuitive knowledge of the artist the same as a personal knowledge of the artist? What if the artist were to make himself known to you by making contact with you? What if he were to send a representative or a letter telling you of his purpose in creating each painting or sculpting each statue? Would you know more of the artist than you did merely looking at his creations? What if he went still further and entered the art museum? What if he actually walked the halls of the institute with you? Would this not produce a greater knowledge of the artist?

Bible believing Christians insist that this is exactly what God, the Creator-Artist, did. Although it is true that He made Himself known through His creation in what theologians call *natural* or *general revelation*, He did more than that. He communicated with us. He communicated to His creatures in a means known as *special revelation*. Through special revelation God makes known those things about Himself that otherwise could not be known. He does this in two primary ways. First He reveals Himself through His written Word, inscribed in the pages of the Bible. Second, He also reveals Himself in the incarnate Word, the person of Jesus Christ who became flesh and dwelt among us.

By a careful study of the creation, the seeker will come to know something of God’s divine nature and His invisible attributes. This is a knowing about God. But, through the special revelation of the Bible and

in the person of Jesus Christ, God can be known in a personal and intimate way, that is, in a relationship. The transcendence view is a revelatory view. It holds that God is a personal being who transcends His creation and must reveal Himself if He is to be known at all. Apart from divine revelation, God would remain the unknown God. This then is the role of the Bible, *to make God known*.

The Unknown God

If God has revealed Himself in both natural revelation and special revelation, why is it that people do not know Him? Why is God the unknown God? God is unknown to us for two basic reasons—His nature and our nature.

His nature makes Him unknown to us. Isaiah quotes God as He describes His own lofty and distinct nature in these words: “‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the Lord. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts’” (Isa. 55:8–9). God is unlike us in His cognitive capacity. We cannot understand His rationale for His actions. God must come to us, for we certainly could not come to Him given this kind of gulf of understanding. In a similar way, God explains Job’s limitations in comprehending and knowing the God of creation. “Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the Almighty? They are higher than the heavens—what can you do? They are deeper than the depths of the grave—what can you know?” (Job 11:7–8). “How great is God—beyond our understanding! The number of his years is past finding out” (Job 36:26). God is by nature impossible for us to probe. He is the unknown God because He is higher, deeper, and beyond human search. But He is not limited in His ability to find us and make Himself known to us.

Our nature makes Him unknown to us. Not only is God beyond us, we are limited by our own sin and our tendency to suppress any of the truth God has made known. Paul reminds us that sin has blinded us to revelation from the Spirit of God. “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14). Satan too has a part in blinding us from seeing and comprehending divine truth, including the gospel of Jesus Christ: “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4).

God has indeed made truth about Himself known, but human beings suppress that truth, choosing to believe lies instead of the revela-

tion given by God in nature. In a passage of profound importance, Paul wrote,

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen. (Rom. 1:18–25)

God is, for all intents and purposes, the unknown God. Not unknowable, for God can make Himself known, but unknown because of our state and condition. How then does the unknown God make Himself known? Through special revelation, through His Word, inscribed in the Bible and incarnate in Jesus Christ, God has acted and willed that He be knowable.

God Made Known

In nature God has left a calling card. He uses it to draw our attention so that He can make His clearer and more personal revelation plain. Paul spoke to this in Acts 17 when he addressed the Athenian philosophers:

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. "For in him we live and move and have our being." As some of your own poets have said, "We are his offspring."

Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's

design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead. (Acts 17:24–31)

Through God's natural revelation we come to know about God. We learn of His divine nature, His creative role, and His invisible attributes. But it is in the person of Jesus Christ that God makes Himself known in an intimate and personal way. Through God's special revelation in Christ we actually come to know God. John tells us of the incarnation of the Word of God. God became flesh that we might know Him.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. . . . The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. . . . No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known. (John 1:1–5, 14, 18)

According to the author of Hebrews, Jesus is no mere reflector of God's glory and nature as the moon would reflect the sun. He is like the sun giving forth its light. He radiates the very glory of God, the Father. He is the exact representation of His being.

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, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs. For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father"? Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son"? (Heb. 1:1–5)

Paul summarizes this truth for us in his Colossian letter and adds a further point. In Christ we are reconciled to God and can know Him in a new relationship untainted by the power of sin.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Col. 1:15–20)

Paul says that Jesus is the God of creation. He holds all things together by His power. He is supreme, and He supremely reveals the divine character of God. Remarkably, He makes peace with God through His atoning blood sacrifice on the cross, allowing us to know God.

Through God's natural revelation we come to know about God. Through God's special revelation in Jesus Christ, we come to know God. What, then, is the purpose of the Bible as special revelation? It is this: Through God's written revelation we come to know and believe in Christ, the Messiah. Then, by Scripture's objective truth, we are able to confirm the validity of our knowledge of Him. John puts it this way: "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30–31). This is the reason we need the Bible—that we might believe and, by believing, that we might come to know Him.

THE NATURE OF THE BIBLE

How is it that a book, given by God to transform, seems so unproductive when taught in the very churches where it is most honored and best known? Our Christian education has often produced warped personalities; our teaching has often failed to straighten twisted lives. Warping is so common that we've become used to it! Used to shaking our heads about "lost faith" in high school and college students. Used to congregations and individuals without vitality or dedication or reality in their walk with Christ. Used to an exploding population and a sputtering evangelism. Used to living day after day with men and women who need the Savior, and used to saying nothing to them about Him. Used to reading and studying and teaching the Bible without seeing God use it to transform. Have we been successful in reproducing the biblical faith in our modern world? Have we "turned the world upside down" as did the early church? Are our churches filled with spiritual giants?

Hardly! Teaching the Bible as we teach it has not transformed men as our theology says the Word of God should. But why not? Is it possible that we haven't really understood the nature of the Bible we teach? Is it possible that we haven't been teaching the Bible in a way that harmonizes with God's purposes in giving it?

Views of Scripture

The conservative view. What we call a conservative view of Scripture—that it is God's revealed and authoritative written Word—dominated Protestantism after the Reformation. The conservative has always believed that in the Bible God communicates with humans. He communicates information, truth, that we could not otherwise know. Because God has communicated His viewpoint to us in words, we need not guess what He is like or what He gives us in Christ. God has communicated with us in words, in just the way we communicate with other people.

For this speaking, God chose certain men and superintended their writing by His Holy Spirit, so that the product, our Bible, is His message. Its accuracy and infallibility are guaranteed. Of course, God didn't blank out the mind of each writer and use his hands as we would a puppet's. He didn't simply dictate. He worked through the consciousness and personality of each writer, through his feelings and patterns of expression. Yet the end result is God's message, His truth, His Word. So the conservative believes.

But in this century other approaches to the Bible have become popular and even dominant. People have suggested entirely new understandings of the nature of Scripture and new understandings of the place the Bible has in our relationship with God. These new views have led to new approaches in teaching, Christian nurture, and Christian education.

The liberal view. This view dominated the thinking of religious educators of most denominations from the twenties through the thirties. Men like George A. Coe and William C. Bower drew from liberal theology and the progressive school of education and proposed a new approach to Christian training. And they modified completely the role of the Bible in Christian teaching.

Briefly, men of this school viewed God as One who acts in our world of today just as He acted in the biblical world. God, therefore, should not be sought in a book, but in life. To these men, however, God's activity was not supernatural in the sense of miraculous. It was natural. God worked through the natural processes of individual and societal life.

What then do they say about the Bible? In a basic sense, the Bible

was considered to be unneeded. It did not, to these men, contain truth about God or truth from God. Instead it recorded human experience. It was the story of men and women who looked for God in the normal events of their lives and times, and who believed that they had found Him. Today, they said, we are to look for God not in the events of the past but in the events of our own society. "God is at work today!" was their exciting cry. "Let's leap into life and meet Him."

And so the Bible was discarded as a source book of truth and values and authority, and human values and relationships moved onto center stage. The goal of Christian training became the enrichment of human life, the process of guiding people to discover the "higher Christian meanings" of their experiences. It was only in living life that God could be found, and found to be meaningful.

So religious educators and church leaders turned to the development of ways in which experiences could be guided and learners helped to grow in their ability to live meaningfully as individuals and in groups.

The neo-orthodox view. "Not Christian" was the charge raised against liberal religious education by H. S. Smith in his *Faith and Nurture*.³ The Christian faith, said Smith, is rooted in something deeper than "growing values." It is rooted in a Christian revelation. It is rooted in a sovereign God, who stands outside of history, yet who disclosed Himself in a historical Christ. Liberal religious education, without a God who discloses Himself and encounters individuals supernaturally, cannot claim to be Christian.

Unlike the complete disregard for the Bible by liberal theologians, neo-orthodoxy recognizes the Bible as containing the Word of God. For the neo-orthodox theologian, the Scriptures are time-bound and culturally conditioned. Neo-orthodox theologians hold that, because the writers of the Bible were real, historical men as we are, and therefore sinful, they were capable of, and actually guilty of, error as they prophesied and recorded Scripture. In spite of this fact, neo-orthodox teachers believe, God speaks through the text of the human fallible Scripture. Neo-orthodoxy takes an approach to theology that places the religious experience of the believer as primary. The Bible stimulates such an experience. When it does so, they believe that it "becomes the Word of God" for that reader. So, neo-orthodoxy holds that the Bible becomes the Word of God to the individual reading it when the reader encounters God in the pages of Scripture, not that it is intrinsically the Word of God.

In a short time the neo-orthodox viewpoint dominated theologically and educationally. Paul Vieth's *Church and Christian Education*⁴ reflects the changing climate. Soon Christian educators like James D.

Smart, Lewis J. Sherrill, and Randolph Crump Miller appeared. They attempted to develop a philosophy of Christian teaching based on the neo-orthodox theology. Today their influence is still seen in the curricula of major denominations and publishing houses, and the basic concepts they developed are reflected in many books on Christian education and in religious education publications.

The neo-orthodox influence was a healthy corrective to the liberal viewpoint. Neo-orthodox educators saw people as sinful (though this was variously defined). Human beings needed to know God, according to the neo-orthodox educator. God's revelation is channeled through the Bible, these educators believed, and so the Bible did have a place in Christian training. To the neo-orthodox educator, however, the Bible was not the Word of God, but instead, it became the Word of God as people encountered God in the Scriptures. Neo-orthodox educators argued that the text itself was nothing more than a human record of God's encounters with humanity. But when the Bible causes the reader to encounter God it becomes the Word of God to the believing person. In this sense, the Bible is an indirect revelation of God.

Neo-orthodox teachers held a distinctive concept of what revelation is, what the place of the Bible is in revelation, and how the Bible should be taught. To them, the Bible could not be taught as simply facts about God, but as human encounters with God. And in this respect we have been done a service. For development of this theory has forced us to look honestly at our own Bible teaching and to ponder why the teaching of the Bible in our churches has been so unproductive in terms of transformed, dedicated, Christ-centered lives if, as we believe, the Bible is the written Word of God. We have been forced to ask theological questions about our teaching of the Bible.

How we need this! How we need not merely to assert the fact of propositional revelation, but to understand the nature of that revelation and to see its implications for our Bible teaching. Remember, the purpose of the Bible is to reveal truth about God and to enable our students, through that revealed truth, to know God. It is not merely a book of facts to be learned or verses to be memorized. That kind of teaching falls short of a genuine understanding of the nature and purpose of the Bible.

Words Mean Something

Rush Limbaugh likes to make the statement, "Words mean something!" By this statement he is chastising the current approach to language that allows words to take on whatever meaning the reader or hearer wants to assign them. Whether applied to human conversation, interpreting the United States Constitution, or our understanding of

biblical authority, such a view of words leaves the meaning of words strictly in the mind of the receiver. This is not the perspective held by the authors of Scripture with regard to its words. They were certain that “words mean something!”

Just glance through the Bible and it strikes you that the writers were not only sure they knew God; they were sure they knew a lot about Him. They thought they knew what God had done in human history; they labeled events as His acts, such as His overshadowing Mary so that her child was fully human and fully God (Matt. 1:18; Luke 1:35). They said God caused the Flood, that He led Israel out of Egypt. They said national emergencies, the invasions of Israel by pagan nations, were God’s chastising acts (Isa. 10:5–6). Peter said that God caused, in the sense of ordaining, Christ’s crucifixion (Acts 2:23).

And the writers went beyond events. They claimed to know God’s motives and outcomes of events that simply could not be observed. They tell, for example, why Christ died, and what His death accomplished. Christ died for our sins (Rom. 15:3) to reconcile us to God (2 Cor. 5:18) in order that we might have God’s forgiveness (Eph. 1:6) and be given immortality (2 Tim. 1:10) and eternal life (Titus 1:2). Christ’s death means other things, too, and the writers thought they knew what the meaning was for the entire universe (Rom. 8:19–22) and for Satan (Heb. 2:14).

The Bible writers even dared to talk about what God will do in the future, giving details of Christ’s physical return (1 Thess. 4:14–17), of the end of the earth (2 Peter 3:7), of humanity’s final rebellion under the “man of sin” (2 Thess. 2), and of the final judgment on unbelievers (2 Thess. 1:7–10). And of God’s plans for the future, Bible writers dare to say “the Spirit clearly says” (1 Tim. 4:1)!

No one can read things like this without being sure that these writers felt that they had received—and were communicating—information about God and from God. The writers expressed this information in words. Obviously, if information (as distinct from raw data) is going to be communicated, words play a part. Thus, a valid understanding of the nature of the Bible must focus on the words of the Bible.

Revelation from the Spirit of God

However, as it is written: “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him”—but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man’s spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the

spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. (1 Cor. 2:9–13)

Paul, writing in 1 Corinthians 2, gives a striking portrait of divine revelation in Scripture. Let's note the most significant ideas.

Revelation gives information not otherwise known. All of us draw conclusions from our experiences. We watch another person for a time, and we get ideas of why he acts as he does. We assign motives and even predict behavior. This much we deduce from experience. In this passage Paul is talking about something a little different. He's talking about God's plans, "God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began" (1 Cor. 2:7). It's information about these plans that Paul says is now revealed.

Now, in what possible way could men discover God's hidden plans? Paul quotes the Old Testament to nail down the fact that the source of such information is not in the realm of human experience. No eye saw it. No ear heard it. No one imaginatively figured it out. These ideas did not develop as a human interpretation of a "revelation experience." Such information had to be directly revealed by God.

The Spirit reveals. It's one thing to deduce from observed behavior, and another entirely to know by revelation. No one on the outside can get down into another person's mind and know his thoughts. The person has to tell his thoughts if they are to be known. But, Paul points out, the Holy Spirit is God. So He can comprehend the thoughts of God, "even the deep things of God." Revelation, to Paul, is a work of the Spirit by which He communicates information from God to men. And the initial purpose of this communication isn't said to be "to bring men to encounter." It's that we might understand God's gifts to us.

Communication is by words. After all, God wants us to understand, to know, not to guess. And so He communicates to us in the way that we communicate, in a way that we can understand, by words. In the passage Paul says we impart (communicate) God's revelation in "words taught by the Spirit" (2:13).

What view of revelation does Paul present? The passage looks at revelation like this: (1) The source of revelation is the Spirit; (2) The content of revelation is information; and (3) The medium of revelation is language.

The idea that God speaks to us in words is not peculiar to Paul. The Old Testament prophets spoke words that they claimed were God's, not theirs. The writer of Hebrews talks constantly of the Old Testament

as what “God said” or “the Holy Spirit says” (Heb. 1:5–14; 4:7; etc.). The consistent biblical picture, then, is that information is communicated to us by God in human language, in words. And “revelation” is a label for that information.

WHAT ABOUT THE BIBLE?

Probably the simplest thing to say about the Bible is that the words imparting God’s revelation are written there. Because the revelation is in words, evangelicals often say that the Bible itself is God’s revelation. They claim that it does not *contain* the Word of God; it *is* the Word of God. Failure of the teaching of the Bible to transform must lie somewhere other than in the Bible itself or its literal interpretation. For the Bible is given to be understood. We are to take God at His word. The problem then in teaching does not lie in the authority of the Bible but it must lie in the teacher, the student, the method of teaching, or some combination of the three. In order to teach the Bible creatively and with authority so as to change lives, we must begin with a high view of Scripture. Such a view mandates that the Bible teacher recognize the inspiration of Scripture and understand something of the literary nature of the inspired text. We will turn our attention to these matters in the next chapter.

NOTES

1. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1973), 29.
2. Larry Dossey, *Healing Words* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 6–7.
3. H. S. Smith, *Faith and Nurture* (New York: Scribner, 1941).
4. Paul Vieth, *The Church and Christian Education* (St. Louis: Bethany, 1963).