



# The Revelation of the Bible

## God, Revelation, and Dr. Phil

by Stephen Cavness

I just finished reading a publication's list of the "Top 50 Most Influential Christians in America."<sup>1</sup> Upon finishing the list, I wasn't sure if I should laugh, cry, be angry, or drop to the floor in prayer ... or a combination of all four. Among those chosen as top representatives of Christianity was a man who denies the Trinity and another who has publicly stated that he does not preach about sin. Several individuals in the list actually practice prayer directed toward humans. Even syndicated talk show host Dr. Phil made the list.

I had no idea.

Such lists come from a variety of publications and are sent out on a regular basis, and thankfully, there is usually some representation of legitimate Christianity included. But overall, these lists are frustrating because they are so misleading. I shudder to think of the casual reader who thinks such information is trustworthy.

It is imperative that we let the Word of God be our guide as we wade through the overwhelming number of speakers, preachers, writers, and cultural icons who either claim to be or are pronounced to be reliable sources on Truth. How do we do that? We measure a self-identifying Christian by what he believes *about* Scripture, as well as comparing what he says *to* Scripture. What God says is our ultimate source of Truth. Consequently, in order to know if someone is speaking the Truth, we must examine what God has revealed to us.

God has revealed Himself to us in two ways: general revelation and special revelation. A brief discussion of these two types of revelation is necessary in order to clearly establish the means by which God reveals Himself, what He reveals, and the sufficiency of what is revealed.<sup>2</sup>

### I. General Revelation

General revelation can be defined as the "revelation of God in nature." It is "accessible to all mankind without distinction."<sup>3</sup> Paul speaks of this revelation in Romans 1:18-21:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. *For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened...*<sup>4</sup>

Being an observant, responsive part of creation allows us to see characteristics of our Creator. They are not simply *available* for observation, they are *inescapable*. That God is creator,<sup>5</sup> eternal,<sup>6</sup> invisible,<sup>7</sup> personal,<sup>8</sup> and sustainer of creation<sup>9</sup> is known to all men due to general revelation. Also known to all men is a basic moral code that is held by the conscience.<sup>10</sup> This knowledge, obtained through general revelation, is also a means of common grace granted by God to all mankind: believer and unbeliever alike. In the fallen world in which we live, even a community of unregenerate thieves will feel wronged if they are stolen from, lied to, or physically harmed, by one of their own or someone else. This fact of nature is universal, and universal moral codes need a basis for their universality.

### II. Special Revelation

What general revelation cannot reveal, however, is the way of salvation. Christ Himself stated in John 14:6 that no one could come to Father without coming through

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Him. Salvation comes from faith in Jesus Christ **alone**. Salvation is not attainable by good works, by observing a moral code, or by sacrifices offered to appease the wrath of a deity. Only faith in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the propitiation for sins can bring salvation. This is where Paul, in Romans 10, raises the importance of special revelation:

For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching ... So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.<sup>11</sup>

General revelation lacks the Gospel. No one can know the Gospel by observing the world in which they live. Mankind knows it is guilty, but what does one do to appease the “wrath of God?”<sup>12</sup> On the basis of general revelation alone, mankind cannot be saved. More is needed.

Special revelation, then, is “the revelation by God of His redemptive purpose.”<sup>13</sup> It is the knowledge of God provided through His Word spoken by the prophets and Jesus Christ Himself, and by the other writings of Scripture. The 1689 London Confession puts it this way:

The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience, although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and his will which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord at sundry times and in divers manners to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his church; and afterward for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan, and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the Holy Scriptures to be most necessary, those former ways of God’s revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.... Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the books of the Old and New Testaments... All of which are given by the inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life.<sup>14</sup>

With this special revelation of God, man can know the only way to salvation. Scripture<sup>15</sup> alone is necessary to

proclaim Jesus’ death, resurrection, and sacrifice for man’s sins. 1 Peter 1:23 says, “...you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.”

Not only does special revelation inform us of the way to salvation, but it also reveals to us the full and specific will of God. General revelation gives us *perceptions* of right and wrong, but special revelation provides us with the *facts* of what is right and what is wrong. In other words, special revelation is the act of God showing His will to His people through His Word.<sup>16</sup>

God’s Word, in the form of Scripture, tells us everything we need to know about God. He has given us an infallible record<sup>17</sup> that is sufficient for every aspect of life. 2 Peter 1:3 says, “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence.”<sup>18</sup> Wayne Grudem states: “. . . it can be argued that the Bible is necessary for [knowledge with certainty] about anything.”<sup>19</sup>

Since it is God alone who has supreme knowledge, it is only by consulting His word that we can have confidence that what we think we know is actually true. We can know, with confidence, that the things that God has revealed through His word are accurate and necessary. As summed up by Paul in his second letter to Timothy:

...and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.<sup>20</sup>

It is not enough to take the word of a self-proclaimed “Christian.” It is not enough to take the word of a pastor,<sup>21</sup> a theologian, or a “Christian” musician or author with a large audience. Before we place ourselves under anyone’s teaching, we need to be informed of what God says about what such people are teaching. Anytime the teachings of the Word of God and the word of man contradict each other, or do not agree, we must follow the Word of God.

As Christians, we may not be people in agreement on every aspect of Scripture, but we must be people of discernment.

No individual is perfect in his interpretation of the Bible. I do not know of anyone with whom I agree with on every single nuance of Scripture, but I do know that there is a major difference between matters of opinion and matters of interpretation. The Bible is very clear on many doctrines such as creation,<sup>22</sup> salvation,<sup>23</sup> and election.<sup>24</sup> We cannot deny that such events occurred or continue to occur. We may not agree with the logical implications or conclusions that others draw from such teachings, but we cannot ignore their clear place of these doctrines in the Word of God.

Of course, this whole conversation presumes a certain familiarity with Scripture. It is no surprise that the health and wealth prosperity “gospel” that is running rampant in our culture and our churches downplays and deemphasizes the importance of knowing Scripture in favor of material blessings and good feelings. One of the biggest dangers facing the church today is how quickly she trusts those who merely quote the Bible without proper analysis or understanding or discernment.<sup>25</sup> Throughout the history of the church, heresies and cults have developed from such misuse of the Bible.<sup>26</sup> The only way to fix this problem is to study the history, grammar, and context of Biblical passages. If we are not intimately acquainted with the Scriptures, we will be less likely to notice error when we hear or read it.

What are we to do, then, with this special revelation from God? What are we to do with our Bibles? We can do one of three things.

First, we can choose to be ignorant; to blindly follow those who look the “most Christian” . . . or the least, whatever our desire might be. We can choose to continue following the traditions and teachings our parents followed, or those we have always followed, never stopping

to consider and test what we are hearing and reading by the perfect standard of God’s word. We can choose to follow the latest church fads. Indeed, as long as we remain ignorant of any standard, we can just make our own.

Second, we can choose paranoia. We can become so paranoid of false teaching that we refuse to trust anyone about anything. If we were to do so, we would violate direct Biblical teachings to fellowship with other believers<sup>27</sup> and to submit to the elders ruling over us.<sup>28</sup> This choice of paranoia, taken to its logical conclusion, would leave little else to write about because, if we could not trust anyone in regards to doctrinal matters . . . why am I still typing and why are you still reading?

Third, we can choose to place ourselves under the authority of those who make public their love of, and their desire to teach only what is in accordance with the Bible. We can choose to spend time in the Word ourselves, praying that the Lord will open our hearts and minds to absorb His truth. We can hold our leaders and ourselves accountable to rightly handling Scripture in a loving and helpful manner. It is the purpose of this website to help you do exactly that.

God alone is our ultimate source of truth. He has revealed himself to us and has given us His Word so that we may know how to know, love, worship, and obey Him. No matter what the authority is, whether it is one of the top 50 “Christians” in America or the latest book on the Gospel, if what is written and spoken contradicts the Word of God, it is to be avoided at all costs.

“Sanctify them in Your truth, for Your word is truth.”<sup>29</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *The Church Report*, <http://www.thechurchreport.com/content/view/823/32/>.

<sup>2</sup> The term “sufficiency,” in regards to God’s revelation, includes the importance and necessity of revelation.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Greenville, S.C.: Ambassador Emerald International, 2002) 383.

<sup>4</sup> English Standard Version (emphasis added).

<sup>5</sup> Acts 17:25.

<sup>6</sup> Acts 17:25; Rom 1:20.

<sup>7</sup> Rom 1:20.

<sup>8</sup> Ps 104: 24.

<sup>9</sup> Acts 14:15-16; 17:24-28.

<sup>10</sup> Rom 1:32.

<sup>11</sup> Rom 10:13-14, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Rom 1:18.

<sup>13</sup> Cairns, 383.

<sup>14</sup> *The London Baptist Confession of Faith*, 1689.

<sup>15</sup> Scripture can be preached audibly or presented in written form.

<sup>16</sup> Deut. 29:29; Ps. 1:1-2, 119:1; Jn 14:15; Heb. 1:1; 1 Jn 5:3.

<sup>17</sup> 2 Tim 3:16-17. Quoted below.

<sup>18</sup> ESV. One might wonder why the Apostle Peter did not refer to the Scriptures when he said, ‘God has granted to us all things . . .’ But, at the time he wrote 2 Peter, the New Testament was still being written because God was not finished revealing Himself to the authors of Scripture. Consequently, at the time Peter wrote this book, such a statement (that God has granted us all things in Scripture) may not have been accurate because God was not finished writing Scripture.

<sup>19</sup> *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 119.

<sup>20</sup> 2 Tim 3:15-17. ESV.

<sup>21</sup> We are to submit to our leaders (Heb 13:17) and we are to submit to God (James 4:7). Therefore, we should choose our leaders with caution. If a pastor or teacher does not submit to the Word of God, we should not be under his leadership because he will take us down a path we cannot follow.

<sup>22</sup> Gen 1:1; Is 42:5.

<sup>23</sup> Jn 14:6.

<sup>24</sup> Rom 9:14-18.

<sup>25</sup> The point here is not that people who quote the Bible cannot be trusted; the point is that people cannot be trusted *just because* they quote the Bible.

<sup>26</sup> For the differences between the Bible and other religious literature, see Jeremy Cagle’s article, “The Bible Compared to the Koran and the Book of Mormon.”

<sup>27</sup> Heb 10:23-25.

<sup>28</sup> Heb 13:17.

<sup>29</sup> Jn 17:17. ESV.