
Exegesis 19: Revelation and Inspiration

Ian Rees

An examination of 1 Corinthians 2:6-13 and its teaching about the nature of Scripture.

There are times when Spurgeon's famous dictum about not defending the Bible ("I would sooner defend a lion") is inadequate. It is quite true that the Bible, being the Word of God, is well able to defend itself and is not chained by human disbelief or attempts to consign it to the waste bin. But the great man did not intend that we should stand on the touch-lines while New Age philosophies and liberal theology convert society around us to religious pluralism and relegate the Scriptures to just another holy book (and a bad one at that). Nor was he suggesting that we do not help believers so shaken by assaults on their faith that they question the authenticity of the Bible itself.

No. Christians need help to resist the temptation to weaken in their trust of the Bible and its authority. They need reassurance (and proof) that the Bible really is the Word of God in order to resist the scepticism of our unbelieving age and avoid the pitfalls of liberal interpretations offered in many churches.

This section of Paul's letter is a powerful antidote to doubt and disbelief, in that it combines instruction on two vital themes that deal with two areas of doubt about the Christian message.

In the first, Paul helps us to face the ancient notion that it is not possible to know God. Liberal theology, being a modern manifestation of that old idea, tells people that God is "mysterious" and beyond knowing with any certainty. Paul, without claiming it is possible to know God absolutely, tells us that knowing God is possible because He reveals Himself to us.

The second theme concerns itself with the question of how we can know that the Bible is right. It is all very well for Paul to claim divine revelation, but how can we be sure that he (that is, Paul) recorded it correctly? What is there to assure us that the version we have is still God's words and not Paul's to a greater or lesser degree? We are all aware of the solutions offered today: the apostles got it wrong; they were misled; they embellished the facts; the Bible therefore only contains the Word of God. . . to name but a few. Paul's answer is to explain how the Holy Spirit inspired the apostles and writers to record the truth using God's words.

This passage therefore addresses the dual themes of **Revelation** and **Inspiration**. According to Hodge, "there is neither in the Bible nor in the writings of men a simpler or clearer statement of [these] doctrines."¹ He defines them as follows:

"Revelation is the Spirit's act of communicating divine knowledge to the mind.

Inspiration is the same Spirit's act of controlling those who make the truth known to others."²

Elsewhere he makes the observations that "the object of revelation was the communication of knowledge. The object of inspiration was to secure infallibility in teaching.

Consequently they differ. . . in their effects. The effect of revelation was to render its recipient wiser, the effect of inspiration was to preserve him from error in teaching.³ The reason for Paul's excursion into this field is that he was answering his critics' accusations that his preaching was without wisdom or power (1:18-2:5). His message was regarded as foolishness (1:23); and his method, lacking in eloquence or oratorical power (2:1). He counters such attacks by informing us that the Christian message owes nothing to human wisdom, but is rather a demonstration of God's wisdom, since it is founded upon Christ crucified.

The Message Revealed, 2:6-10a

With his rebuttal of human wisdom in mind, he goes on to say that the Christian message is nevertheless true wisdom from God that believers recognise. There is some debate about who "the perfect" are, as the word usually refers to mature believers⁴, but Hodge is of the view that the context demands that Paul is speaking of believers in contrast to unbelievers⁵. These latter, whose viewpoint is framed solely by the wisdom of the present age, do not recognise the wisdom of God in what the apostles spoke (2:6). The reason for such a failure is put in terms that demonstrate the depths of man's inner darkness and the need for revelation from God.

Paul says that the wisdom they speak of is "God's secret wisdom" (2:7). The leaders of Jesus' day, whose thinking was patterned by the wisdom of the age, did not understand it and demonstrated their ignorance by finally crucifying the "Lord of Glory" (2:8)⁶. Paul uses the word *mysterion* ("secret", NIV), which "has about it nothing of the mysterious in our sense of the word. It does not signify a puzzle which a man finds difficult to solve. It signifies a secret which man is wholly unable to penetrate. But it is a secret which God has now revealed. At one and the same time the word points to the impossibility of man's knowing God's secret, and to the love of God which makes that secret known to man."⁷ The darkness is only emphasized by a further explanation that this wisdom was "hidden" (2:7) and was simply beyond the thoughts of men (2:9). There are grammatical difficulties with Paul's use of the Old Testament at this point. He appears to be giving a quotation ("it is written"), yet what he says does not correspond to any particular OT passage. Morris concludes that "it seems best to think of this verse as a rather free citation of Is 64:4 with reminiscences of other scriptural passages."⁸ Another problem comes out of the fact that the quotation simply ends in the air without concluding properly. Hodge refers us to "the custom of the apostles to quote passages from the Old Testament without weaving them grammatically into their own discourses."⁹ Any grammatical problems do not, however, obscure the intended meaning, that it was simply not within man's natural capacity to fathom out the depths of God's glory prepared for us.

With man's darkness as a back-drop, Paul is now able to highlight God's revelation. This is a turning point within the passage as Paul draws a great contrast: men are unable to penetrate the secrets of God but are not in darkness any longer because God has revealed them (2:10). He uses the word *apokalupto* to reinforce his previous emphasis upon God's secret and hidden wisdom, because it means the unveiling of something previously hidden¹⁰. What he puts in focus here is the source not only of his authority as an apostle but of the authority of the Bible itself. He is stating that the Christian message comes from God, having been revealed to the original apostles and writers by the Holy Spirit. It has not been worked out by an agile mind but has rather been uncovered to show those who could not possibly find it.

There is therefore no boasting on Paul's part as he writes these words: he at one time persecuted the church out of the same ignorance¹¹ that brought about the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus. The difference between Paul and his former allies is that God revealed the truth to him. And there can be no boasting in our knowledge of the truth. What knowledge we have has come to us only through the mercy and grace of God. At the same time this short sentence answers the false humility of modern belief systems. It rebukes the liberal theology that suggests we cannot know God and refuses to acknowledge that God Himself has told us something. It contradicts the spiritual permissiveness of New Age philosophies which maintain that faith is a matter of opinion or personal taste. In opposition to these voices it proclaims that continued ignorance and fudging of the truth is inexcusable; there is light for our darkness because God Himself has provided it; we can know, because we have been told.

The Teacher Inspired, 2:10b-13

Paul's remark about the Spirit revealing the truth to him sparks off the next subject: that of inspiration. This is a vital question, since attacks on the Bible are often frequently directed at its trustworthiness. So we need to be confident that what Paul and the apostles taught corresponds to what God showed them. Paul answers this in a step-by-step argument, leading to a stunning conclusion.

His first statement, in 2:10b,11, clarifies how the Spirit is able to reveal God to us. Paul says that the Spirit searches the deep things of God, so that, just as no one knows the inner thoughts of a man except his own spirit within him, no one is capable of knowing God's thoughts except His Spirit¹².

Out of this Paul then makes the bold assertion in 2:12 that he and the other apostles have received this Spirit (not 'spirit', as AV), in consequence of which they are now able to understand "what God has freely given us," hence the difference between their understanding and the ignorance of their rulers.

But in 2:13, Paul's argument reaches its high-point, as he explains how it is they can actually communicate that understanding. He says that he and the apostles speak of God's free grace not merely in their own words but in words taught by the Spirit. The enigmatic phrase that follows (*pneumatikois pneumatika sunkrinontes*) can be translated and interpreted a number of ways but the context is, in the end, the determining factor in its meaning. Hodge is satisfied that the verb should be translated 'explaining',¹³ ('expressing', NIV), but Morris is unconvinced¹⁴ and, along with Vine¹⁵, takes it to mean 'combining' or 'joining fitly together'. The two nouns in the phrase are problematical since it is not immediately obvious whether they are masculine or neuter, or what they therefore refer to. The context, however, brings us to conclude that Paul is reinforcing what he has just said, and is pointing out that they combine spiritual things (truths) in/with spiritual words.¹⁶

This is a staggering claim, for it is stating that the Bible is not inspired solely in its ideas but also in its words. As Hodge says:

"This is verbal inspiration or the doctrine that the writers of the Scriptures were controlled by the Spirit of God in the choice of words which they employed in communicating divine truth. This has been stigmatized as the 'mechanical theory of inspiration', degrading the sacred penmen into mere machines. It is objected to this doctrine that it leaves the diversity of style which marked the different portions of the Bible, unaccounted for. But, if God can control the thoughts of a man without making

him a machine, why cannot He control his language? And why may He not render each writer, whether poetical or prosaic, whether polished or rude, whether aphoristic or logical, infallible in the use of his characteristic style? If the language of the Bible be not inspired, then we have the truth communicated through the discolouring and distorting medium of human imperfection. Paul's direct assertion is that the words which he used, were taught by the Holy Ghost."¹⁷

Of course, what Hodge mentions at the end of that quotation is exactly our problem today. It is *not* generally accepted that the Bible is inspired in its words, so it is inevitably treated as just another religious tract, written by men and containing a mixture of truth and error, which has been "discoloured and distorted" by the channels through which it came. It is B B Warfield who gives one of the classic answers to this objection:

"As light passes through the coloured glass of a cathedral window, we are told, is light from heaven, but is stained by the tints of the glass through which it passes; so any word of God which is passed through the mind and soul of a man must come out discoloured by the personality through which it is given, and just to that degree ceases to be the pure word of God. But what if this personality has itself been formed by God into precisely the personality it is, for the express purpose of communicating to the word given through it just the colouring which it gives? What if the colours of the stained glass window have been designed by the architect for express purpose of giving to the light that floods the cathedral precisely the tone and quality it receives from them? What if the Word of God that comes to His people is framed by God into the Word of God it is, precisely by means of the qualities of the men formed by Him for the purpose, through which it is given?"¹⁸

But Paul's words are in themselves sufficient to answer such scepticism about the Bible. God revealed Himself to men and then guided them in the recording of truth, so that it came through their personality and was yet the Word of God.

Conclusion

What we have in this passage of Scripture is statement about the way in which Revelation and Inspiration combine, and combine they must. If we are to have a message for our generation, that message must come from God. We have such a message, brought to us with the assurance that the very words used to convey it are God's words. We can affirm with confidence and boldness that God is not unknowable since He has made Himself known to us, and the Truth is not indefinable since God has defined it for us. This is a piece of spiritual high ground which we must never surrender.

References

- 1 Charles Hodge, *SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY*, Abridged Edition, edited by Edward Gross, Baker, 1988, p 83
- 2 op cit p 83
- 3 op cit p 83
- 4 see Leon Morris, *COMMENTARY ON 1 CORINTHIANS*, IVP/Eerdmans, 1983, p 53, 54
- 5 Charles Hodge, *COMMENTARY ON 1 & 2 CORINTHIANS*, Banner, 1978, p 34
cf Acts 3:17, "you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders."
- 7 Morris, op cit p 55
- 8 op cit p 56

- 9 Hodge, COMMENTARY, p 37. cf other examples of this, Eph 3:1, Rom 5:12
10 cf Rom 16:25,26, Eph 3:3-5
11 cf 1 Tim 1:13
12 A clear indicator of the Personality and Deity of the Spirit
13 Hodge, COMMENTARY, p 41
14 Morris, op cit p 59
15 W E Vine, EXPOSITORY DICTIONARY OF NEW TESTAMENT WORDS,
MacDonald, p 219
16 Morris, op cit p 59,60
17 Hodge, COMMENTARY, p 41
18 E J Young, THY WORD IS TRUTH, Banner, 1980, p 64

Rev Ian Rees BA (Hons) is the minister of Wiveliscombe Evangelical Congregational Church in West Somerset

Biblical Docetism?

Docetism applies to a particular distortion of the biblical view of Jesus. In the earliest days of the Christian church there were those, usually associated with the school of gnosticism, who believed that Jesus did not really have a human nature or human body. They argued that he only seemed or appeared to have a human body. This heresy was called docetism (*dokeo*, to seem, to think or appear). It has come to apply to any failure to take seriously the real limitations of the human nature of Jesus.

The charge of **biblical docetism** has been levelled against advocates of inerrancy, most notably by Karl Barth. He accuses us of holding a view of inspiration in which the true humanity of the biblical writers is cancelled out by the intrusion of the divine characteristics of infallibility. For Barth it is fundamental to our humanity that we are liable to error. If the classic statement is *errare est humanum*, to err is human, we reply that although it is true that a common characteristic of mankind is to err, it does not follow that men always err or that error is necessary for humanity. If such were to be the case, then it would be necessary for us to assert that Adam, before he fell, had to err or that he was not human. Not only must we ascribe such error to Adam before the fall and to glorified Christians, we would also have to apply it to the incarnate Christ. Error would be intrinsic to his humanity, and it would have been necessary for Jesus to distort the truth in order to be fully human. Let us never engage in such blasphemy even though we confess the depth to which we have fallen and the high degree of propensity that we do have to err. Even apart from inspiration, it is not necessary for a human being to err in order to be human. So if it is possible for an uninspired person to speak the truth without error, how much more will it be the case for one who is under the influence of inspiration.

Finitude implies a necessary **limitation** of knowledge but not necessarily a **distortion** of knowledge. The trustworthy character of the biblical text should not be denied on the ground of man's finitude.

*R C Sproul
International Council on Biblical Inerrancy*