

REVELATION AND NOVELTY*

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I

In dealing with revelation I will again begin by affirming that my remarks have the character of prolegomena, that is, that they are comments one makes before, in advance. Hence my treatment of the theme of revelation will be philosophical, conceptual, theoretical, which is to say that I will not be dealing with the actual *content* of revelation, except perhaps on an incidental basis.

I have a long-standing interest in the concept of revelation, but I must confess, to my disappointment, that this interest is not often fed by new and innovative insights or ideas. Since I am always on the lookout for treatments of the theme of revelation, I regularly look at publications that claim to deal with it. Most of them, it turns out, focus on the *content* of revelation--and ignore the conceptual issues with which I struggle, the issues on which I am constantly in search of guidance.

The philosophical tradition--taken as a whole--is hostile to the notions of both creation and revelation. Why this attitude in the case of revelation? The answer, I believe, is quite simple: it is the desire in the heart of sinful man for what we might call epistemological autonomy. Just as a toddler wants to walk without holding onto his mother's hand, and therefore winds up falling from time to time, man wants to go it on his own when it comes to orienting himself in this world. Lev Shestov argues that the first man wished "to know," not "to believe," and adds that the first man, like many a philosopher after him, was vexed by the notion of faith, regarding it as "a kind of diminution, and injury to his human dignity."¹

We can illustrate this tendency from the history of philosophy. To begin with Plato, his insistence that the human soul, by virtue of a prior existence in the domain or general vicinity of the Forms, was equipped to know, judge, and evaluate particulars by measuring them against the Forms as yardstick, really amounts to the insistence that man is on his own when it comes to knowledge-gathering. Man is cognitively equipped when he comes into this world: that's why learning can be called recollection.² When we turn to Descartes, who is generally thought to be the father of modern philosophy, we see that the main thrust of his philosophy--especially when we think in terms of how it was received and transmitted to succeeding generations--is the ability of the human mind to attain truth on its own, provided it follows a carefully prescribed method; hence he laid down "rules for the direction of the mind" and wrote a discourse "on the method of rightly conducting the reason and seeking for truth in the sciences." When we have "clear and distinct" ideas, we can be sure that they correspond to reality. Even God's existence is proven by such a route. In the case of the British empiricist tradition (note that an exception should be made for Berkeley), man is again epistemologically autonomous. Everything in the intellect derives from the senses--this is the main thesis defended by Locke and Hume. Thus, we need no knowledge input from without. And if there is to be revelation of some sort--this is Locke's position, whereas Hume did not believe in revelation at all--it must be "reasonable." When we move on to Hegel, we see the thesis of man's independence asserted again, although the gathering of knowledge or wisdom or insight now becomes a collective human project, and a project from which a sort of God (conceived of in pantheist terms) is not excluded. Still, God's participation is not as revealer: knowledge still wells up from within.

Now, not every philosopher has wanted to exclude God utterly from the human process of gaining knowledge. There have been a number of thinkers in the Christian Platonist tradition who have transferred Plato's Forms to the mind of God and then developed some version of an illuminationist or divine participation epistemology. In such a scheme, the

human knower ascends to or draws on the mind of God whenever he gains or develops knowledge. One such thinker is Nicolas Malebranche, who, in the words of James Collins, “. . . pushed to the extreme the rationalist policy of making God serve as the underpinning for an epistemology.” Malebranche, of course, is also the thinker who makes God the cause of all events, both mental and physical.

We have a direct vision of the divine essence, if not in its absolute nature, then at least to the extent that it is sharable by other things. Hence we see the same exemplar ideas according to which God creates the finite world. Since God cannot produce a contradiction, our vision of the ideal essences and eternal truths provides an unshakable mooring for the sciences.³

Such thinking stands at the opposite extreme from the tendency pointed out by Shestov, but it is subject to criticism in the form of a difficult question. Those who make God the ultimate author or cause of all deeds (as Malebranche does), have to answer the question whether God is the author of evil. In other words, what doctrine of sin and evil is then left? And those who resort to an illuminationist or divine participation epistemology must answer the question whether God is the source of error and illusion. In other words, we have to take account philosophically of both sin (wrong action) and error (wrong thought). And a Christian Platonist scheme will not help us here.

If we wax eloquent about the glories of knowledge and proclaim that knowledge cannot be understood and explained unless we pull God into the picture, shouldn't we also wax eloquent about other marvelous processes, such as nutrition? We ingest and digest food, extract nourishment from it, and then expel what we don't need or can't use. Should we develop a divine participation theory of nutrition? Such a notion probably strikes you as absurd. Why? Well, one reason is that you regard nutrition as an extremely earthly--or perhaps I should say earthy--process. We share nutrition with the animals: they also eat, process food, and excrete what they don't or can't use. Would animals then have to be included in a divine participation theory of

nutrition?

My answer is that no such fancy theology is needed in a Christian high school when we take up nutrition: we can explain it in terms of the organs God has created for human beings and animals to use. But then I would go on to ask: what about animal knowledge, animal cognition of reality? Don't we share cognition with the animals? Don't animals possess eyes, ears and noses? Do Christian Platonists also have squirrels ascending to the mind of God to discover whether there are any acorns around to eat or store for winter? Their answer is no, and the reason they can give such an answer is that they tend to conceive of man as an immaterial soul: the soul (think of Plato's "unaided intellect") which apprehends the "pure and unadulterated object."⁴ Thus the similarities between human and animal knowing do not even come up for discussion.

What I wish to suggest is that we, as human beings, gain much knowledge in a manner similar to that used by animals. We use our eyes to look for something to eat, and also to stay away from our enemies. And when we do so, we are functioning as God intended. Over against Christian Platonism, I would stress that God gave us the senses for our use, and that, as good gifts of God, we may rely on them. God expects us to use those senses in all kinds of ways day by day (which is why it is so serious to undergo the loss of one of the senses, such as sight or hearing). He does not promise to give us all the information we need by means of revelation.

My thesis, then, is that we must not equate revelation with the entire domain of human knowledge and experience. Revelation is extremely important--but it is not everything, cognitively speaking. In fact, if revelation were indeed "everything," it would also, in a significant sense, be nothing. And this tendency, namely, to make revelation both everything and nothing, is the error of the liberal tradition within Christianity.

II

In "Creation and Novelty," I wrote about the danger of taming, naturalizing and assimilating the doctrine of creation. I now want to point to the same danger as it manifests itself in connection with the doctrine of revelation. Exactly such a tendency rears its head in liberal Christian theology, for example, the work of Schleiermacher, who wrote: "What is 'revelation'? Every new and original communication of the universe and its inmost life to men is a revelation. Thus every moment. . . can be seen to be revelatory, if you are properly conscious of its special character."⁵ What happens in Schleiermacher's thought is that no proper separation is made between revelation and human responses to revelation. However important the latter, i.e., human responses, may be and however eagerly we look for them, we make a cardinal error if we equate them with the revelation itself. In the background, again, is the principle of continuity, which plays such a fundamental role in liberal thought, for this principle encourages us to blend revelation and response.

I wish to argue against this theological tendency on some formal or non-theological grounds, that is to say, on philosophical grounds. If everything--or virtually everything--is revelation, actually or perhaps only potentially, then nothing is. Then revelation ceases to be a central category in our thought, just as if everything is miracle (as it is, again, for Schleiermacher), then nothing is miracle.

Writers often use the device of highlighting key words, or perhaps phrases, or even entire sentences, by underlining them or using italic type. Some writers need to be restrained by editors: they are then told that highlighting can easily be overdone. If we use italics too freely, they lose their effect. To highlight everything--I can well imagine that everything in a certain writing might seem important to its author--is in effect to highlight nothing. We could easily set an entire book in italic type, but what good would that do? The irritation many people feel with red-letter Bibles comes about in part for similar reasons. At first it seems like a good idea to highlight and set off the actual words of Jesus. But then it turns out that entire pages of some of the gospels

have to be composed of red print (which is less readable than black print). The intended effect of the highlighting is lost.

We must learn to think of revelation as highlight. If all human discourse were revelation, we wouldn't know how to prepare our ears and hearts to listen to the Lord. And if everyone were an incarnation of God--which is more or less what some religious traditions teach--we wouldn't be able to neglect kitchen tasks to sit at the feet of the Master (as Mary did, recognizing that there is plenty of time for doing dishes later). The realization that Jesus--and no one else--is the incarnate Messiah is what gives meaning to the much misunderstood statement, "The poor you always have with you" (John 12:8). Therefore we must stay away from any totalizing view of revelation.

III

Another point of a non-theological nature needs to be made here, and it concerns the capacity of human beings to receive and absorb revelation--or any other communication, for that matter. In information theory one hears talk about redundancy, which means, roughly, repetition. When we are told something we already know, it has no information value for us. Moreover, it hinders the reception of genuine information, as we surely all know from experience. Let me give you a couple of examples.

My favorite National Football League team is the Minnesota Vikings. If I listen to a radio or TV sports report from Buffalo to find out how the Vikings fared, their game usually does not lead the parade of scores, for the folks in Buffalo want to hear about the Bills' game. Often many other scores are reported first, perhaps with film clips from the games. Thus I may have to listen for several minutes before hearing about the Vikings' game. What happens, often, is that I miss the Vikings' score altogether, for while other matters are being discussed my mind tends to wander. I may tune in again when the Vikings are mentioned, but sometimes I am not alert enough. The result is that I have to go out and buy a newspaper to get the information I want.

I have the same problem with weather reports. The CBC radio station I listen to loves to give the weather for all sectors of Ontario, and so I have to wait till my own part of the province is mentioned. By that time my attention may have drifted to something else, and I miss it. (How I wish I had a dollar for every time this has happened to me!) I dare say that you would have the same problem. Suppose, when you phoned directory assistance asking for a certain telephone number, the system gave you much more than you asked for--let's say all the telephone numbers on the page on which the number you are seeking appears. I suspect that when the voice on the phone read to you the number that you had actually asked for, you might not be paying attention and thus miss it.

Scientists tell us that some animals perceive only difference; that is to say, they are unable to perceive a mass of solid color. And some can only be said to perceive when there is movement. Hence if a predator stands completely still, they literally don't see or notice him. This shows us again that focus is a major factor in perception generally, and must be borne in mind when we talk about revelation and the mode in which God addresses us and makes contact with us.

One of the points that must be stressed about revelation, then, is that it has focus and comes to us as addressed. To draw an analogy from contemporary life, revelation is much more like a first-class letter than like junk mail. It is not an almanac listing all sorts of things we don't care to know about, e.g., the weather in faraway places; rather, it speaks to our need, our calling, our situation. In that regard it always includes an element of novelty.

IV

At this point I can pause and already sum up some conclusions. Revelation is only meaningful if it is not continuous with human knowledge and experience, if it is not redundant, if it brings us something relevant to our life today, our calling, our needs. At its very center, of course, revelation is gospel, good news. And it is not just yesterday's

news, which we cast aside like yesterday's newspaper, deeming it of little relevance to our situation today. The fact that the gospel continues to meet with opposition in our own hearts ought to tell us something. We all wish to make our own way, and so we tend to deny our continuing sinfulness. We need to be told day by day that we cannot make it on our own, and to be assured that God has promised to be with us to renew us and enable us to carry out the task he has assigned us.

The fact that revelation is so often rejected ought to be a clue to its real character. The offense which the gospel encounters everywhere--and we must make no exception for our own hearts--should indicate clearly enough that its content, its message, is nothing trivial that we can easily assimilate to our day-by-day round of concerns.

I now propose to draw some implications of this understanding of revelation. The first concerns Scripture--or rather, the story line in Scripture, which we often call Biblical history. Whereas the story line overlaps with general history or world history, and especially the history of the ancient Near East, it can never be assimilated to it but will always stand apart as an indigestible element that causes a degree of perplexity.

One way to express this point is to say that Scripture is a source--or perhaps a set of sources--so different in nature from other sources that we do not know how to include it among the others. As the Christian historian works with Biblical givens, all the while honoring the principle of Biblical authority, he finds a certain unevenness creeping into his work. Omri, for example, is dealt with only in passing in the Bible; his son Ahab is the focus of much more attention. Yet in general history Omri looms much larger. How could one reconcile such disparities?

My answer, of course, is that no serious effort should be made to reconcile them. The integration of Bible with history which is often attempted in Christian high schools is a good idea only up to a point; if carried through consistently it would cost us a great deal. We must study both Omri, for

his overall significance, and Ahab, for his special role in a history designated by God as part of his revelation.

I would even apply this approach to the contentious question of the resurrection of Jesus. That our Lord died on the cross is not the subject of much dispute; we could refer to it as a fact. (I use the term "fact" here for whatever one can appeal to in an argument without running the risk of being contradicted. Thus it is now a fact that President Kennedy was a womanizer; it was not a fact back in 1970, seven years after his death.) Jesus' resurrection is not a fact in the same way. Many people deny it. Some affirm it, but in a peculiar way that does not satisfy Christian orthodoxy. And the rest of us maintain that he arose bodily and eventually ascended into heaven. But these events are not part of general history in quite the same way as his death. Of course the miracles that accompanied the crucifixion are not part of general history either.

Some of you might find this a peculiar contention on my part. Am I somehow denying the resurrection? Not at all. Rather, I am arguing that historical awareness of the past is something shared, and that events that are utterly mysterious and/or miraculous cannot easily be assimilated to it. History is full of undigested lumps: the resurrection is one of them. (Historians generally ignore them, or, if they are too prominent to be ignored, deny them.) I cannot explain the resurrection or render it easy to swallow, but I most certainly believe it, and I base my life on it.

V

The next conclusion is somewhat more obvious: the expanded doctrine of general revelation with which many people in Reformed circles have long operated must be scrapped. The basis for this expanded doctrine, which is closely linked with misunderstandings of common grace, is the "God wrote two books" thesis. Proponents of this thesis are referring, of course, not to the Old and New Testaments but to the Bible and nature. And nature, when looked at carefully, turns out to include history and culture. God makes himself known in creation--that's the original thesis.

But when general-revelation thinkers are done talking, it turns out that he also makes himself known via the puzzling art works in your local museum of avant-garde art.

To deny this doctrine--or, to be more precise, a mistaken version of the doctrine--I will first make an affirmation, namely, that God created the world good, as the book of Genesis emphasizes. And the believer can see in that goodness of creation a reflection of the goodness of God himself. But we no longer live in the Garden of Eden. This is so obvious that I am almost embarrassed to repeat it here; yet it is of decisive significance for our question today. Does the Windemere Basin, a body of water near my home which is famous for the toxic chemicals it contains, also manifest God's goodness to us? Or can it better be regarded as a reminder of man's greed and shortsightedness?

I am quite willing to admit, then, that the Garden of Eden and the original creation can be viewed in faith as a manifestation of God's goodness, and also that vast stretches of unspoiled nature today lead the believer to think about God as Creator. The issue must be joined when it comes time to assess culture: do the wonders of modern secular art and culture tell us about God? I see no reason to affirm that they do, although they certainly testify eloquently as to who man is. And if history does tell us something about God, the lesson is malleable: what conclusion you draw will depend on what convictions you bring to your study of history. When I contemplate the destruction involved in the Battle of Berlin in 1945, I cannot help but think of God as the one who reveals himself as judge of all the earth: the one who toppled Babylonian and Assyrian tyrants from their thrones has also dealt with Hitler. But such conclusions do not spring directly from the battle itself; rather, they result from examining the battle in the light of the Bible.

What then is the positive content of the doctrine of general revelation? The doctrine is usually our response to texts in Scripture that speak of nature praising God: "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (Ps. 19:1). Why not read such texts as they are written? Why not affirm, with Annie Dilliard and the Gospel

according to Luke (see 19:40), that even stones can speak and shout the praises of God? What we do instead is to affirm that dead nature--why does nature have to be dead, by the way?--leads human beings to draw certain conclusions and make certain affirmations.

The significant element in the doctrine of general revelation is the affirmation made by Paul in Romans 1: the invisible things of God have been made manifest so that mankind might be without excuse. How is one to read this? I for my part do not interpret it on an individual level; in other words, I do not take it to mean that every human being who has ever lived has seen enough of nature to be able to conclude that God holds man responsible for his sin. (Many human beings never develop enough mental capacity to engage in such reasoning.) I read it instead in collective historical terms. The line of unbelief, cut off from revelation, that is, from God's speaking, which is always addressed to his people, possesses enough collective recollection of his revelation, which is mediated by tradition, that it is able to see the majesty and power of nature as a reminder that there is some sort of judge over all of us. And in virtue of that reminder--in a time before the gospel went out to all the nations of the earth--they are responsible and, in Paul's phrase, without excuse. Today, if people have not heard, we as believers entrusted with the great commission, are at fault.

Defenders of general revelation in the broader sense which I have been criticizing need to take account of the criticisms of the Scottish philosopher David Hume. (It is a weakness in Bruce Demarest's book *General Revelation*⁶ that it mentions Hume only once--and then in passing.)⁷ In his attack on the teleological or design argument for God's existence, Hume was in a curious and unintended way helping theology get back on track. His age was much preoccupied with "evidences" and the "reasonableness of Christianity." It seemed to many people that theology somehow had to draw on God's handiwork in nature as part of its source material. Hume raised objections about the inferences that were too glibly drawn and maintained that the omnipotent

God of the Scriptures was not a likely candidate for having created the world as we know it. He suggested that if we had to infer a maker, we should opt for a young, inexperienced deity, or perhaps even a bungler.

Was Hume right? No, but I would affirm that Hume was alerting us to the ravages of sin--as they affect both history and nature. I have referred already to the blight of pollution. Let's now turn to the daily newspaper as a record of the deeds of men. There we read stories of greed, slaughter, bungling, corruption--in short, sin of every kind. Does God really make himself known in and through such deeds of men? Do we find out what God is like by reading the biographies of Hitler and Stalin? (Remember that although Hitler was toppled from power, Stalin died in bed.) When people starve to death in various countries around the world today, do their spindly legs and bloated stomachs somehow tell us what God is like? Is a direct inference possible from our suffering world to the character of God? Does our ravaged world manifest the image and likeness of God?

A better argument would be that although we as human beings are supposed to manifest God's image, we often keep it hidden. For those who wish to see the Father, of course, Scripture has a straightforward answer. "Philip said to him, 'Lord show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied.' Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father. . .'" (John 14:8-9). And so we need to remind ourselves and each other that it pleased God to make himself known to us through Jesus Christ, the Son who is the exact image of the Father. And it was not any physical magnificence on our Lord's part that rendered the Father visible either; indeed, according to Isaiah 53 he was nothing to look at, physically speaking. That's part of the surprise that runs through Scripture. Just as David was an unlikely candidate for the role of God's chosen one, so also Jesus of Nazareth. We see again that God is very specific and focused in his revelation. He does not reveal himself generally through strong males and beautiful females (have you ever watched the Miss America pageant with the broad understanding of

general revelation in your mind as justification?); rather, he reveals himself focally through his chosen one--our Lord Jesus Christ.

VI

The misunderstanding of general revelation is theologically dangerous and unhealthy because it serves to draw attention away from the actual revelation--in Scripture and in Christ. If revelation is potentially available to us everywhere in nature and history and culture, there is no need to be preoccupied with the Bible. What pastor has not heard arguments to the effect that on a beautiful summer Sunday God can be encountered in nature just as well as in church?

Such a misunderstanding is strengthened especially by the attitude many Reformed people take toward the enterprise of science, by which I mean natural science. We are involved in natural science in a big way, for we operate Christian liberal arts colleges in which science is taught. Thus we have developed a rationale for studying science which relies heavily on a mistaken conception of general revelation. Our God is a God of order, we maintain, and by investigating orderly processes in physics, chemistry and biology we come to know him better. Thus science really turns out to be theology in that it yields knowledge of God. What this comes to in practice is that not just nature but also our *account* of nature in the form of scientific writings comes to have revelational status.

This tendency to view science itself as a revelation from God is a factor in the debate underway in our circles concerning *The Fourth Day*, a recent book of Prof. Howard Van Till of Calvin College.⁸ For example, in a letter published in *Calvinist Contact* on January 23, 1987, James Taylor argues: "If God created the earth, then it too is God's Word to us." Robert Vander Vennen, in a later issue, follows up by observing:

Whenever Christian people disagree among themselves about aspects of science, what they are disagreeing about is not science but how to interpret the Bible. What is

really at stake is how to interpret the Bible. In recent discussions of Van Till's book *The Fourth Day* the focus too is on interpreting the first two chapters of Genesis.

To get away from such thinking, we need a clear understanding of what science does--and does not--involve. I would maintain that science today, with its operational definitions and its countless models, can be most fruitfully understood as a series of techniques, discourses, and practices that aim at the material transformation of reality for the betterment of mankind. Does science, then, tell us the way reality is? That some scientists aspire to do so cannot be denied, but then, so do lots of other people, including poets and shamans. The issue, in philosophical terms, is whether an ontological interpretation can and should be given for all scientific operations. And I would answer that question with a simple no. Scientists are welcome to talk about neutrinos and other curious sub-atomic particles, for example, but I do not feel obliged to believe that such particles actually exist, any more than I believe that the Gross National Product exists. Many scientific disciplines make heavy use of abstractions and of reifications that correspond to nothing concrete in reality or human experience. The use of terms that name models can best be understood as a manner of speaking.

VII

Part of our response to the Van Till challenge is to articulate what we believe concerning origins and the age of the earth. In this regard I have five points to make. Naturally, I do not claim that all of them are--or should be--part of the creed we hold in common as Christians.

First of all, the Christian answer to the question of origins in its strongest sense is the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. We offer no account, of course, of God's origin. *Creatio ex nihilo* means that the universe is not eternal. I believe that this doctrine is best construed as a denial of various other possibilities that have been raised.

A second, more concrete area of inquiry is the age of the earth: is it relatively old or relatively young? It seems to me that we must maintain that it is a young earth. How young? Here there is some room for debate; I surely would not argue for Bishop Ussher's chronology.

The third area for comment is the proper exegesis of the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Here there is much room for constructive work on the part of conservative Christians. To maintain that these chapters must be taken "literally" (which to me means in terms of everyday experience) will not get us very far; what we really mean to say is that they must be taken seriously. And what this means, in turn, is that they must be understood as part of the gospel message, in a way that will render them suitable material for preaching. We do deal somewhat with Noah in sermons, but we tend to neglect the rest of what we find in Genesis 4 through 10.

The fourth area of comment is the doctrine of the fall into sin, which must be taught as historical. By calling it historical, I mean to say that the fall is something that actually happened within time (unlike the creation itself, which inaugurated time) and that it has consequences for all subsequent human history. It is especially the radical consequences of the fall into sin that need to be stressed when we talk about origins. Where did we come from? It is not enough to say that we come from God, who looked upon his handiwork and declared that it was very good: we must add that we fell very deeply into sin, and that we have only slowly, through God's grace, been raised up again. In my own teaching I stress the consequences of the fall into sin as giving us a perspective on so-called prehistory.

The fifth area of comment is the character of history as constructed, as communal remembrance. In other words, to tackle these questions we need a Christian philosophy of history, including especially an understanding of what historical awareness is and what factors go to make it up. Our young people must grasp the existential need for a myth to live by; without such an awareness they will never comprehend what evolutionism really is in our society,

namely, the narrative of the myth of progress by which modern secular man tries to live. Our main story line is not one of continuous progress but rather creation by God, fall into sin with all of its consequences, and then redemption through Jesus Christ, with the fruits of that redemption already beginning to manifest themselves in human history here on earth.

Should all of these affirmations about origins become part of our creed, our body of official teaching? I don't believe so. I mentioned five points. The ones that have credal significance, in my judgment, are the first (*creatio ex nihilo*) and the fourth (the fall into sin and its radical consequences).

VIII

The final area of application for the conception of revelation I am proposing is the study of the world's religions. That such study is popular today and that it is pervaded by relativism and universalism is surely well known to all of you. How should we respond to this state of affairs? Should we stay away from such study? I don't believe so, for how could we ever square such a strategy with our commitment to missions?

As long as we are in the grip of the misunderstanding of general revelation and common grace according to which, to use the words of Ralph Stob, a former president of Calvin College, God "speaks to men in pagan nations through their noblest souls and greatest geniuses," we will not quickly find the way out. Rather, we will be inclined to suppose that we really have no choice but to become ever more liberal on this question. Stob also wrote: "It is God's grace applied through the operation of the Spirit which explains whatever was good and true in pagan antiquity."⁹ Classical civilization has long been protected in our circles by the umbrella of common grace; today we see modern secular science seeking shelter there as well.

I would propose instead that we simply refuse to regard the world's major religious traditions--however impressive they may be in cultural, artistic, and intellectual respects--as

having anything to do with a self-manifestation on God's part outside of Christ and Scripture. We will then be in a position to study those traditions historically and culturally without surrendering to relativism. Closer to home, we will also be able to join the North American discussion about what we must do to make room in our society for increasing numbers of people whose cultural roots are not in Europe--as our own are--but in Asia.

All of this discussion and study can take place, I am convinced, without any surrender on the essential point of antithesis between the gospel and the religious traditions that oppose it. The notion of revelation as novelty, as providing man with surprising truths that he could not figure out on his own, will safeguard us from the temptation to declare that all religions eventually reach the same general conclusion. We must declare most emphatically that they do not. What Christianity affirms is that God, the Maker of heaven and earth, has manifested himself and made his will for mankind known through one person centrally--Jesus of Nazareth. And so we must continue to think along the lines of the man in Zechariah's prophecy, who took hold of the robe of a Jew and declared, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you" (Zech. 8:23).

We have been holding onto that robe for so long ourselves that some of us suppose that we really are Jews, and that our adherence to Christ is somehow part of our ethnicity. (I point, for example, to the misguided efforts undertaken by the Christian Reformed Church's Synodical Commission on Race Relations.) Therefore, I close with a reminder that our ancestors--perhaps I should speak for myself here and point only to my own Frisian forebears--worshipped other gods before the gospel took hold of them and called them away from pagan practices. The challenge that awaits us is not to somehow synthesize all cultures and ethnic groups but to point people the world over to Jerusalem. They will have to decide for themselves, as we have long been determining for ourselves, what baggage they can take with them on that journey to the city of David.

*This address was delivered as part of the annual Mid-America Special Lecture Series in November, 1987.

ENDNOTES

1. *Athens and Jerusalem*, trans. by Bernard Martin (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1966) 282.
2. See the *Phaedo*, trans. by Hugh Tredennick, in Plato's, *The Last Days of Socrates* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969) 120ff.
3. *God in Modern Philosophy* (Chicago: Regnery, 1959) 88.
4. See the *Phaedo*, 110.
5. *On Religion: Addresses in Response to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. by Terence N. Tice (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1969) 142.
6. Published by Zondervan of Grand Rapids in 1982.
7. See page 81.
8. Published by Eerdmans of Grand Rapids in 1966.
9. *Christianity and Classical Civilization* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950) 27, 34.