

R.W.Bertram on REVELATION – Posted in two parts. This is Part I

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THESES ON REVELATION.

Crossing a Modern Theme with its Biblical Original (Part I)

Robert W. Bertram

- I. Retrieving “Revelation”¹. Theologians since the Enlightenment have so overused the biblical theme, revelation, and often in such sub-biblical ways, that the term has become “inflated.” It has increased in currency but depreciated in value.*
- 2. So much so that critics seriously suggest declaring a moratorium on the term. That is unlikely to happen soon. The bolder course would be to regain for the concept of revelation its original biblical force, notably as it was employed by Paul.*
- II. Does Revelation Save?³. Today’s revelationist theologies assume that the only thing the world has ever needed in order to be “saved” is to be shown that it already is*

saved. If so, we really must not need all that much saving, just a recognition of a salvation which obtains anyway, whether we believe it or not.

4. What we need, presumably, is not that God will love us— that, it is assumed, God does in any case – but only that God would reveal that love to us, persuading us how well loved we already are.

5. If that were true, then, whether we are convinced of God's love or not, whether we accept it or reject it, loved we still are. It is as if the world were unconditionally elected and that grace were irresistible, no matter how resistive the world may appear to the contrary.

6. Beginning from that dubious premise, revelationists are left to busy themselves with only one change, a change of human hearts and minds, an attitudinal change in our relationship to God.

7. Still, within revelationism even that change makes little difference in the end. For in revelationist theologies the only decisive relation is not our relationship to God but God's to us, which allegedly has never needed changing in the first place. That relationship is assumed to be fixed – by definition gracious.

8. Thus the “revealing” of divine grace seems to be the only project left to promote, though even that makes little difference ultimately. That is why the idea of revelation, though currently it abounds in theologies everywhere, has drastically lost its original cash value. It has become an inflationary concept.

III. Getting Loved⁹. What this revelationist half-truth

forgets is how inter-personal the biblical love is. Inseparable from God's loving is the part we play in it, precisely as the beloved.

10. Consider this biblical view. Just negatively, if those whom God promises to love should disbelieve the Promiser, then they are not in fact "getting" loved. What they are getting – and from God! – is the opposite.

11. Conversely, it is exactly in their trusting the Promiser that the promised love comes true. Of course, they do not make it come true. The love is always of God's making. But neither does God love without the loved ones' receiving it, without their getting loved – which is what faith is.

12. Note the analogy to human promising. A bride promises to love her husband. But suppose he distrusts her. Then, not only is he deprived of her love. Her love itself shrivels to a private feeling, a solipsism. Her conscience may be clear. But is he being loved? If so, only in a way that discredits him. Is that love?

13. Grace is like kissing. God does not do it alone. Unilaterally? Yes. Even passionately. But not ineffectually, not without the beneficiaries' receiving it. The kiss is not thrown or forced or slept through. In one measure or another, sooner or later, it is accepted, enjoyed. If not, whatever "kiss" there was becomes instead a reproach.

IV. Two Prior Questions
14. There are at least two prior questions about revelation which revelationists neglect, though Paul did not. First, as what is God revealed? Only as gracious? Not also as wrathful? Second, is it only God who is revealed? Aren't we as well?

15. As to the first question, as Paul knew well, there is also a revealing of God which is anything but saving, namely, the revealing of divine condemnation. That revelation, too, must be faced. Yet it cannot be faced except on pain of death.

16. As to the second question, Paul reminds us that it isn't only God who is being revealed, whether in wrath or in mercy, but so – in both cases – are we: either as infuriating or as endearing. Indeed, it is only as we heed God's revelation of us that God's self-revelation occurs.

V. Divine Wrath
17. On the first point, that God is revealed also as wrathful, Paul leaves no doubt. "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against... the wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth." (Rom. 1:18)

18. In fact – literally, in actual, observable fact – that is the divine wrath, that God lets them "by their wickedness suppress the truth."

19. What is observable, empirically so, is at least the fact of "wickedness" and even perhaps the fact that that wickedness functions to "suppress the truth." What Paul discerns in that fact, and that is what is "wrathful," is that God lets us do it. "God gave them up." (v. 24)

20. Human, truth-suppressing wickedness implies not just an absence of God but an absenting of God.

21. That is the hard point, however, which is so incredible, most of all to revelationists, namely, that our suppressing the truth by our wickedness has the active acquiescence of the Creator, who indignantly abandons us to our untruth.

22. That is why, because it is so offensive to piety, that the bitter, suppressed truth about God's wrath has to be "revealed," literally unveiled. Without that revelation we moralize our sin, arrogating it exclusively to ourselves, denying any thought of God's angrily letting us have our way.

VI. Contradiction in God? 23. The starkest theological antithesis is not, as we often pretend, between "sin and grace," namely, between something we do (sin) and something God does (grace.) True, that antithesis would be stark enough.

24. But no, starker still is the corresponding antithesis, as Paul puts it, between divine law and divine promise, between God's cursing and blessing.

25. Notice, that antithesis between God's wrath and God's mercy is real, not merely apparent. It isn't as if God only seems to be wrathful but really is only loving, or as if wrath is just a temporary disguise until it is unmasked, disclosing the kindly God behind it. What is revealed is judgment no less real than its opposite, mercy.

26. Nor is it a matter of two gods, a demonic one who accuses and a pitying one who forgives. Both actions are the doings of one and the same righteous God.

27. But then doesn't this revealed antithesis of wrath versus mercy, law versus gospel, imply a contradiction within God? Perhaps it does.

28. Still, need that be offensive? Might it not be Good News? Isn't it a marvel of the divine mercy that out of love for us God is willing even to incur contradiction? After all, God could have avoided such inner conflict by

sticking just to the law and being done with us.

29. And isn't the greater marvel this, that God finds a way, as Paul says, to "reconcile" the contradiction (2 Cor. 5:18-19), and at immense personal cost, even if that entails being triune in the process?

VII. Understandable Denial³⁰. Revelationists typically evade Paul's antithesis by construing "wrath" not as God's real self, which for them can only be love, but rather as a passing – stern, yes, but passing – "form of grace."

31. Once the divine wrath has thus been domesticated, it becomes instead a kind of interim "tough love," a merely tactical means for bringing sinners to mercy – and never anything but such a means.

32. Would that The Critical Process were that benign or always that temporary.

33. On the other hand, it must be admitted that the divine wrath is seldom manifest in all its force and fury – and finality. So it is understandable, just on empirical grounds, why revelationists might shrug off Paul's and other biblical writers' depiction of God's anger as exaggerated.

VIII. Moses' Face Veiled³⁴. Paul senses how extreme his claims about divine wrath must seem, especially to the religious establishment. And he accepts the burden of proof. He appeals to the establishment's own Writings, to the story in the Book of Exodus where Moses descended from Sinai to present his people with the newly revealed law. (2 Cor. 3:7-18)

35. So blinding was the brightness of Moses' face, having just come down from his encounter with the Lord, that Moses had to don a veil in order to spare his people the

withering glow of the law's "glory." ("Glory" might better be spelled glow-ry.)

36. With that allegory Paul dramatizes a universal condition that still prevails: the law always comes to us "veiled." Its fierce "condemnation" of us has to be muted, actually belied, in the process of transmission. Else we in our weakness could not tolerate the law's mortifying truth even minimally.

37. Moreover, this veiling of the law, a concession to human weakness, is a compromise to which the law's own Author is party. God colludes with our veiled minds and deliberately conceals the full truth of our condemnation.

38. The only alternative, it seems, would be for God to lift the veil from the law, as a bullfighter lifts his red cape from the path of the charging bull. But then the price of truth would be the goring of the crowd downfield. Instead, for the moment, the veil stays between and the people's fate remains hidden from them.

IX. Divine Quandary³⁹. God, so to speak, is in a quandary. .

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[To be continued in the next ThTh posting.]