

ANDREW TOMPKINS

---

# The Interplay between Forms of Revelation: Implications for Theological Method

## Introduction

The interplay between forms of revelation has been a matter of much discussion in theological discourse for many centuries. While this article is not particularly concerned with the final say on the doctrine of revelation it is concerned with revelation and its relation to theological method. In other words, what is the significance of the various modes or forms that revelation takes in connection with the way theology is approached and done? Revelation is a challenging concept to define without creating some sense of ambiguity. This article will proceed with a short definition of revelation as the various forms that God utilizes to reveal who he is to humanity. Theology in this paper is understood to be the dynamic pursuit of attempting to understand who God is as a relational being and the corresponding faith in God manifested as a result of his revelation.

## Presuppositions

This article presupposes that God is triune and that Christ is the Incarnate God who came to earth in the flesh. It also presupposes that Scripture is the inspired Word of God and that God is also revealed through experiences, people, the faith community known as the church, and that this revelation takes place in cultural contexts. The primary concern of this article is not to isolate forms of revelation but rather to work with the forms listed above to understand better how they interplay with each other as revelatory forms and what this means for theological method.

In order to do this Paul's Damascus road encounter with Christ and

the subsequent events will serve as a paradigmatic narrative to be used as a framework for the discussion. This narrative displays all of the above forms of revelation and can aid in an understanding as to how these forms interplay with each other in cultural contexts.

### Limits and Tools

This article is limited in that it does not pretend to be the final word on the topic nor comprehensive in its research outcomes. It is more of a working project meant to foster further study, reflection, and research on the issue of revelation, Christ, and theological method. It is somewhat limited in that it focuses on particular biblical passages, a particular person (Paul), and on a particular context. There is much more biblical material that is relevant to the thesis of this article and that would inform and enhance the thesis to a great extent, but such will be bypassed due to space constraints.

In order to accomplish the task several different disciplines were consulted. Of course systematic theologies played a role, but works that would fall under other theological disciplines, such as historical theology and biblical theology were also consulted. Missiological, anthropological, and sociological literature were also referenced. These are often disciplines that are left out of theological discussions, but have been increasingly recognized as extremely valuable and important voices in theological discussion.

### The Interplay of Revelatory Forms in Paul's Encounter

Acts 9:1-31, 11:25-26, and 12:25-13:3 relate the account in Scripture of Paul's transformative encounter from Christian persecutor to Christian epitomizer. However, it is not the only place that references this story. Later in his life Paul would frequently make references to this experience, both in his speeches and epistles. Acts 22:2b-21 records Paul's retelling of the events of his transformation before a crowd of angry Jews in Jerusalem. Again in Acts 26:4-23 Paul tells the story to King Agrippa at the court of Festus. Each of these are relevant for the purposes of this paper and will be consulted. Paul also references this encounter in several different places in his epistles: in 1 Cor 15:9, 10, as well as Gal 1:11-24 in a very explicit manner. There are many more implicit or less direct references in other epistles as well. Beyond these direct references, however, it is important to recognize that "the Damascus Event [is] the hinge around which Paul's career turned, and there is no way one can seriously engage with Paul apart from this" (Barnett 2013:392). While there were a variety of things that would have influenced Paul's theology as found in his epistles,

his Damascus road experience is clearly one of the most formative experiences he had.

The various revelatory forms of Paul's encounter could be debated, but this article will argue that God, at the very least, used the following forms to reveal himself. First, there is the direct encounter on the road in which Jesus is seen both in physical light and in person and Paul also heard an audible voice. Paul is then sent to get a word of encouragement and prophetic guidance from a "disciple" who is also part of the growing community known as The Way. Thus, both the disciple and the larger community serve as conduits of revelation and help Paul interpret his experience through the OT Scriptures, which Paul was already well acquainted with. Paul then goes out to tell others of his experience and becomes an active member of the community by becoming a witness to Christ whom he has experienced and begun to understand. But this is done in a limited way, until many years later, when he is sought out by Barnabas and brought to Antioch, which then leads to his full call to share God with the Gentiles.

### Vision/Epiphany

As Paul is traveling down the road to Damascus a major event takes place that is not easy to picture or fully comprehend. Luke describes it in Acts 9:3 in the following way, "light from heaven flashed around him." Paul in his later descriptions of the event in Acts 22:6 and 26:13 puts even more emphasis on the overpowering light that flashed before him. In fact in Acts 26:13 he claims the light was "brighter than the sun." Clearly the type of light and the impact of this light was something Paul would never forget. This was no ordinary, natural light but the light that only God possesses. This light was so bright it blinded Paul; however "Paul's conversion experience is an experience of revelation described in terms of seeing," affirmed in several passages, where Paul explicitly states that he saw Christ (1 Cor 9:1; 15:8) (Thurston 2003:236).

Beyond the sight sensation of this encounter, there was an audible voice which Paul heard and even replied to. Jesus engaged Paul in a conversation, asking Paul why he was persecuting him (Jesus). Paul, in a state of shock, asks simply "Who are you Lord?" thus recognizing that this being is more than an angel. Interestingly, the conversation recorded in Acts 9, and then as retold by Paul in Acts 26, have a difference in how much Jesus actually spoke to Paul. In the early account (and in Acts 22 as well) Jesus simply asks a few simple questions and then directs Paul to Damascus, promising help there. But in Acts 26 Jesus gave a more detailed description of his future plans for Paul, a description that the earlier accounts attribute to Ananias. It is not necessary to get caught up in speculating

about the compatibility of these texts because, either way, these both say that Jesus and Ananias played major roles in helping Paul know what his future was to be.

Paul clearly had a major encounter with Jesus that was real and undeniable. His companions, while they did not hear the voice or understand the encounter, were aware that something occurred outside the norm. They were also confronted by the very real physical reality that Paul was blind. So there was no denying that Paul had an incredible encounter. For Paul this was a pivotal moment, not only in his recognition of Jesus as God, but also in his apostolic authority. It became common for Paul to reference this moment of revelation as evidence that he had seen the risen Lord, just as the other apostles had. This was clearly a revelatory encounter in which God revealed himself to Paul in a very real and incredible way.

### Ananias the Prophetic Healer and Disciple

Soon after Paul's encounter God gives Ananias a vision in which he calls to Ananias and sends him to the house where Paul was staying. He gives Ananias a message to tell Paul that he has been chosen by God as an "instrument" to "proclaim" Christ to the Gentiles. Ananias is now more than a simple disciple, as he is called in Acts 9:10, but also a prophet who is used to reveal to Paul God's future plans for him. In other words, Ananias serves as a conduit of revelation through the prophetic word he speaks.

God also reveals himself in another way through Ananias. By having Ananias place his hands on Paul, God heals Paul of his blindness, working through the hands of Ananias to reveal his power over Paul's physical deformity caused by the light that Jesus had flashed before him three days prior. Ananias therefore is a vessel of revelation on several counts, and the text shows that he was a faithful revealer of God's will.

As a disciple Ananias does one more act that is also crucial in the revealing process for Paul. He takes Paul to join with the other disciples who were to be found in Damascus, the very people Paul had come to imprison and possibly kill.

### The Way as Scripture Interpreters

Acts 9:20-22 mentions that Paul could not stay quiet for long. The passage says that he went out into the synagogues and began engaging with the Jews, and in fact, he "baffled" them by proving that Jesus is the Messiah. Implied here is a very key point in the revelation of Jesus to Paul. In order to "baffle" the Jews, Paul would have had to share more than his incredible encounter testimony. In fact what is implied in this text is that

Paul was actually able to show the Jews from the Scriptures who Jesus really was.

While it is true that Paul was well versed in the OT Scriptures from a very young age up until this transformative encounter, he still did not find Jesus of Nazareth in those Scriptures prior to this point. How does he move from his pre-encounter understanding of Scripture to his Acts 9:20-22 understanding? The simple answer is that it was through the community of disciples known as The Way or the Early Church.

This group served as the hermeneutical community which guided Paul in helping him interpret his encounter of Jesus by showing how Scripture revealed Jesus (Hiebert 1994:91). Paul had encountered Jesus on the road, but there were still many details to be filled in. He had also encountered Jesus through the healing and words of Ananias, but this also left gaps in his understanding. It was his time spent with the disciples in Damascus (Acts 9:19b), which would have included Ananias who Paul later calls a “devout observer of the law,” who would have helped him gain a clearer understanding of the Christ as he is revealed in Scripture. Thus, Paul is able to go out to the synagogues and show his fellow Jews from the Scriptures who Jesus of Nazareth really is.

### Paul's Return to Antioch

For a variety of reasons Paul was not able to fully engage in ministry in Jerusalem and therefore returned to his native city of Tarsus. Sometime later, as the multi-cultural church in Antioch began to grow, Barnabas recognized the need for a leader who could easily relate to and engage with this diverse group. It was at this time that the Holy Spirit prompted Barnabas to remember Paul who was in Tarsus. Barnabas searched him out and brought him back to the diverse church in Antioch where together they not only aided the church but helped foster major growth.

In many ways Antioch became the proto-type for how the church should function. This multi-cultural setting served to continue the revelatory experience of Paul who now was also actively engaged in revealing Christ to others across cultural boundaries. Notice how an important aspect of the revelatory experience of Paul comes in Acts 13:1-3. Through the Spirit, God reveals to the diverse group (verse 1 illustrates very clearly that this was a very diverse group) that God has called Paul and Barnabas to now engage in the work that Jesus called Paul to several years prior on the road to Damascus (Stott 1990:216-218).

Once again the community becomes an agent of revelation by facilitating the call of the Spirit through the laying on of hands and affirming the Spirit's sending of the two men. Paul's intercultural experience and call

at Antioch would play a major role in how he would move forward in revealing Jesus to a diverse Gentile world that God was calling him to.

One could try to argue for the primacy of various forms of revelation over the others, but this paper is not interested in that debate at this particular juncture. Christ serves as the tie that binds the revelatory encounters into one cohesive unit. In each instance of revelation it is Christ who is manifested, in some forms more clearly than others possibly, but each one feeding off of and feeding the other. Each revelatory encounter revealed Christ in a unique way, while at the same time the encounters worked to mature Paul's understanding, building on prior encounters and revelations. Christ was the center and thread woven throughout each revelatory encounter. What does this mean for theological method? The next major section of the paper will attempt to flesh out the implications in light of Paul's encounter and subsequent witness through his testimony in Acts and the epistles he wrote.

## Personal and Dramatic Experience

### Christ as the Center

It does not take an overly quantified amount of study to recognize that Paul's life and teachings, or put another way, his theological framework, was centered in Christ (Rom 15:17, 18). It must be stated that while Paul is Christ centered, the Christ he knows and shares is not a being alone, but a being in trinity. This must not be lost sight of for Paul's Christ-centeredness was really Paul's God-centeredness. And all was viewed through the incarnate, crucified, and resurrected Christ whom Paul knew relationally, starting with his Damascus road experience and moving forward.

But the discussion must now move towards looking at Paul's experience of revelation, in its various forms and how they relate to Paul's understanding of doing theology. Looking at Paul's encounters with God, as shown in Acts, will guide the discussion, but the discussion will move beyond this to the wider corpus of Paul's writings.

### Paul's Encounter Outside of Scripture

Systematic theologians throughout the last several decades have spent large amounts of prolegomena space on describing the difference between general revelation and special revelation. These have become the common denominators in most discussions on revelation. Thus, this issue need not be re-discussed here. Paul's encounter, however, may actually create a problem for some theologians in that it seemingly blurs the lines between these two types of revelation that are often strongly separated by theologians.

The physicality of the Damascus road encounter is essential for it to have any real meaning. Paul the persecutor needed a major shock to get him to not only stop what he was doing but completely turn and change his focus and direction. At the same time Paul's experience was outside the Bible. In other words, here was a man who knew the Scriptures of the day as well as any and yet had not encountered Christ in them. He needed an encounter that was more direct than reading words on a page, no matter how inspired those words were. He needed a light to shine on him that was brighter than the sun, and he needed to see Jesus in order to take him seriously.

Continuing with the above train of thought, Paul's experience was probably tested by Scripture, but it would also have to be noted that Paul began to view Scripture through his experience. In other words, yes the church of the day probably needed to verify Paul's experience by checking to see if it fit well into a scriptural framework, but it also had to read Scripture in light of what happened to Paul. For Paul, at the very least, Scripture was dramatically "changed" from a dry book of law, to a drama of Christ's story which he now found himself in the midst of.

### Theological Method and Personal Encounters

Any theological method that neglects Spirit-led encounters and experiences pointing to Christ that people have with God faces the danger of not being a dynamic method but rather a static method that begins to depersonalize God and turns theology into a mere scholastic study that dissects passages of Scripture. Paul's experience is simply a more dramatic version of all those who have experienced God's presence at some point or several points in their lives. The theologies of the Global South can be of great help to the Western theological method in this regard because they often seem to naturally recognize more readily God's working in encounters outside direct Bible reading. It is not uncommon to hear of people having dreams of Jesus or experiencing healing from Jesus in the Hindu and Muslim contexts, which is often the starting point of their journey to and with Christ (Doyle 2012). If we are honest with ourselves, most people even in the Global North, have had conversion experiences or moments where they encounter God in special ways. A theological method that is Christ centered should also be willing to take seriously the many testimonies of Christ working in people's lives.

There is one last point to be made before moving to the next section. The initiator of Paul's encounter was God. Jesus reveals himself to Paul while he was yet a sinner, and he did it in a concrete and unmistakable way. God met Paul where he was. Furthermore, it will become clearer as this paper progresses, that this principle (as experienced by Paul) would

have a profound effect on the way Paul proceeded to do theology and work in mission.

### Connecting Christ-centered Experiences with Method

When doing theology, personal experiences with God as a form of revelation are often neglected. As noted above, theologians from the Global South tend to understand and articulate this type of encounter much better because they tend to take these types of experiences more seriously. There is no doubt that a vast majority of Christians would be able to describe some sort of event, not necessarily as dramatic—although in some cases maybe more dramatic—but certainly just as life transforming as Paul’s in their own lives. Yet, when doing theology there is a fear that we must not allow our experiences to become part of the hermeneutic we use (Ward 1994:221–223; Kärkkäinen 2014:63, 72). What this does is cause a disconnect between real life experience and the actual way people articulate their faith. This in no way invalidates Scripture or other forms of revelation, but rather is part of the interplay between various forms of revelation. The key component is that the experience or encounter is with Christ (Walls 1996:43–46).

### People’s Role as Revelatory Conduits

#### Ananias

God was also clear in his brief conversation with Paul on the road that he was to meet a man in the city who would help him. After three days Paul and Ananias met. When they met, Ananias not only spoke to Paul, but as he prayed with him God healed Paul of his blindness as well. This is yet another aspect of God’s revelatory encounter with Paul, but this time through a faithful follower. Simon Kistemaker notes that it is an “interesting fact that Ananias, who is a disciple but not an apostle, serves as Jesus’ instrument to work a healing miracle and to confer the Holy Spirit” (1990:343). Paul would also, in his own ministry, reveal Christ through acts of healing and other signs and wonders (Rom 15:19; see also 2 Cor 12:12). There is no doubt that Paul also shared the details of his encounter with Ananias who was probably shocked, but also encouraged by this miraculous story. So begins Paul’s fellowship with the believers, which would become a major part of Paul’s focus over the coming years. Most of Paul’s epistles are not theological tomes but rather Paul’s inspired counsels to the churches which were filled with people he loved.

What is important to note at this juncture is that the process of



revelation continues through this interaction between Paul and Ananias. Paul is brought to a “devout” man, who was strong in the Jewish tradition but also a follower of The Way and even called a “disciple.” He receives a revelatory vision of Paul and his future, which he then shares with Paul. Therefore, Ananias acts as a conduit of revelation. God works through this faithful servant to reveal himself to Paul. This is yet another example of revelation taking place outside the direct locus of Scripture. Keep in mind that this paper is not attempting to put all forms of revelation on the same level, as later sections will make clear. But at the same time there can be no doubt that Ananias, a sinful human being like everyone else, was used by God as a conduit of revelation to Paul.

Paul needed this added form of revelation to help him start to make sense of his Damascus road encounter. It is important also that the man chosen as a revelatory vessel was not just any man. God worked within the context in such a way that he chose the very best person to continue revealing himself to Paul. At this point in time, Paul would no doubt have struggled to receive further light from anyone other than a devout follower of The Way who was also a strong Jew. Ananias was just such a person, and thus God in his wisdom contextualizes his revelation in a way to give it the greatest chance of impact. There will be more on this in the section on culture later.

### Impact on Theological Method

God revealing himself through human conduits has a major impact on how people think about and do theology. The connecting strand is Christ. Both the person having the experience and the person hearing about it are sharing Christ with each other in somewhat different ways. Both are acting as conduits of revelation, used by God to further an understanding of the faith they both have in him. Therefore, theology that does not take people seriously is an incomplete theology. In other words, if it is true that people are encountering Christ, whether on a scale with Paul or not, then it is also true that people are conduits of revelation and that their stories are not only worth listening to but essential in the pursuit of an understanding of faith.

Paul, on several occasions, spoke about his testimony as a revelation of Jesus (1 Cor 2:1–2). Beyond that, a quick read of the greetings in many of Paul’s letters show that Paul was in intimate contact with a large number of people, both women and men, who continued to impact his experience with God. “Testimony is not [simply] a synonym for autobiography” (Stott 1990:178), but also a conduit to reveal God. For some it may reveal God to them for the first time, for others it may add light to their current

relationship with God. This means that the doing of theology must allow for the stories of others to be heard and also allow them to help shape people's understanding of God. The key is that the stories must uplift Christ and be centered in the Triune God, or as Paul puts it, "whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Cor 10:31).

### Orality

Anyone who has spent time or grown up in predominately oral cultures can more easily understand the importance of non-textual communication. The Global North is made up of textually-based cultures. Reading and documentation have been the ways of passing on knowledge and values in the Global North for several centuries, whereas the art of story-telling and passing on important cultural knowledge orally has not been a major part of the Global North's perspective. That is currently changing with the shift to narrative being concretized in the social media revolution that has swept the Global North, but in many ways it is still a text based culture.

Anthropologists have shown that oral cultures have a similar ability to pass on values and concepts as accurately as text-based societies. A "word in season" is worth much more than a "book shared" in such cultures. Experience is interpreted and understood in the stories told, and passed on. This is not to say text has no valuable role to play in these societies or that the Bible is invalid (Arrington 2015:398–412). What it does is help people understand that the telling of a story in many places has a deeper impact on both the listener and story teller than reading a text (Peterson 2009:98–109). The biblical world was also much more oral than text based. The narratives and wisdom literature of Scripture were primarily passed on through oral methods as opposed to mass-produced text—which of course was to come much later after the printing press was invented. This in itself should force theologians to rethink the power of testimony as a form of revelation. For much of history, and even in many current cultural situations, the spoken word is of primary importance.

A challenge arises however, when the power of experience above is taken seriously and understood. If each person has their experiences and they go around telling others and the listeners also go around telling their experiences, there is little cohesiveness. There needs to be a guiding point of contact, which is essentially the Triune God as revealed in the Incarnate Christ. But even this statement is not enough to really give cohesiveness to story-telling, encounters, and experiences lived and testified to.

## Implications for Doing Theology

All of the above headings in this section have profound implications for doing theology. First of all, the importance of recognizing the role of people in revealing who God is becomes much more important. This obviously elevates the role of mission and ties mission and theology together. As people share their testimony they share God and as one listens to others one listens to God in a sense. In order to construct a valid theological method, one has to take seriously the testimonies of others. Not just the “veterans” of the faith, but even the “newbies” in the faith. Ontologically speaking, the shared stories of people concerning their encounters and relationship with God is a move towards a working theological knowledge of who God is. The stories cannot be the final arbiter, nor can they be viewed as completely trustworthy, but they must be taken seriously. Without the witness and testimony of people there is a real risk that God becomes a mere scholastic concept stuck in a book.

## The Community of Faith Seeking Understanding

### Engaging with The Way

What is interesting at this juncture in Paul’s newfound experience is where he resides for several days and what he does as a result of where he resides. Through Ananias, Paul was introduced to the community of believers known as The Way. This was the wider group, the disciples of Jesus in Damascus. There are not many details as to exactly what Paul did while he was with them, but what he does after being with these believers gives us a major hint as to what he was doing.

Acts says that soon after that Paul went out and began engaging with his fellow Jews, and in fact, was “baffling” them with his ability to show Jesus was the Christ (Acts 9:22). There is only one way that Jews would be baffled in this situation. If Paul simply told them about the Damascus road experience or even about the words of Ananias the wider Jewish community would not have taken him seriously. This passage instead implies that Paul was able to show them through Scripture that Jesus was the Christ, and this is what was truly baffling.

Keep in mind that Paul knew the Scriptures long before coming to Damascus; yet through all his study and time with Scripture it had not brought him to Christ. When he encountered Christ on the road to Damascus God did not direct Paul to scriptural passages or give him a Bible study. Even Ananias, in that first meeting, does not mention Scripture. So how did Paul come to begin a journey of finding Christ in Scripture?

The community of faith in this instance carries on the work of revealing God to Paul. They act as a conduit to point Paul to the God of Scripture who matches the God of his experience and the God that Ananias spoke to him about. It was in this group that Paul was able to begin to see the riches of the OT witness to Jesus. It was also in this group of believers that he was able to interpret his own encounter more clearly. The community of faith gave meaning to his encounter and to Scripture. God revealed himself to Paul through the community of faith. Paul also reveals Christ to the wider group through his testimony. The community finds meaning and cohesiveness in the shared stories of its community members. Revelation goes in every direction inside the community of faith. Thus Paul can say to the church in Rome, “I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith” (Rom 1:1–12).

### Antioch

The group in Antioch performs a similar function to the small group in Damascus. The multi-cultural group in Antioch is more than simply another church planted (Walls 1996:17, 18). It also plays the role of revelatory conduit for Paul and Barnabas. First, it is here that Paul gets his first sustained engagement with ministry, at least as far as the record of Scripture is concerned. It would seem that much of Paul’s approach to theology finds its roots in his Damascus and Antioch experiences, because it was in these places that God called Paul to mission to the wider Gentile world.

Notice carefully how God called Paul and Barnabas. Rather than a direct vision or word from God the Spirit informed the group as a whole of God’s plan for “setting apart Paul and Barnabas” for the “work” God had indicated to Paul way back on the road to Damascus. It was most likely through the prophetic role of some of those present (Acts 13:1) that God revealed his will through the Holy Spirit (Kistemaker 1990:455). Once again the church played the role of revelatory conduit, only this time as an affirming group who recognized God’s call and laid their hands on Paul and Barnabas to send them off.

### Importance of Community

Before dealing directly with Scripture it is important to look more carefully at what it means for God to reveal himself through a community of faith or the church. A cursory look throughout scriptural history leads to the conclusion that God primarily works through groups not just individuals. This is not to downplay the major role individuals played

throughout scriptural history. But the roles of these biblical characters almost always seemed to find meaning when understood within the community. Whether it be Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, or Esther, it was the community that provided the context for and in many ways gave meaning to their stories (Tompkins 2015). Sociological research, has in many ways, proven that part of the essence of what it means to be human involves communal interaction (Grenz and Franke 2001:231).

### Bringing the Personal Encounters Together

It is the church that brings the experiences and encounters into a place of contact and puts them together, creating a “mosaic of faith” (Grenz and Franke 2001:49). “In a sense, to be Christian is to be a storyteller” and the stories are told in communities of faith (48). The stories brought together can also be critiqued and interpreted more clearly. When the encounters and experiences are left to the individual, or even to a small group of close friends, there is a tendency to misinterpret the encounters even when using Scripture. This is due to the sinful, selfish nature of humanity and its natural tendency towards self-deception and ethnocentrism.

The church, on the other hand, becomes a place where theology more safely develops. Notice that it is in the church, not the academy, that this is done. This is a move away from purely academic theology to community-based theology (Greenman and Green 2012:62). Of course this is an ideological picture of the community of faith, unfortunately it is not always as safe as one would hope, but the alternatives are worse (Grenz and Franke 2001:213; Vanhoozer 2000:80). Patient listening and humility are essential in order for the wide variety of stories found in the community to have a voice and a say in the theological method. Without the community of faith people are left to choose how to interpret their stories and also how to act on that interpretation individually.

Because the triune God is communal in nature, it is impossible to understand God without also being communal. The community of faith is where God is revealed in a wider way than the other two forms of revelation discussed above. The church becomes God’s revelation to the world as a body in mission beyond the individual witness of the members. But the experience of the individual members is essential to give the wider revelation meaning. The community, however, must be willing to reflect critically on its past and tradition in order for the community of faith to avoid becoming traditionalists and historicists in the sense of idolizing the past. Tradition may have the potential of cutting off God’s present revelation through people, the Bible, and even through the traditions themselves, if they are viewed outside of the interplay of revelations.

## Community and Theological Method

What does this mean for theological method? Any theological method which does not allow itself to be critiqued and even created in the community is not a dynamic method that can relate to real life. Christ and the church are inseparable and therefore theological method must also take the church seriously. Without the interpretative help of the wider faith community theology runs the risk of individualistic God talk and sterile religion for the private world of the individual (Grenz and Franke 2001:224).

### The Norming Norm

The article thus far has been very limited in addressing Scripture as revelation. There have been hints here and there, but I have purposely avoided Scripture until this juncture. Most discussions on revelation are ultimately discussions about the role of Scripture as revelation. Unfortunately they often leave behind the other forms of revelation discussed above as though they are not connected.

### Paul and Scripture

If one were to remove all the OT quotes from the writings and sermons of Paul one would be left with almost nothing. Paul's sermons and epistles are through and through biblically based. He often uses statements like, "the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures" (Rom 1:2). Paul clearly had a very high view of Scripture and was constantly promoting a scriptural approach to theological thinking and mission praxis.

As was briefly noted in the section on community, Paul encountered Jesus through the community when they helped Paul encounter Jesus through Scripture. Paul was an astute scholar of the OT, having grown up in the context of the Pharisaic worldview. But it was only after his Damascus road experience that Scripture became more than a book, but an actual meeting place between Paul and God. Paul encountered Jesus in Scripture and then traveled the world helping others do the same. Paul's understanding of Scripture as revelation actually included the mission element; he says in his letter to the Romans that Scripture has revealed God "so that all nations might believe and obey him" (Rom 16:26).

## Scripture, Theology, and the Interplay of Revelatory Forms

As the example of Paul and his writings remind us, Scripture and theology are closely tied together. Jesus is not just Incarnate, he is the Incarnate Word, and Scripture is where this Word is most clearly revealed throughout history. And this will happen continually even into the future, until Jesus returns. Scripture contains all the elements that are found above in textual form (Rom 1:2). Scripture has a wide variety of encounter experiences, recorded through inspiration, that are meant to continue on as stories to be told between people. They are stories that are meant to shape and norm the mosaic created by the community. Much current theological thinking emphasizes a narrative approach to Scripture, or Theo-drama as one theologian put it (Vanhoozer 2005; Vanhoozer 2006:110). What this potentially does is free Scripture up from the stagnation of “written” text to “living, breathing Word.” It is not to say that all readers of Scripture must become narrative theologians, but that Scripture is about God’s revelation throughout history, in real encounters with real people who then incorporate that revelation into real life situations lived in relation to God.

This is one of the reasons why comparing Scripture with Scripture is so essential. The revelation of God becomes clearer and history begins to gain meaning in the context of the metanarrative of Scripture (Wright 2006). But Scripture read outside the influence of encounters and experiences is Scripture without meaning. In other words, simply comparing Scripture with Scripture in a closed-off room will eventually become a futile activity. Experiences and encounters must take place in order for the stories of Scripture to have their full revealing power. Beyond that, Scripture that is not read in community, but rather as an individualistic Scripture, is in danger of becoming the word of the reader not the Word of the author, the Spirit. Scripture is interpreted by the individuals and communities who engage with it, just like every other encounter with God. As seen above, Scripture must go through an interpretative process. But Scripture is unique in that it also informs the interpretative process by revealing to the reader and the hermeneutical community Christ who is the Word of Scripture (Vanhoozer 2000:74). In other words, as the individual and the community interpret Scripture together—and it is essential that it be done together—it is from Scripture that they find the norm for interpretation, not only of other parts of Scripture, but also for all the experiences that make up the mosaic of the faith community.

## Interpreting Together

Paul needed an experience to help him see God in Scripture, but at the

same time he also needed the Word to give any type of meaning to his encounter. Beyond this the Word and the encounter only find real meaning when testified of and shared in the community of faith, which then aids in the interpretative process. This is an unending hermeneutical spiral.

There is another unique role that Scripture plays. While the encounters, experiences, and members of the community may share certain characteristics with each other, ultimately if left with only these as forms of revelation there would be a confusing cacophony. Scripture does not change, because it is the Word of the God who also does not change. In a sense then, Scripture is a stabilizer in a world that is constantly changing and in which experiences also change. This does not mean that interpretation does not change; to the contrary, interpretation does and must change—not that every interpretation must change but that no interpretation must be viewed as necessarily final—to continue to be a dynamic revelation. However, underlying that change is a sameness in that Scripture has not changed, only the interpretation has (Walls 1996:11; Vanhoozer 2000:87). In this way Scripture acts as a source of solid revelation that cannot be moved. Scripture is normative.

### Scripture as the Final Arbiter

Scripture can be translated and can cross cultures, unlike any other form of revelation, precisely because of its inherent nature. In a sense Scripture incarnates over and over in much the same way that Jesus incarnated to earth.

It is ultimately Scripture that “stands in judgment over all” of our experiences, cultures, and “theological expressions” (Grenz and Franke 2001:71). It is interpreted Scripture, but Scripture nonetheless. Scripture also reveals God in a way that helps people see more clearly the paths that lead away from God. Experience struggles to do this, even the community cannot fulfill this revelatory role like Scripture does (see 2 Cor 11:1–4 for an example of this). Because Scripture records the repeated human encounters with God through history, it helps judge our own stories and the community’s mosaic of stories.

It is Scripture that can both critique and confirm our experiences and encounters, because it is where God has chosen to record how he reveals himself in a variety of settings. Scripture can critique my North American worldview and my wife’s Indian worldview at the same time, but in dynamically different ways. This brings me to my final point about Scripture. Scripture would seem to reveal God best when understood dynamically. Not that Scripture changes, which it does not, but that interpretation of Scripture does. So in reality, Scripture, as understood in



light of faith, is inevitably dynamic and when understood in interplay with the other forms of revelation this is perfectly safe and even a good thing (Kärkkäinen 2014:71).

### **But What about Culture?**

Anthropology and sociology have shown that culture is a given reality. There is no way to live without being part of some sort of culture. Therefore, to argue that Christians should avoid culture or that the Bible speaks against culture does not fit with reality. A more appropriate understanding is that culture is real, and also, like everything else on earth is affected by sin and therefore there are no perfect cultures.

#### Culture and Scripture: Towards a Biblically-shaped Worldview

Any person who reads Scripture or experiences God is inevitably influenced by the culture they are a part of. Andrew Walls clearly articulates this when he says:

The fact, then, “if any man is in Christ he is a new creation” does not mean that he starts or continues his life in a vacuum, or that his mind is a blank table. It has been formed by his own culture and history, and since God has accepted him as he is, his Christian mind will continue to be influenced by what was in it before. And this is true for groups as for persons. All churches are culture churches—including our own. (1996:8)

Once this is understood, this can help people as individuals and faith communities to more carefully reflect on the role their various cultures are playing in their experiences and even their readings of Scripture.

But as the above section demonstrated, there is a spiral here as well. The reading of Scripture is not only influenced by the reader’s cultural viewpoint, but can also influence the reader’s viewpoint so that it actually acts as an agent to transform culture. As a result missiologists are using phrases like “biblically-shaped worldview” or “transforming into a biblical worldview” to describe the interplay between culture and Scripture. There is a danger however, when a theologian or missiologist believes they have discovered the totality of what a biblically-shaped worldview looks like based on their study this side of the eschaton.

#### Method and Culture

If the above is true, then one’s method is influenced by one’s culture,

whether the person realizes it or not. Not only that, but it begs the question, what is to be done with so many cultures around the world? If there are so many cultures, does not that mean that there will be innumerable interpretations of Scripture (Hiebert 1994:97-103)? In some ways this is true, but the above discussion of Scripture is important here. Scripture does not change and has proven that it can be translated into any language. Keeping in mind that culture and language are intimately tied together so that one cannot exist without the other, it then becomes clear that Scripture is a God-breathed miracle in its ability to be applicable in all cultures. As Andrew Walls has so aptly put it, theology continually crosses cultural barriers creating a situation in which “the theological workshop never shuts down” (2012:26). This should be encouraging and in some ways creates a type of excitement at the possibility of discovering God in new and profound ways by engaging with all the different interpretations and experiences (Walls 2012:33; Grenz and Franke 2001:67).

### The Incarnation Principle

The Incarnation is a perfect reminder of the above and brings everyone back to the center, namely Christ. The Word came to earth and dwelled on earth as a human being. Walls sees the act of Christ as in some ways a type of translation which is replayed over and over as the Word is translated into new cultures (1996:23). Christ came and lived on earth inside a cultural context. But while He was living in the context of Palestine he was also challenging the culture around him. Jesus did not promote a kind of cultural assimilation so that all would eventually be part of one culture; rather, he challenged the cultures around him to glorify him within their culture.

Paul recognized that this principle was part of who God is, and that incarnating into cultures was an essential part of being a revelatory conduit. Paul was all things to all people in order to reveal Christ to some so that they could be saved (1 Cor 9:19–23). When Paul says that he became a Jew or one under the law and outside the law he is simply following the example of Christ. He was flexible in how he approached other cultures, knowing that each culture was different. Paul did not critique culture itself as bad but rather brought Christ into contact with the cultures he was a part of and lived in so that the cultures could be transformed.

All revelation takes place in a culture. Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus took place within a cultural context. Paul was confronted by Jesus on the road and then sent to a devout student of the law who had a Jewish background. In other words, Paul was sent to someone he could easily relate to and understand (Kistemaker 1990:337). Throughout Paul’s

epistles and the narratives recorded in Acts Paul continues this legacy by always doing his best to take the context seriously and adjust his method of revealing Christ to fit the context. Therefore, as a revelatory agent Paul is also a contextualizer. His theology is not just founded on his experience, his interaction with disciples and the faith community, and his reading of the Word, it is also grounded in a cultural setting (Vanhoozer 2006:111). This is not to say that culture is where Scripture is grounded or where truth is found most clearly, but rather to say that Scripture and people pursuing truth are cultural by their very nature. Therefore, a good theology must also be contextual. In fact all theology is contextual, unfortunately however, much of non-Western theology has been labeled contextual while often Western theology is considered more universal in nature (Vanhoozer 2006:88; Wright 2006:42; Kärkkäinen 2013:16-21).

### Implications for Theological Method

There is a very serious implication based on the above consideration. If all theology is influenced by culture, including a person's experience, community, and reading of Scripture, then that means there is a subtle but serious danger that must be looked out for. Much of the theological thinking and subsequent published material of the past centuries was done and continues to be done in fairly mono-cultural settings. In fact, much of the written theologies available are actually found to be from one primary cultural group, namely white, Global North, males (Walls 1996:10). David Adamo spells it out in the African context in the following way:

Eurocentric hermeneutics have not addressed the abject poverty prevalent on the African continent. They have not addressed the oppression and the pain of witches and wizards, which is very real among African people. Such hermeneutics have not addressed adequately the problems of African ancestors and the question of land domination on the African continent. African culture and religion are not taken seriously in Eurocentric hermeneutics. (2015:62)

Slowly scholarship is taking note of this across cultures, but the change is difficult in the coming. The Global South is producing tremendous amounts of theological reflection that must be taken more seriously. Walls has forcefully argued that much like the cross-cultural diffusions of Christianity in history that have served to stymie erosion and decay within the church, so it is again in the present. The cross-cultural diffusion of the present very well may have saved Christianity from a slow death in the Western world (Walls 1996:19).

The faith community must become more intentional in taking seriously

an inter-cultural approach to Scripture and faith gatherings (Yancey 2003). Walls may be able to help when he talks about a “dual nationality,” whereby a disciple of Christ has “a loyalty to the faith community which links him to those in interest groups opposed to that to which he belongs in nature.” This means those that come from different cultural backgrounds and who view the world differently in many ways must come together (Walls 1996:9). In other words in a world that is globalized there is no longer any excuse for mono-cultural understandings of revelation, mono-cultural readings of Scripture, or mono-cultural faith gatherings. Anthropologist Paul Hiebert points out that, “theologians can often detect the cultural biases of theologians from other cultures better than they can critique themselves” (1994:91). As an anthropologist and missiologist Hiebert has been able to experience first-hand the value of a global hermeneutical community doing theology together.

Tite Tiénou, the chair of the Mission and Global Theology Department at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, has isolated four major issues in the theological atmosphere of the present: “the West’s ‘hegemony postulate’, the West’s self-perception that it is ‘the center,’ the perception that third world scholars as ‘purveyors of exotic, raw intellectual material to people in the North’, and the ‘dialogue of the deaf’ between the West and the rest of the world” (2006:46). He goes on to persuasively argue that while many Christian historians and missiologists have grasped the importance of these issues, many in the theological disciplines have not.

### Intercultural Necessity

Because all cultures contain the footprints of God as well as the footprints of Satan, it is in the interest of all cultures to be engaged in a dynamic theological method where Scripture is the norm. This article argues that the most dynamic way to do theology is to engage in a method that first takes all the forms of revelation seriously, and second, does so in an inter-cultural environment. The inter-cultural environment will then bring the mosaic of faith communities closer to completion; it will bring the forms of revelation of God into a broader and more accurate light (Vanhooser 2006:119).

This does not negate all past theological methods that did not take an intercultural approach to theology, for in many ways intercultural connectivity was beyond the ability of previous generations of theologians to comprehend or deal with. Walls points out that the norm for the NT church was intercultural communion, but over time this was lost as theology became more entrenched in certain cultural milieus. He goes on to say that there is “now an opportunity to recover” this intercultural element (2012:32, 33).

Paul's experience again is in many ways the blueprint. It is interesting to note that Paul hailed from Tarsus, a multi-cultural city, and that much of his early ministry, after becoming a follower of The Way, took place in Antioch, which Scripture repeatedly points out was extremely multi-cultural (Acts 11:20; 13:1). It is interesting to note that it was the Antioch church that, through the revelatory work of the Spirit, affirmed the call of Paul and Barnabas to go out as mission agents.

The rest of Paul's earthly life can be summed up as one continuous intercultural engagement. Therefore, Paul's theological method was no doubt influenced by his inter-cultural engagements. Walls looks at the churches Paul was a part of and the theology he developed out of this inter-cultural experience and claims that "this was, surely, not simply a historic episode, but a paradigmatic one, to be repeated, even if briefly, again and again" (1996:25). This may explain why his theology is so rich and to this day unmatched by any of the systematic theology tomes.

### **Towards a More Wholistic Methodological Approach**

Without God's revelation, theology is of no consequence and therefore theological method unnecessary. Therefore, the above understanding of revelation becomes essential in that it recognizes the various forms of revelation as all being valid and in need of each other; however, it avoids building on one of these forms as its theological foundation. Any revelatory point can act as the starting point, leading to the hermeneutical spiral. What is important is that each form of revelation be centered in Christ and interplay with the other forms of revelation. Scripture plays a unique role in this hermeneutical spiral by being the unchanging norm that all the other forms keep coming back to. But Scripture alone cannot function in its fullest as a revelatory form without the other types of revelation.

The theological method also must take seriously the cultural contexts that revelation takes place in, which ultimately effects the theological endeavor. Therefore, as God continues to reveal himself through various forms of revelation in various contexts, it becomes essential to pursue God in intercultural settings to draw closer to him. The thread that brings it all together is God working through the Spirit, leading people to the Incarnate Word who draws them back to the Father.

If the thesis of this article is taken seriously there also would need to be a development of research in the area of other religions and how they fit into the wider conversation of revelation and culture. There is a push in today's globalized world, to take the theological concepts of other religions more seriously, leading to a wide variety of preliminary conclusions, but this is an area that needs much more careful exploration. Finally, an

evaluation of the role mission plays in theological development is also crucial towards a more wholistic approach to understanding revelation and culture as they relate to theological method in a Christ-centered way. This paper is meant to serve primarily as a launching pad not a final say on the subject.

### Works Cited

- Adamo, David Tuesday. 2015. "What Is African Biblical Hermeneutics?" *Black Theology* 13, no. 1:59-72.
- Arrington, Aminta. 2015. "Orality, Literacy, and the Lisu Linguistic Borderlands." *Missiology* 43, no. 4:398-412.
- Barnett, Paul W. 2013. Appendix 1: Paul in the Book of Acts. In *All Things to All Cultures*, edited by Mark Hargin and Alanna Nobbs, 392-395. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Doyle, Tom. 2012. *Dreams and Visions*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.
- Green, Gene L. 2012. "The Challenge of Global Hermeneutics." In *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission*, edited by Jeffery P. Greenman and Gene L. Green, 50-66. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.
- Greenman, Jeffrey P., and Gene L. Green, eds. 2012. *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.
- Hiebert, Paul G. 1994. *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.
- Kärkkäinen, Veli-Matti. 2014. *Trinity and Revelation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2013. *Christ and Reconciliation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Kistemaker, Simon J. 1990. *Acts: New Testament Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.
- Petersen, Gideon. 2009. "God Speaks in the Heart Language." *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 5, no. 1:98-109.
- Stott, John R. W. 1990. *The Message of Acts*. The Bible Speaks Today Series. Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.
- Thurston, Bonnie Bowman. 2003. "Paul on the Damascus Road: The Study of the New Testament and the Study of Christian Spirituality." *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 38, no. 4:227-240.
- Tiénou, Tite. 2006. "Christian Theology in an Era of World Christianity." In *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, edited by Craig Ott and Harold H. Netland, 37-51. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.
- Tompkins, Andrew. 2015. *God's Mission to the Nations: An Old Testament Study Applied in the Hindu Context*. Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Global Mission Centers.
- Vanhooser, Kevin J. 2000. "The Voice and the Actor." In *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, edited by John G. Stackhouse Jr., 61-106. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005. *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2006. One Rule to Rule Them All? In *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, edited by Craig Ott and Harold H. Netland, 85-126. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.
- Walls, Andrew. 1996. *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*. New York: Orbis Books.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2012. The Rise of Global Theologies. In *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission*, edited by Jeffery P. Greenman and Gene L. Green, 19-34. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.
- Ward, Keith. 1994. *Religion and Revelation*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.
- Wright, Christopher J. H. 2006. *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.
- Yancey, George A. 2003. *One Body One Spirit: Principles of Successful Multiracial Churches*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.



Andrew Tompkins is currently working on a PhD in Mission Studies at Andrews University. Prior to that he spent nearly 6 years in India working as a teacher, pastor, and Associate Director of the Center for South Asian Religions located at Spicer Adventist University in Pune, India.