Commentary On WCF 1.1 – On Divine Revelation

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WCF 1.1

Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing: which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.

Commentary

Proposition 1: *Revelation* is the manifestation of a thing that was once hidden or obscure.

Proposition 2: There are two species of *Divine Revelation*:

- 1) Natural Revelation
- 2) Supernatural Revelation

Proposition 3: Supernatural Revelation is formally distinguished on account of:

- 1) the object of revelation being above the light of nature,
    - e.g. Trinity, Incarnation, etc. (called *substantially supernatural*)
- 2) the manner of God revealing being above the natural order,
    - e.g. miracles, dreams, visions, etc. (*called modally supernatural*)
- Q. Whether the existence of a supernatural order (divine truths which surpass human reason) can be known to those devoid of faith?
    - Yes (see Aquinas, SCG1.C3).
    - To those who accept that God is, it can be reasonably concluded that God exceeds our finite capacity to know.
        - "For our intellect's knowledge, according to the mode of the present life, originates from the senses: and thus things which are not objects of sense cannot be comprehended by the human intellect except insofar as knowledge of them is gathered from sensibles. Now sensibles cannot lead our intellect to see in them what God is, because they are effects unequal to the power of their cause. And yet our intellect is led by sensibles to the divine knowledge so as to know about God that he is, and other such truths which need to be ascribed to the first principle. Accordingly, some divine truths are attainable by human reason, while others altogether surpass the power of human reason."
    - To those who accept the existence of separate substances (angelic intellects), it can be reasonably concluded that God surpasses the angelic intellect by a more infinite degree.

        - "Now the angelic intellect surpasses the human intellect more than the intellect of the cleverest philosopher surpasses that of the most ignorant idiot: because this distance is contained within the limits of the human species, which the angelic intellect surpasses. For an angel knows God through a more excellent effect than does man, as much as the angel's essence, through which he is led to know God by natural knowledge, is more excellent than sensible things, even than the soul itself, by which the human intellect mounts to the knowledge of God. And the divine intellect surpasses the angelic intellect much more than the angelic surpasses the human. For the divine intellect by its capacity equals the divine essence: hence God perfectly understands of himself what he is, and he knows all things that can be understood about him. But the angel does not know what God is by his natural knowledge, because the angel's essence, by which he is led to the knowledge of God, is an effect unequal to the power of its cause. Consequently, an angel is unable to grasp by his natural knowledge all that God understands about himself, neither is human reason capable of grasping all that an angel understands by his natural power. Accordingly, just as a man would show himself to be a most insane fool if he declared the assertions of a philosopher to be false because he was unable to understand them, much more so would a man would be exceedingly foolish if he were to suspect of falsehood the things revealed by God through the ministry of his angels, because they cannot be the object of reason's investigations."
    - To those who are humble enough to recognize how little they know about themselves, their own human nature, and the many sensible things in the world below us (plants, trees, birds, bees, etc.), we can reasonably conclude that if we can hardly know our own nature, we cannot know God's nature apart some Divine assistance (grace, supernatural revelation).
        - "Furthermore, the same is made abundantly clear by the deficiency which we experience every day in our knowledge of things. For we are ignorant of many of the properties of sensible things, and in many cases we are unable to discover the nature of those properties which we perceive by our senses. Much less, therefore, is human reason capable of investigating all the truths about that most sublime essence."
    - According to faith we believe that God far exceeds our natural capacity to know (Job 11:7, Job 36:26), and that even the knowledge of faith is imperfect (1 Cor. 13:9, Isaiah 40:18-19).

Proposition 4: *Natural Revelation*, called here "the light of nature," can refer to: the subject, the power, the habit, the act, or the object of knowledge. We may further reduce these to three according to Object, Medium, and Subject.

- By way of illustration, we may consider a lamp shining on a bronze statue in a dark room. The *Lamp* is the Subject, the *Rays of Light* are the Medium, and *the Bronze Statue* is the Object. We could say that the Lamp "sees" the bronze statue through its own light. In a similar way, we can say that our Mind (Lamp/Subject) may know truth through its

own Power, Habit, or Act (Rays of Light/Medium) when it looks upon God's created effects (the Bronze Statue/Object).

- 1) The *object* (*that-to-which*, or *terminus ad quem*) of knowledge about God is found either:
    - externally in the world of sensory experience (e.g. stars, rocks, trees, etc.), the mind look outside itself.
    - internally in the conscience (the "natural law"), the mind looks inside itself.
- 2) The *medium* (*that-through-which*) of knowledge about God refers to the mind's ability (power, habit, or act) to reason discursively from effects back to their cause(s).
- 3) The *subject* (*that-from-which*) of knowledge about God refers to the fallen natural mind, devoid of the light of faith (sometimes called "natural reason," or "common sense").
- There is no contradiction between Natural and Supernatural Revelation, they are truth in harmony with one another (e.g. *Summa Contra Gentiles*).
- The Bible teaches (Divine Supernatural Revelation!) and experience confirms that there *is* a natural revelation and knowledge of God that human reason can attain to apart from supernatural revelation (chiefly contained in Holy Scripture). This knowledge of God is imperfect and usually mixed with errors on account of original sin (and personal sin, laziness, lack of time, etc.), and does not extend to doctrines like the Trinity, Incarnation, and other mysteries of salvation that Christ uniquely reveals and then encloses in Holy Scripture.
- In Romans 1, The Apostle Paul lists only *some* of the attributes of God that can be known from the light of nature, such that there is a Creator, with eternal power, who deserves worship, thanksgiving, and glory, and that He will judge us for our deeds, good and evil.
- In Romans 2:12-16, the moral conflict in the heart and consciences of the Gentiles (without the law) is brought forward as further evidence of this natural light of reason, which if reasoned from correctly implies an expectation of future judgment. If there is no God, then there is no basis for objective morality (universal right and wrong), and therefore the experience of a conflicted conscience must be accounted for in some other way (resulting in the folly of materialism, evolution, various social pressures, etc.).

Proposition 5: Natural Revelation is insufficient for our salvation, but sufficient for our damnation.

- The Confession goes on to say (with the Apostle Paul), that this natural knowledge of God is insufficient for salvation. And since salvation requires faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 10:8-15), it pleased God to reveal himself in a supernatural way through the prophets (Hebrews 1:1-2), and then to commit that supernatural revelation to a written form.

Proposition 6: Supernatural Revelation is most necessary for man's salvation.

- Because of our fall into sin and ignorance, Supernatural Revelation is most necessary (John 1:4-5, 9-10).
- Because Romans 10:13-14 says, *For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a*

preacher? If the knowledge of Christ is above our natural knowledge, supernatural revelation is most necessary for man's salvation.
    - Note that Divine Supernatural Revelation is a wider category than Holy Scripture. Holy Scripture is the written record of the Supernatural Revelation that God's Spirit desired to enclose for us by the prophets, apostles, and evangelists.

Proposition 7: It pleased God to commit the Supernatural Revelation of Himself and His Will into a written form:

- 1) For the better preserving and propagating of the truth,
- 2) For the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world.

Proposition 8: The Canon of Holy Scripture is the final *written form* of Divine Revelation and may not be added to.

- Why do we affirm this?
    - 1) Because Hebrews 1 presents Christ as the culmination of God's speech (God's "Final Word"), and therefore it would be unfitting for additional Scripture to be necessary after the revelation of Christ.
    - 2) Because God the Holy Spirit chose to conclude the book of Revelation with these words: *For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book. (Rev. 22:18-19)*
    - 3) Because to deny this proposition would be to affirm that Holy Scripture is incomplete.
    - 4) Because you only lay a foundation once, and God is the perfect builder of all things, including the Church (Heb. 3:4).
- Note: The debate between fair-minded Cessationists and Continuationists could be resolved by maintaining a real distinction in final cause between Private Revelation and Common Revelation. Holy Scripture has a unique final cause as Common Revelation for the Catholic Church, whereas even the prophets and apostles had experiences of Supernatural Private Revelation (see 2 Cor. 12, etc.) that were not intended for "Inscripturation." Thus, today God can (and does!) speak privately and directly to people, but such speech does not necessitate that it be written down and made a rule of faith for the universal church. Scripture alone is this supreme infallible rule of faith.

Quotations

St. Thomas, Commentary on 2 Timothy 3:16

But you will say: how is it that not all writings are divinely inspired, since Ambrose says that every truth, no matter who utters it, proceeds from the Holy Spirit?

I answer that God works in two ways: either immediately, as his own work, when he works miracles; or mediately, by using secondary causes, as in the works of nature: your hands have made me (Job 10:8), although they were formed by the activity of nature. And so in man he instructs the intellect both immediately by the Sacred Writings, and mediately by other writings.