

## ESSENTIAL CHURCH, PART 12: REVELATION

John 1:1-5, 14; Acts 18:24-28 (NASB)

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In our last study we spoke about the inherently gravitational nature of genuine Christian fellowship. The church of Christ is held together by him the way a star holds the planets in its solar system with an overwhelming force. We are not held together because we all think the same or have the same tastes. We also made the distinction in our last study that we are not primarily held together by a humanly-devised and maintained fence, where church leaders erect a boundary and enforce who is in and who is out. In the church the first purpose of the revelation of God in the Bible is to define the gravitational center which is Christ. That is a much harder concept to grasp and employ than a fence which creates a group based on human similarities and agreements.

How exactly does the revelation of God in the Bible function in a gravitational fellowship? One way to study it is by examining cases where the revelation has failed to give guidance and unity to the church, the same way that physicians hold morbidity and mortality sessions to learn why things turn out badly for some patients.

One current and startling example of such a failure is the growing use of profanities in the pulpit in ostensibly Bible-believing churches. One pastor, in his zeal to relate to the unchurched, titled an entire sermon series using the worst vulgarity as the key word. Each individual sermon in the series is another clever way to employ that vulgarity. I watched a video where another overzealous pastor took the same vulgarity and said: "From now on, the phrase '[bleep] you' is going to stand for forgiveness. So I want you to look at your neighbor and say: '[bleep] you!' Call your relatives and say: '[bleep] you!'" And he kept expanding it from there, so I stopped listening. Another pastor used the sermon title: If God is So Good Then Why Is Everything So [bleep]? Another liked to use the expression: "Big [bleeping] deal!" One church took the three-letter abbreviation of a common phrase with this same vulgarity and made those the three key letters of their church mission statement. They then made huge banners with those letters for the entrance to the church.

Where has the breakdown in our Bible study methodology occurred so that vulgarities are now considered acceptable and even useful in Bible teaching? Was it the first step of inductive study where we try to be good observers of the text itself? Was it the second step where we apply many study tools to understand what God is saying in context? Or did the breakdown occur in the application of the truth of God to our behavior today?

Let's try it ourselves to see if we can do it successfully: "**Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear**" (Ephesian 4:29). We could pile up many similar verses. It should be easy to see that for pastors and churches to use vulgar speech is not the failure of the revelation, it is the stark refusal to accept the authority of the revelation to guide our speech. There is no difficult interpretational work to be done here. Believers are commanded not to say foul things. So how should the revelation guide believers in a gravitational fellowship?

## THE PRIMACY OF THE REVELATION

First, there must be an individual and group commitment to the primacy of the revelation of God found in the Bible. The Apostle John has given us a profound statement of that revelation: **"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. ...And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth"** (John 1:1-5, 14).

In the beginning of everything that has been created was the Word, who is God himself. The Word is prior to everything we know. The very principle of life is the special possession of the Word, and that life is the light for all mankind. No form of physical or spiritual darkness can overcome the light of this Word. This creating, life-giving, glorious Word put on true humanity and walked with us so we could see him, know him directly, and receive both grace and truth. And then the Word became inscripturated. It became a written representation of the incarnate Word in the Bible. When the incarnate Word shines God is revealed to us, and that glory is transmitted by the inscripturated Word. Thus you cannot say that you love and obey Jesus Christ without loving and obeying his word.

Dr. Albert Simpson, founder of The Christian and Missionary Alliance, published a set of commentaries called *Christ in the Bible*. It is a set of expositions displaying the revelation of Christ in his word. If you look there for discussions of the hot theologies of Simpson's day you will not find them. If you look for blasts at other churches you will not find them. If you are seeking lengthy recitations of various interpretations you will not find them. You might wonder: *Then what is this commentary for?* It is for feeding the people of God with the pure milk of the Word. It reflects Simpson's awareness of the primacy of the revelation which God has given us in the Bible, and its complete sufficiency to build mature disciples of Christ. Simpson built the movement of which you are a part by relentlessly teaching the Bible.

So the first way an essential church engages the gravitational force which holds it together is with a shared value of the primacy and sufficiency of the word of God. This is where we learn of God, Christ, and ourselves. This is where we turn to find salvation, to feed our souls, to answer our questions, to guide our lives, and to rebuke our waywardness.

A willingness to use profanity in church "ministry" is evidence that the word of Christ's revelation is not considered either primary or sufficient, because no one can be confused about the meaning of **"let no unwholesome word come out of your mouth."** Long committee meetings in the church where we never open a Bible or quote a Scripture are troublesome in this light. Major life decisions where we do not consult the revelation reveal the same lack. We must decide: Are Christ and his word first or not? We will not hold together as a church without this shared value.

## EVERY BELIEVER'S RESPONSIBILITY TO THE REVELATION

Secondly, it is well to revere the word of God, but who does God hold accountable to know it, transmit it, and defend it? If you are a believer and have a pulse, it's you. While the Lord assigns

different roles and responsibilities with respect to his word, everyone shares the same essential relation to it, as Jesus said: "...**The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life**" (John 6:63). This is like asking: Who is responsible to know what water is and drink it when they are thirsty?

An event in the early church found in Acts 18:24-28 is instructive about the way we all should take responsibility for the word of the Lord: "**Now a Jew named Apollos, an Alexandrian by birth, an eloquent man, came to Ephesus; and he was mighty in the Scriptures. This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he was speaking and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus, being acquainted only with the baptism of John; and he began to speak out boldly in the synagogue. But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately**" (Acts 18:24-26).

Apollos was what I like to call a tiger: fervent in spirit, bold, and eloquent, which means gracefully powerful. He would have seemed larger than life to most of us, and a little intimidating. We learn that he was instructed in the truth during a time before the collection of the written New Testament portion of the Bible. And he spoke accurately—so far as he knew. But a husband and wife team, Priscilla and Aquila, realized upon hearing him that he was missing key parts of the truth of Christ.

We must first credit these two with being willing to overcome the natural tendency to think that this was someone else's problem. Somehow they knew: "It's us!" Secondly, we must credit them with the boldness to take a risk and confront a tiger. We all know that when you confront a tiger you usually bleed. I have even seen an ordaining council revealing a little fear of a tiger who had come before them for examination. There was a concern that he was just too strong. Is there a difference between strong and headstrong? Yes, and it is the job of the ordination mentor to help such a person sort it out in a godly way. My response to that council was to ask: Are we saying, as the word of God is trampled every day in the West, that we don't want any tigers? They said No, we're not saying that. And I said: then assign him to me.

Notice that Priscilla was a full participant in this intervention with her husband. I have found that the heated debate about the role of women in ministry has caused many women to retract too far. Do not shrink from discussing the truth whenever and with whomever necessary. Eternal matters are at stake. I remember being at Council once with a bunch of ministry friends and their wives. We were feeling pretty negative about the conduct of business and were voicing our complaints. We had clearly strayed from wise evaluation into personal kvetching. That's Yiddish for "complaining in order to make ourselves feel better." One pastor's wife, a slim wisp of a person, said quietly and clearly: This is not the way Jesus would have us talk. And we all shut our mouths, because she was right. True is true, no matter who says it. Remember the Lord Jesus, who said: "Kvetch not."

What would it mean if we heard a brother or sister straying into false teaching and did not say anything? We would be saying that the truth does not matter very much, that our desire to avoid confrontation is more important than the truth, and that we prefer niceness over honesty. And we would be in danger of gossip the moment that subject came up with someone with whom we were actually willing to talk.

Believing in the primacy of the revelation of Christ in the Bible is not enough. We must all be willing to learn it, pass it along, and defend it when necessary. Yes, the pastors and elders have a special

responsibility under God to do this, but it is nevertheless a group effort.

## A RELATIONAL MATTER

Because the church is, at its core, a set of relationships, the Lord has given us a plan for approaching such problems in a relational, non-adversarial way. Matthew 18:15-17 speaks specifically about sinning, but I believe this plan has a broader application to all issues between believers: **"If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that 'BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."**

The very first step, as we saw Priscilla and Aquila do, is to face the challenge and go talk to the person in private. Taking someone aside in this way is how we preserve truth and love at the same time. None of us wants a church that is true but unloving, or a church that is lovey-dovey but doesn't know what the truth is! We must always keep these two things together, and that includes times when the process gets hard.

It is so easy to share these kinds of concerns with others first. We feel that we want insight, so we violate Jesus' plan and ask for an opinion. We want support so we, in asking for prayer, tell someone things Jesus does not want them to know. Electronic communication makes it far too easy to blast something out into the ether which Jesus does not want to be public—at least not yet.

If the two of you work it out, then you have won the day and trouble is over. If not, the person with the concern has a responsibility to come back again for a second try with another wise and discreet person. If that fails, then the pastors and elders have to get involved. Some doctrinal and behavioral questions should float up to the group of leaders whom God has appointed to make wise judgments. Even those should remain confidential until all hope of restoration is lost.

Why is this the case? Gossip is a pernicious poison which keeps on killing long after the emotions which caused it have receded. But there is also the question of spiritual battle. If the devil can tie the church up in gossip and contention he will not need to stop our advance because we will not be advancing. And once a wrongly-spoken word is out, it cannot be recalled. Many of these cases become unrecoverable losses for the work of Christ. You cannot unlose a lost battle.

When I first became a senior pastor at the age of twenty-six the elders of that church urged me to go talk to the Smiths. The Smiths had been committed members with a large ministry to college students but had stopped coming to church. The college ministry had been about 60 students in a church of about 150, and some leaders had a concern that the ministry was spending a lot of money. So the leaders discussed it in a confidential meeting, which is appropriate to do. The conclusion was that it was worth the money and effort, and that did not sit well with some members. So one leader decided to voice his complaint into a lobby filled with college students: "You kids just drink our coffee and eat our doughnuts but you don't contribute anything!"

So they stopped coming. Ministry over. And the college ministry leaders left also. No pastor

can retrieve those words or undo the damage. There is a hurricane wind blowing of dark forces arrayed against the church, and most of the time, when something gets blown away in the blast it is gone for good. We cannot afford to ignore the plan Jesus gave us for working these things out!

## THE REVELATION PROPELS THE MISSION

We need to see that the revelation of God in the Bible propels the mission. A clear, sturdy message generates clear, sturdy responses from sinners like you and me. A fuzzy, weak presentation of truth gets knocked away by the world, the flesh, and the devil like it was not even there.

Look at how powerfully the intervention done by Priscilla and Aquila propelled the good news of Christ: "**And when [Apollos] wanted to go across to Achaia, the brethren encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him; and when he had arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, demonstrating by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ**" (Acts 18:27-28). Priscilla and Aquila were not themselves tigers, but their willingness to take a risk set Apollos loose to do battle with the forces arrayed against the knowledge of God. It is hard to put a value on what this couple achieved by following the plan of Jesus for preserving the primacy and sufficiency of the word of God. The kingdom of Christ rocketed forward!

So let the word of God defeat our attempts to explain every part. Let it convict us of sin. Let it make us feel good, bad, or indifferent. But let us never lose the revelation, for then we would be lost.

John the Apostle wrote: "**For I was very glad when brethren came and testified to your truth, that is, how you are walking in truth. I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth**" (3 John 1:3-4). Why does John, and by extension, the Lord, have no greater joy? Because the truth of God's word is his revelation of himself. It's personal. Always! His self-revelation is the glorification of his name.

So how much do you and I care about what God says? Are you willing to show your love and obedience to Christ by following his word--or not?

As a local church we must have the unshakable conviction that every question we have must be answered by the word of God. It won't always be easy to do. But nothing else will do! An essential church embraces the primacy and sufficiency of God's word. Every member takes it as his or her personal responsibility before God to know it, pass it on, and defend it when necessary. That's a church that will hang together in Christ no matter what happens.