

Summary of Christian Doctrine Part I

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Editor's Note: For a more in-depth look into theology, we suggest purchasing Louis Berkhof's, "Manual of Christian Doctrine" (Eermans, Grand Rapids, 2001) and of course Berkhof's, "Systematic Theology" (Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 2000). These volumes are indispensable in any Christian's library.

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Part I: Introduction

Chapter I: Religion

1. The Nature of Religion The Bible informs us that man was created in the image of God. When he fell in sin, he did not entirely cease to be the image-bearer of the Most High. The seed of religion is still present in all men, though their sinful nature constantly reacts against it. Missionaries testify to the presence of religion in some form or other among all the nations and tribes of the earth. It is one of the greatest blessings of mankind, though many denounce it as a curse. Not only does it touch the deepest springs of man's life, but it also controls his thoughts and feelings and desires.

But just what is religion? It is only by the study of the Word of God that we can learn to know the nature of true religion. The word 'religion' is derived from the Latin and not from any word that is found in the original Hebrew or Greek of the Bible. It is found only four times in our translation of the Bible, Gal. 1:18, 14; Jas. 1:26, 27. The Old Testament defines religion as the fear of the Lord. This fear is not a feeling of dread, but of reverent regard for God akin to awe, but coupled with love and confidence. It is the response of the Old Testament believers to the revelation of the law. In the New Testament religion is a response to the gospel rather than to the law, and assumes the form of faith and godliness.

In the light of Scripture we learn to understand that religion is a relation in which man stands to God, a relation in which man is conscious of the absolute majesty and infinite power of God and of his own utter insignificance and absolute helplessness. It may be defined as a conscious and voluntary relationship to God, which expresses itself in grateful worship and loving service. The manner of this religious worship and service is not left to the arbitrary will of man, but is determined by God.

2. The Seat of Religion. There are several wrong views respecting the seat of religion in man. Some think of religion primarily as a sort of knowledge, and locate it in the intellect. Others regard it as a kind of immediate feeling of God, and find its seat in the feelings. And still others hold that it consists most of all in moral activity, and refer it to the will. However, all these views are one-sided and contrary to Scripture, which teaches us that religion is a matter of the heart. In Scripture psychology the heart is the central organ of the soul. Out of it are all the issues of life, thoughts, feelings, and desires, Prov. 4:28. Religion involves the whole man, his intellectual, his emotional, and his moral life. This is the only view that does justice to the nature of religion.

3. The Origin of Religion. Particular attention was devoted during the last fifty years to the problem of the origin of religion. Repeated attempts were made to give a natural explanation of it, but without success. Some spoke of it as an invention of cunning and deceptive priests, who regarded it as an easy source of revenue; but this explanation is entirely discredited now. Others held that it began with the worship of lifeless objects (fetishes), or with the worship of spirits, possibly the spirits of forefathers. But this is no explanation, since the question remains, How did people ever hit upon the idea of worshiping lifeless or living

objects? Still others were of the opinion that religion originated in nature-worship, that is, the worship of the marvels and powers of nature, or in the widespread practice of magic. But these theories do not explain any more than the others how non-religious man ever became religious. They all start out with a man who is already religious.

The Bible gives the only reliable account of the origin of religion. It informs us of the existence of God, the only object worthy of religious worship. Moreover, it comes to us with the assurance that God, whom man could never discover with his natural powers, revealed Himself in nature and, more especially, in His divine Word, demands the worship and service of man, and also determines the worship and service that is well-pleasing to Him. And, finally, it teaches us that God created man in His own image, and thus endowed him with a capacity to understand, and to respond to, this revelation, and engendered in him a natural urge to seek communion with God and to glorify Him.

To memorize. Scripture passages bearing on:

a. The Nature of Religion:

Deut. 10:12, 18. "And now, Israel, what doth Jehovah thy God require of thee, but to fear Jehovah thy God, to walk in all His ways, and to love Him, and to serve Jehovah thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, to keep the commandments of Jehovah, and His statutes, which I command thee this day for thy good."

Ps. 111:10. "The fear of Jehovah is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all they that do His commandments: His praise endureth for ever."

Eccl. 12:13. "Fear God and keep His commandments; for this is the whole duty of man."

John 6:29. "This is the work of 'God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent."

Acts 16:31. "And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved, thou and thy house."

b. The Seat of Religion.

Ps. 61:10. "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me." Also vs. 17. "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise."

Prov. 4:28. "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life."

Matt. 6:8. "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God."

c. The Origin of Religion.

Gen. 1:27. "And God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him."

Deut. 4:18. "And He declared unto you His covenant, which He commanded you to perform, even the ten commandments."

Ezek. 37:26. "A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh."

For Further Study of Scripture.

a. What elements of true religion are indicated in the following passages: Deut. 10:12; Eccl. 12:13; Hos. 6:6; Micah 6:8; Mark 12:33; John 3:36; 6:29; Acts 6:31; Rom. 12:1; 13:10; Jas. 1:27.

b. What forms of false religion are indicated in the following passages: Ps. 78:35, 36; Isa. 1:11-17; 58:1-5; Ezek. 33:31, 32; Matt. 6:2, 5; 7:21, 26, 27; 23:14; Luke 6:2; 13:14; Gal. 4:10; Col. 2:20; II Tim. 3:5; Tit. 1:16; Jas. 2:15, 16; 3:10.

c. Name six instances of true religion. Gen. 4:4-8; 12:1-8; 15:17; 18:22-33; Ex. 3:2-22; Deut. 32:33; II Kings 18:3-7; 19:14-19; Dan. 6:4-22; Luke 2:25-35; 2:36, 37; 7:1-10; II Tim. 1:5.

Questions for Review

1. Is religion limited to certain tribes and nations?
2. How can we learn to know the real nature of true religion?
3. What terms are used in the Old and New Testament to describe religion?
4. How would you define religion?
5. What mistaken notions are there as to the seat of religion in man?
6. What is the center of the religions life according to Scripture?
7. What different explanations have been given of the origin of religion?
8. What is the only satisfactory explanation?

Part I: Introduction

Chapter II: Revelation

1. Revelation in General. The discussion of religion naturally leads on to that of revelation as its origin. If God had not revealed Himself, religion would have been

impossible. Man could not possibly have had any knowledge of God, if God had not made Himself known. Left to himself, he would never have discovered God. We distinguish between God's revelation in nature and His revelation in Scripture.

Atheists and Agnostics, of course, do not believe in revelation. Pantheists sometimes speak of it, though there is really no place for it in their system of thought. And Deists admit the revelation of God in nature, but deny the necessity, the reality, and even the possibility of any special revelation such as we have in Scripture. We believe in both general and special revelation.

2. General Revelation. The general revelation of God is prior to His special revelation in point of time. It does not come to man in the form of verbal communications, but in the facts, the forces, and the laws of nature, in the constitution and operation of the human mind, and in the facts of experience and history. The Bible refers to it in such passages as Ps. 19:1, 2; Rom. 1:19, 20; 2:14, 15.

a. Insufficiency of general revelation. While Pelagians, Rationalists, and Deists regard this revelation as adequate for our present needs, Roman Catholics and Protestants are agreed that it is not sufficient. It was obscured by the blight of sin resting on God's beautiful creation. The handwriting of the Creator was not entirely erased, but became hazy and indistinct. It does not now convey any fully reliable knowledge of God and spiritual things, and therefore does not furnish us a trustworthy foundation on which we can build for our eternal future. The present religious confusion of those who would base their religion on a purely natural basis clearly proves its insufficiency. It does not even afford an adequate basis for religion in general, much less for true religion. Even gentile nations appeal to some supposed special revelation. And, finally, it utterly fails to meet the spiritual needs of sinners. While it conveys some knowledge of the goodness, the wisdom, and the power of God, it conveys no knowledge whatever of Christ as the only way of salvation.

b. Value of general revelation. This does not mean, however, that general revelation has no value at all. It accounts for the true elements that are still found in heathen religions. Due to this revelation gentiles feel themselves to be the offspring of God, Acts 17:28, seek after God if haply they might find Him, Acts 17:27, see in nature God's everlasting power and divinity, Rom. 1:19, 20, and do by nature the things of the law, Rom. 2:14. Though they live in the darkness of sin and ignorance, and pervert the truth of God, they still share in the illumination of the Word, John 1:9, and in the general operations of the Holy Spirit, Gen. 6:3. Moreover, the general revelation of God also forms the background for His special revelation. The latter could not be fully understood without the former. Science and history do not fail to illumine the pages of the Bible.

3. Special Revelation. In addition to the revelation of God in nature we have His special revelation which is now embodied in Scripture. The Bible is preeminently the book of God's special revelation, a revelation in which facts and words go hand in hand, the words interpreting the facts and the facts giving substance to the words.

a. Necessity of special revelation. This special revelation became necessary through the entrance of sin into the world. God's handwriting in nature was obscured and corrupted, and man was stricken with spiritual blindness, became subject to error and unbelief, and now in his blindness and perverseness fails to read aright even the remaining traces of the original revelation, and is unable to understand any further revelation of God. Therefore it became necessary that God should re-interpret the truths of nature, should provide a new revelation of redemption, and should illumine the mind of man and redeem it from the power of error.

b. Means of special revelation. In giving His special or supernatural revelation God used different kinds of means, such as (1) Theophanies or visible manifestations of God. He revealed His presence in fire and clouds of smoke, Ex. 8:2; 33:9; Ps. 78:14; 99:7; in stormy winds, Job 38:1; Ps. 18:10-16, and in a "still small voice," I Kings 19:12. These were all tokens of His presence, revealing something of His glory. Among the Old Testament appearances those of the Angel of Jehovah, the second Person of the Trinity, occupied a prominent place, Gen. 16:13; 31:11; Ex. 23:20-23; Mal. 3:1. The highest point of the personal appearance of God among men was reached in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In Him the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us, John 1:14. (2) Direct communications. Sometimes God spoke to men in an audible voice, as He did to Moses and the children of Israel, Deut. 5:4, and sometimes He suggested His messages to the prophets by an internal operation of the Holy Spirit, I Pet. 1:11. Moreover, He revealed Himself in dreams and visions, and by means of Urim and Thummim, Num. 12:6; 27:21; Isa. 6. And in the New Testament Christ appears as the great Teacher sent from God to reveal the Father's will; and through His Spirit the apostles become the organs of further revelations, John 14:26; I Cor. 2:12, 13; I Thess. 2:13. (3) Miracles. The miracles of the Bible should never be regarded as mere marvels which fill men with amazement, but as essential parts of God's special revelation. They are manifestations of the special power of God, tokens of His special presence, and often serve to symbolize spiritual truths. They are signs of the coming Kingdom of God and of the redemptive power of God. The greatest miracle of all is the coming of the Son of God in the flesh. In Him the whole creation of God is being restored and brought back to its original beauty, I Tim. 3:16; Rev. 21:5.

c. The character of special revelation. This special revelation of God is a revelation of redemption. It reveals the plan of God for the redemption of sinners and of the world, and the way in which this plan is realized. It is instrumental in renewing man; it illumines his mind and inclines his will to that which is good; it

fills him with holy affections, and prepares him for his heavenly home. Not only does it bring us a message of redemption; it also acquaints us with redemptive facts. It not only enriches us with knowledge, but also transforms lives by changing sinners into saints. This revelation is clearly progressive. The great truths of redemption appear but dimly at first, but gradually increase in clearness, and finally stand out in the New Testament in all their fullness and beauty.

To memorize. Scripture passages bearing on:

a. General Revelation:

Ps. 8:1. "O Jehovah, our Lord, how excellent is Thy name in all the earth."

Ps. 19:1, 2. "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth His handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night showeth wisdom."

Rom. 1:20. "For the invisible things of Him since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even His everlasting power and divinity." Rom. 2:14, 15. "For when Gentiles that have not the law do by nature the things of the law, these, not having the law, are a law unto themselves; in that they show the work of the law written in their hearts, their consciences bearing witness therewith, and their thoughts one with another accusing or else excusing them."

Num. 12:6-8. "And He said, Hear now my words: if there be a prophet among you, I Jehovah will make myself known unto him in a vision, I will speak with him in a dream. My servant Moses is not so; he is faithful in all my house: with him will I speak mouth to mouth."

Heb. 1:1. "God having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners, hath in the end of these days spoken unto us in His Son."

II Pet. 1:21. "For no prophecy ever came by the will of man: but men spake from God, being moved by the Holy Spirit."

For Further Study:

a. Mention some of the appearances of the Angel of Jehovah. Can he have been a mere angel? Gen. 16:13; 31:11, 13; 32:28; Ex. 23:20-23.

b. Name some examples of revelation by dreams. Gen. 28:10-17; 31:24; 41:2-7; Judg. 7:13; I Kings 8:5-9; Dan. 2:1-3; Matt. 2:13, 19, 20.

c. Mention some cases in which God revealed Himself in visions. Isa. 6; Ezek. 1-3; Dan. 2:19; 7:1-14; Zech. 2-6.

d. Can you infer from the following passages what the miracles recorded reveal? Ex. 10:1, 2; Deut. 8:3; John 2:1-11; 6:1-14, 25-35; 9:1-7; 11:17-44.

Questions for Review

1. How do general and special revelation differ?
2. Where do we meet with the denial of all revelation of God?
3. What is the position of the Deists as to revelation?
4. What is the nature of general revelation?
5. Why is it insufficient for our special needs, and what value does it have?
6. Why was God's special revelation necessary?
7. What means did God employ in His special revelations?
8. What are the characteristics of special revelation?

Part I: Introduction

Chapter III: Scripture

1. Revelation and Scripture. The term 'special revelation' may be used in more than one sense. It may denote the direct self-communications of God in verbal messages and in miraculous facts. The prophets and the apostles often received messages from God long before they committed them to writing. These are now contained in Scripture, but do not constitute the whole of the Bible. There is much in it that was not revealed in a supernatural way, but is the result of study and of previous reflection. However, the term may also be used to denote the Bible as a whole, that whole complex of redemptive truths and facts, with the proper historical setting, that is found in Scripture and has the divine guarantee of its truth in the fact that it is infallibly inspired by the Holy Spirit. In view of this fact it may be said that the whole Bible, and the Bible only, is for us God's special revelation. It is in the Bible that God's special revelation lives on and brings even now life, light, and holiness.

2. Scripture Proof for the Inspiration of Scripture. The whole Bible is given by inspiration of God, and is as such the infallible rule of faith and practice for all mankind. Since the doctrine of inspiration is often denied, it calls for special consideration.

This doctrine, like every other, is based on Scripture, and is not an invention of man. While it is founded on a great number of passages, only a few of these can be indicated here. The Old Testament writers are repeatedly instructed to write what the Lord commands them, Ex. 17:14; 34:27; Num. 33:2; Isa. 8:1; 30:8; Jer. 25:13; 30:2; Ezek. 24:1; Dan. 12:4; Hab. 2:2. The prophets were conscious of

bringing the word of the Lord, and therefore introduced their messages with some such formula as, "Thus saith the Lord," or, "The word of the Lord came unto me," Jer. 36:27, 32; Ezek., chapters 26, 27, 31, 32, 39. Paul speaks of his words as Spirit-taught words, I Cor. 2:13, claims that Christ is speaking in him, II Cor. 13:3, and describes his message to the Thessalonians as the word of God, I Thess. 2:13. The Epistle to the Hebrews often quotes passages of the Old Testament as words of God or of the Holy Spirit, Heb. 1:6; 3:7; 4:3;" 5:6; 7:21. The most important passage to prove the inspiration of Scripture is II Tim. 3:16, which reads as follows in the Authorized Version: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness."

3. The Nature of Inspiration. There are especially two wrong views of inspiration, representing extremes that should be avoided.

a. Mechanical inspiration. It has sometimes been represented as if God literally dictated what the human authors of the Bible had to write, and as if they were purely passive like a pen in the hand of a writer. This means that their minds did not contribute in any way to the contents or form of their writings. But in view of what we find this can hardly be true. They were real authors, who in some cases gathered their materials from sources at their command, I Kings 11:41; 14:29; I Chron. 29:29; Luke 1:1-4, in other instances recorded their own experiences as, for instance, in many of the psalms, and impressed upon their writings their own particular style. The style of Isaiah differs from that of Jeremiah, and the style of John is not like that of Paul.

b. Dynamic inspiration. Others thought of the process of inspiration as affecting only the writers, and having no direct bearing on their writings. Their mental and spiritual life was strengthened and raised to a higher pitch, so that they saw things more clearly and had a more profound sense of their real spiritual value. This inspiration was not limited to the time when they wrote the books of the Bible, but was a permanent characteristic of the writers and affected their writings only indirectly. It differed only in degree from the spiritual illumination of all believers. This theory certainly does not do justice to the biblical view of inspiration.

c. Organic inspiration. The proper conception of inspiration holds that the Holy Spirit acted on the writers of the Bible in an organic way, in harmony with the laws of their own inner being, using them just as they were, with their character and temperament, their gifts and talents, their education and culture, their vocabulary and style. The Holy Spirit illumined their minds, aided their memory, prompted them to write, repressed the influence of sin on their writings, and guided them in the expression of their thoughts even to the choice of their words. In no small measure He left free scope to their own activity. They could give the results of their own investigations, write of their own experiences, and put the imprint of their own style and language on their books.

4. a. The Extent of Inspiration. There are differences of opinion also respecting the extent of the inspiration of Scripture. a. Partial inspiration. Under the influence of Rationalism it has become quite common to deny the inspiration of the Bible altogether, or to hold that only parts of it are inspired. Some deny the inspiration of the Old Testament, while admitting that of the New. Others affirm that the moral and religious teachings of Scripture are inspired, but that its historical parts contain several chronological, archaeological, and scientific mistakes. Still others limit the inspiration to the Sermon on the Mount. They who adopt such views have already lost their Bible, for the very differences of opinion are proof positive that no one can determine with any degree of certainty which parts of Scripture are, and which are not inspired. There is still another way in which the inspiration of Scripture is limited, namely, by assuming that the thoughts were inspired, while the choice of the words was left entirely to the wisdom of the human authors. But this proceeds on the very doubtful assumption that the thoughts can be separated from the words, while, as a matter of fact, accurate thought without words is impossible.

b. Plenary inspiration. According to Scripture every part of the Bible is inspired. Jesus and the apostles frequently appeal to the Old Testament books as 'scripture' or 'the Scriptures' to settle a point in controversy. To their minds such an appeal was equivalent to an appeal to God. It should be noted that of the books to which they appeal in this fashion, some are historical. The Epistle to the Hebrews repeatedly cites passages from the Old Testament as words of God or of the Holy Spirit (cf. p. 18). Peter places the letters of Paul on a level with the writings of the Old Testament, II Pet. 3:16, and Paul speaks of all Scripture as inspired, II Tim. 3:16.

We may safely go a step farther and say that the inspiration of the Bible extends to the very words employed. The Bible is verbally inspired, which is not equivalent to saying that it is mechanically inspired. The doctrine of verbal inspiration is fully warranted by Scripture. In many cases we are explicitly told that the Lord told Moses and Joshua exactly what to write, Lev. 3 and 4; 6:1, 24; 7:22, 28; Josh. 1:1; 4:1; 6:2, and so on. The prophets speak of Jehovah as putting His words into their mouths, Jer. 1:9, and as directing them to speak His words to the people, Ezek. 3:4, 10, 11. Paul designates his words as Spirit taught words, I Cor. 2:13, and both he and Jesus base an argument on a single word, Matt. 22:43-45; John 10:35; Gal. 3:16.

5. The Perfections of Scripture. The Reformers developed the doctrine of Scripture as over against the Roman Catholics and some of the Protestant sects. While Rome taught that the Bible owes its authority to the Church, they maintained that it has authority in itself as the inspired Word of God. They also upheld the necessity of Scripture as the divinely appointed means of grace over against the Roman Catholics, who asserted that the Church had no absolute need of it, and some of the Protestant sects, who exalted the "inner light," or the word of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the people of God, at the expense of

Scripture. In opposition to Rome they further defended the clearness of the Bible. They did not deny that it contains mysteries too deep for human understanding, but simply contended that the knowledge necessary unto salvation, though not equally clear on every page of the Bible, is yet conveyed in a manner so simple that anyone earnestly seeking salvation can easily gather this knowledge for himself, and need not depend on the interpretation of the Church or the priesthood. Finally, they also defended the sufficiency of Scripture, and thereby denied the need of the tradition of the Roman Catholics and of the inner light of the Anabaptists.

To memorize. Passages bearing on:

a. The inspiration of Scripture:

I Cor. 2:13. "Which things also we speak, not in words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Spirit teacheth; combining spiritual things with spiritual words."

I Thess. 2:13. "And for this cause we also thank God without ceasing, that, when ye received from us the word of the message, even the word of God, ye accepted it not as the word of men, but, as it is in truth, the word of God."

II Tim. 3:16. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness."

b. The authority of the Bible:

Isa. 8:20. "To the law and to the testimony! if they speak not according to this word, surely there is no morning for them."

c. The necessity of the Bible:

II Tim. 3:15. "And that from a babe thou has known the sacred writings, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus."

d. The clearness of Scripture:

Ps. 19:7b. "The testimony of Jehovah is sure, making wise the simple."

Ps. 119:105. "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path." Also verse 130. "The opening of Thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding to the simple."

e. The Sufficiency of Scripture.

Cf. the passages under c. above.

For Further Study:

- a. Do the traditions of men have authority? Matt. 5:21-48; 15:3-6; Mark 7:7; Col. 2:8; Tit. 1:14; II Pet. 1:18.
- b. Did the prophets themselves always fully understand what they wrote? Dan. 8:16; 12:8; Zech. 1:7 -- 6:11; I Pet. 1:11.
- c. Does II Tim. 3:16 teach us anything respecting the practical value of the inspiration of Scripture? If so, what?

Questions for Review

1. What is the relation between special revelation and Scripture?
2. What different meanings has the term 'special revelation'?
3. Can we say that special revelation and Scripture are identical?
4. What Scripture proof can you give for the inspiration of the Bible.?
5. What are thee theories of mechanical and dynamical inspiration?
6. How would you describe the doctrine of organic inspiration?
7. What about the theory that the thoughts are inspired but not the words?
8. How would you prove that inspiration extends to every part of Scripture, and even to the very words?
9. How do Rome and the Reformers differ on the authority, the necessity, the clearness, and the sufficiency of Scripture?

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