



MIDWEST THEOLOGICAL FORUM

ECUMENISM AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

REVISED EDITION

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The Didache Semester Series

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CHAPTER 1

God Reveals His Plan of Salvation

*God desires that all of humanity be united in communion with him and with one another forever.
Everyone—Jewish people and Gentiles, people of all nations, races, tongues—
is invited to enter into this communion.*

CHAPTER 1

God Reveals His Plan of Salvation

LESSON 1

God Reveals Himself to Us

INTRODUCTION



Salvation history can be described as the story of God's reaching out to man and of man's response to God.

Every human person searches for God, whether he or she realizes it or not. Endowed as we are with a rational intellect, the human person is a natural philosopher, able to consider questions both abstract and profound. Men and women since the dawn of time have asked these kinds of questions:

- ✦ Why are we here?
- ✦ Is there more to the world than what we see?
- ✦ Is there something beyond this world?
- ✦ Who or what created the universe? And us?
- ✦ If someone created us, then what does he expect from us?
- ✦ Is there a God? If so, who is God?
- ✦ Does he care about us?

The very fact that we ask these questions demonstrates that we were made for something more than this world. A dog or bumblebee or blade of grass does not ask such questions; only human persons look beyond what the physical senses can perceive and ponders their very existence and purpose. For this reason, because we seek answers to such questions, we can say that a human being is fundamentally a *religious being*:

The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for. . . . In many ways, throughout history down to the present day, men have given expression to their quest for God in their religious beliefs and behavior: in their prayers, sacrifices, rituals, meditations, and so forth. These forms of religious expression, despite the ambiguities they often bring with them, are so universal that one may well call man a *religious being*. (CCC 27–28)



God the Father with Sts. Mary Magdalene and Catherine of Siena by Bartolomeo.

Religion is our attempt to seek out God, to understand his **mystery**. This involves engaging in religious activities—communication with spiritual beings, the offering of sacrifice, and the like—but also the use of the mind and *natural reason* to determine if there is a God. St. Paul wrote: “Ever since the creation of the world [God’s] invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made” (Rom 1:20). In other words, creation itself—with its magnificence and order—proclaims that there is a Creator, a *someone* who created everything.

This knowledge, however, alone is unfulfilling. Mere acknowledgment of the fact that there is a Creator does not satisfy our longing for something more. We wonder: Is God like us? Does he love us? How can I please him or get to know him better? Does God hold the keys to my happiness and fulfillment? Inevitably, we find that our attempts to know more about him quickly fall short. We must recognize that our ability to know God on our own is quite limited and incomplete. We need God to reveal himself to us.

In this chapter, we will explore:

- ✦ How and why God reveals himself to us.
- ✦ God’s self-Revelation through his covenants in the Old Testament.
- ✦ The fullness of God’s self-Revelation in Jesus Christ.

GOD REVEALS HIMSELF TO US

Although **natural reason** helps us know that there is a God and discern something about his attributes, on our own we cannot come to know him well or intimately, his full identity. But we are not lost, for God has chosen to *reveal* himself to us in a way that we can understand. This self-Revelation of God to humanity is called *Divine Revelation*.



Sermon on the Mount by Yelin.

God has revealed himself in words. “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” (Mt 5:16)

HISTORICITY OF THE BIBLE



acred Scripture is a main source of our knowledge of Divine Revelation, and it tells us the story of salvation history. But how do we know the Bible is accurate? Can we trust that what the Bible says is historically true? To answer this question briefly, let us just examine the historicity of one section of the Bible: the four Gospels.

First, it is important to remember the difference between analyzing something scientifically and analyzing something historically. When analyzing a scientific theory, we must test it over and over again under certain conditions and then use our senses to observe the result. Only after we will have done so can we declare something to be a scientific fact. But this cannot be done for events in the past. For example, no living person has seen or heard George Washington, yet it would be foolish to deny his existence. We can look at the historical records—eyewitness accounts, writings about him and writings attributed to him, the consequences of his life—to assess the historicity of claims made about this person. In many ways, proving a historical claim is similar to the job of a jury at a legal trial: Jurors must analyze all the evidence—much of it based on eyewitness testimony—and then come to a conclusion.

Second, in examining the historicity of the Gospels, we must understand the purpose of the Gospel writings themselves. St. Luke began his Gospel with a succinct description of his purpose:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed. (Lk 1:1–4)

St. John was even more explicit as to why he wrote his Gospel:

Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name. (Jn 20:30–31)

The Gospel writers did not write their accounts to create a historical proof for twenty-first century people; they wrote their accounts so that people in their time would come to accept the truth about Jesus Christ and believe that he is the Son of God. They were serious about history, but their overriding purpose was **theology**. In other words, these are not news reports; rather, they are writings that convey historical events in a way that presents theological truths. For example, a Gospel writer might have presented certain points or details in a different order than another Gospel writer to convey theological truth more clearly. Or, for a similar purpose, he might have related, one after another, teachings of Christ that were originally given over an extended period of time. These actions are not anti-historical; they put historical truth at the service of theological truth.

Furthermore, the life of Christ is more attested—by a significant order of magnitude—than that of any other ancient figure. We have thousands of extant copies of the Gospels from ancient times, far more than any other ancient historical document. We have multiple extrabiblical references to the life of Christ from near-contemporary sources. We have later events, such as the rise of Christianity, that can only be explained reasonably by the existence of Christ as described in the Gospels.

Unlike ancient legends, the Christian faith is founded on historical facts. God became a specific man at a specific time in a specific place. We can be confident that the historical record clearly shows that these facts can be trusted.



Moses Crossing the Red Sea by Raphael.

God has revealed himself through deeds. "Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians; ... and the people feared the LORD; and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses." (Ex 14:30-31)

Salvation history is filled with fumbling efforts to find God, but for his part God has been pursuing us methodically, offering us a relationship with him so we might come to know him. We are like small children who become fascinated with a display of toys and become separated from our father. When we realize that we are alone, we have no idea where our father is and no way to find him. What we do not realize is that our father has been tirelessly searching for us as well, long before we even knew we were lost.

By natural reason man can know God with certainty, on the basis of his works. But there is another order of knowledge, which man cannot possibly arrive at by his own powers: the order of divine Revelation.¹ Through an utterly free decision, God has revealed himself and given himself to man. This he does by revealing the mystery, his plan of loving goodness, formed from all eternity in Christ, for the benefit of all men. God has fully revealed this plan by sending us his beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. (CCC 50)

How has God revealed himself? He has through both *deeds* and *words*: Through mighty deeds he has acted to change the course of history and to bring people to knowledge of him, and through words he has spoken to us through human beings. He had revealed himself so that we might know the truth about him; these deeds and words act together to reveal the identity of God:

This plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them. By this revelation then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man shines out for our sake in Christ, who is both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation. (*Dei Verbum*, 2)

We see that God has not left us to our limitations, to a life of frustration and loneliness. Instead, he has reached out to us to unveil his identity and to form a relationship with us in a long process that has occurred throughout history.

God communicates himself to man gradually. He prepares him to welcome by stages the supernatural Revelation that is to culminate in the person and mission of the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. (CCC 53)

In short, God revealed himself over a period of time. This gradual unveiling is the essential story of **salvation history** because, by revealing himself to us, God invites us to salvation, into **communion** with him. The history of humanity—from our creation to the end of time—is a history of God drawing us closer to himself so we might know him better.

It might seem odd that God works in such a way. Why did he not reveal himself all at once? We might imagine God simply appearing majestically in the sky for all to see, introducing himself in no uncertain terms and laying out exactly what he expects of us. Who could resist such a show of power? Or if he truly wants to save us, why does he not just repeal the Ten Commandments and announce that everyone will be with him in heaven forever?

There are a couple of reasons for this. The first is that God gave us the gift of free will. We have the freedom to choose whether to believe in him or not, the freedom to choose good or evil. He will not force us to love him, to obey him, to have faith in him. He will not force us into eternal happiness in heaven. He simply surrounds us with his love and invites us to respond to that love so we might freely choose the salvation that he offers to us.

The second reason speaks to our human experience. Consider how our human relationships take time to unfold. We come to know others gradually, learning more and more about them as we spend more time with them. When you meet a new classmate or coworker, you know very little about that person. You learn his name and a few facts about his life, and perhaps you will recognize him the next time you run into him. By his clothes and his manner of speaking, you might make certain assumptions about him, but your knowledge is limited and might even be faulty.



The Annunciation by Albani.

"In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary." (Lk 1:26–27)

Over time you get to know him better, especially as he reveals himself to you: his likes and dislikes, his family background, and his views on the world. Whereas in the beginning you knew certain facts about him, you have gradually come to know him deeper and deeper in a much more personal way. Human beings do not come to this knowledge immediately or through some shortcut; it takes time.

The same is true of our knowledge of God. And in the case of God, whose perfection and mystery is infinitely beyond human imagination, our task of coming to know God more deeply is a never-ending process.

St. Irenæus of Lyons repeatedly speaks of this divine pedagogy using the image of God and man becoming accustomed to one another: The Word of God dwelt in man and became the Son of man in order to accustom man to perceive God and to accustom God to dwell in man, according to the Father's pleasure.² (CCC 53)

Thus, God reveals himself throughout the course of salvation history—a **pedagogy** by which, step by step, he unlocks the mystery of himself to the human race. This Divine Revelation can be divided into two main steps: history before the coming of his Son, during which God prepared his people for the Redeemer as related in the Old Testament, and the Revelation of the Word made flesh as expressed in the New Testament.

LESSON 1 REVIEW

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What does it mean to say man is a religious being?
2. What is religion?
3. What is Divine Revelation?
4. How has God revealed himself?
5. What is salvation history?
6. Why does God reveal himself gradually over time instead of all at once?

VOCABULARY

definitions, pp. 41–42

- Communion
- Mystery
- Natural reason
- Pedagogy
- Salvation history
- Theology



St. Luke writing his Gospel—*Revelation of the Word*.