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Reformation
& Revival



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Toward the end of the Book of Revelation, the name of the Lord Jesus Christ is given as Alpha and Omega. Here the Lord Himself is quoted as saying, "Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with Me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End" (Rev. 22:12-13).

There are a number of messages in this name and a number of ways it could be studied. For one thing, elsewhere in this book the name is given to God the Father, in Revelation 1:8, for example, "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, 'who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.'" In 21:6, we also read, referring to the Father, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End." Because things equal to the same thing are equal to each other, it would be possible to study this title as evidence of the deity of Christ. Again, it would be possible to study the title as evidence of Christ's eternal and unchanging character, which is what the accompanying phrases suggest.

But this is not what I want to look at, for the simple reason that these are not the distinct meanings of the title. The distinctiveness of the title comes from the fact that "Alpha" and "Omega" are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet and thus contain within their scope all the letters from which all the words of the revelation of God in the Greek language are formed. In other words, Christ is God's revelation to fallen men and women. He is Himself the living revelation, and He is the source of the written revelation. We can hardly miss this latter emphasis, for the expression "the words of the prophecy of this book" are repeated over and over again in these closing verses (five times, with some variations) like a resounding musical refrain. Moreover, they are referred to as "testimony" (v. 16), and Jesus is identified as "He who testifies to these things" (v. 20). So

when we turn to the title Alpha and Omega, what we are primarily concerned with is the certainty and scope of God's revelation.

God Has Spoken

We begin by noting that God *has spoken in Christ*. This does not mean that God has not spoken in other ways as well. He has spoken in nature in a way sufficiently clear to condemn anyone who refuses to acknowledge God as the Creator (Rom. 1:18-20). He has spoken to us through the prophets whose words are recorded in the Bible. But above all He has spoken to us in Christ.

This is the point John the evangelist makes in the opening words of his Gospel where he calls Christ "the Word." In Greek the term is *logos*. It occurs four times, three times in verse one alone and once in verse fourteen: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us."

To understand this term we need to ask what meaning it would have for those to whom the Gospel was first written. What meaning would it have for a person from a Jewish background? Quite obviously, the first verses of the Gospel, including the term "Word," would refer a Jewish person back to the first words of the Book of Genesis where we are told that in the beginning God spoke and that as a result of this, all things came into being. In other words, to the Jewish mind Jesus would somehow be associated with the creative power of God and with the self-disclosure of God in creation.

We get a feeling for what this would have meant to a Jewish person by imagining our reading a book that began "When in the course of human events" and included the words "self-evident" and "inalienable rights." Clearly the author would be trying to remind us of the Declaration of

Independence and of the founding principles of the American republic.

We need to add to this, however, that the idea of a "word" would also have meant more to a Jewish mind than it does to us today. To the Jew a word was something concrete, something much closer to what we would call an event or a deed. A word spoken was a deed done. This was a result of the Jew's Old Testament theology. What happens when God speaks? The answer is that the thing is done instantly. God said, "Let there be light, and there was light" (Gen. 1:3). God said, "My word that goes out from My mouth . . . will not return to Me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isa. 55:11). Thus, the Jew would be somewhat prepared for the thought that the Word of God could somehow be seen and touched as well as heard, and that the Word might somehow find expression in a life. It would not be entirely strange for a Jew to learn, as the author of Hebrews puts it, that "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son" (Heb. 1:1-2).

The Jews were not the only ones who would be reading John's Gospel, however. The Gospel would also be read by Greeks and by those who spoke Greek and were influenced by Greek thought. What would the word *logos* mean to them?

For the Greeks the answer to this question is found, not in religion, but in philosophy. Almost 2600 years ago, in the sixth century B.C., there was a philosopher who lived in Ephesus named Heraclitus. He was the man, you will remember, who said that it is impossible to step into the same river twice. He meant that all of life is in a state of change. Thus, although you step into the river once, step out, and then step in a second time, by the time you have taken the second step the river has flowed on and is a different river.

To Heraclitus and to the philosophers who followed him all life seemed like that. But, they asked, if that is so, how is it that everything is not in a state of perpetual chaos? Heraclitus answered that life is not chaos because the change that we see is not mere random change. It is ordered change. And this means that there must be a divine “reason” or “word” that controls it. Heraclitus called this the *logos*, the word that John uses in the opening verse of his Gospel.

However, the *logos* also meant more than this to Heraclitus. For, once he had discovered, as he thought, that the controlling principle of matter was God’s *logos*, it was only a small step for him to apply it also to the events of history and to the mental order that rules in the minds of men. For Heraclitus, then, the *logos* became nothing less than the mind of God controlling everything.

By the time John came to write his Gospel, the age of Heraclitus lay nearly 700 years in the past. But the ideas of Heraclitus had been so formative for Greek thought that they had survived, not only in his own philosophy, but also in the philosophy of Plato and Socrates, the Stoics, and others who had built upon it. They were discussed by many persons much as we discuss the atomic theory or evolution today. The Greek knew all about the *logos*. For him the *logos* was the creative and controlling mind of God. It was this that kept the universe going. It was therefore with a stroke of divine genius that John seized upon this word, one that was as meaningful to Greeks as it was to Jewish people, and said by means of it, “Listen, you Greeks, the very thing that has most occupied your philosophical thought for centuries—the *logos* of God, this world, this controlling power of the universe and of man’s mind—this has come to earth as a man and we have beheld Him, full of grace and truth.”

Plato, we are told, once turned to that little group of philosophers and students that had gathered around him during the Greek Golden Age in Athens and said to his

followers, “It may be that some day there will come forth from God a word, a *logos*, who will reveal all mysteries and make everything plain.” Now John is saying, “Yes, Plato, and the *logos* has come; now God is revealed to us perfectly.”

True Words, Plainly Spoken

This leads to a second statement about God’s revelation: Not only has God spoken in Christ, God *has spoken plainly*. Several years ago I was speaking to someone about the gospel. He replied to the points I was making by saying that the discussion was merely a question of “semantics.” I suspected that he had just learned that word, for he used it several times in the course of our discussion, in each case suggesting that there is no such thing as truth, that all ideas are relative, and that a person may therefore call himself a Christian while at the same time believing anything he wishes to believe. His reason was his feeling that language cannot be pressed to the point of precise definition.

I acknowledged that it is sometimes hard to define words, particularly theological words. Theology is the art of defining precisely what certain words mean and do not mean. But at the same time I denied that this was any excuse for failing to grapple with the precise demands of God made in Scripture or for refusing to alter one’s life accordingly. The young man would not accept this. So he continued to use “semantics” as an excuse for failing to believe in Jesus Christ. He also, so it seemed to me, blamed God for his problem, for he was suggesting that things would be very different had God only expressed Himself more clearly.

I remember how the Lord approached this question on one occasion. He had been in Galilee and Judea for nearly three years and had been teaching publicly for that time. He had not often said, at least explicitly, that He was the Messiah—the people were looking for a political messiah—and if He had done that He would have raised false hopes.

Still, He had been open in many claims, saying that He had a right to other persons' loyalties and was able to satisfy all legitimate wants and needs. He had healed the sick, given sight to the blind, and done many other things which were in fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. These were sufficient grounds for anyone to have recognized the nature of His claims or at least to have followed Him in order to have learned more. But the people did not want this. So rather than simply saying that they did not want it or did not want to believe Christ, they said that He had not taught them plainly.

The text says, "The Jews gathered around Him, saying, 'How long will You keep us in suspense? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly'" (John 10:24).

In asking this question Christ's hearers were actually trying to place the blame for their lack of belief on Jesus. It is clear from the language, for they began their complaint with the question: "How long will *You* keep us in suspense?" In other words, they were saying that their failure to believe was His fault, in spite of the fact that He had been clear in His teaching and had been doing miracles among them for three years. Jesus replied to their objection graciously. He said that He *had* told them plainly. He had not spoken in riddles. Besides, the works which He had done had substantiated His teaching. He said, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in My Father's name speak for Me" (v. 25).

What gracious words these were! How graciously they rebuke unbelief! The words alone had caused some to believe. It was the testimony of the Samaritans that they had believed Jesus because "we have heard for ourselves," rather than because of the testimony of the woman Jesus had met at the well (John 4:42). The nobleman who had his son restored to health by Jesus "took Jesus at His word and departed" (John 4:50). Peter had testified, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

All these had believed on the basis of the words alone. Yet there were also Christ's many works which substantiated them.

In John there are seven great pre-resurrection miracles. The first is the miracle of the changing of the water into wine at Cana (2:1-11). John tells us that this was the first of Christ's signs and that, as a result of it, the disciples believed on Him. The second miracle is the healing of the nobleman's son (4:46-54). This shows Christ's power to overcome sin and sickness and to instill peace and faith in the human heart. The third sign is the healing of the impotent man (5:1-18). The point is that all men are spiritually impotent—they cannot come to Jesus—but that Jesus acts in grace to call them to Himself in spite of their inability. Fourth, there is the feeding of the five thousand (6:1-14). Here Jesus is revealed as the one who alone can satisfy the hunger of the human soul. Fifth, there is Christ walking on the water, in which His power over the elements is dramatized (6:16-21). The sixth miracle is the healing of the man who had been born blind (9:1-41). Finally, there is the raising of Lazarus. Each of these reveals something about Jesus that we would not have seen so clearly otherwise, and each supports His claim upon men's loyalty.

"But these are not enough," some say. "Let Him do more." Well, says John, Jesus did quite a bit more. In fact, he says, if everything about Jesus was written that could be written, even the world itself would not be able to contain the books. But this is enough. These words and works are sufficient. Consequently, "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31).

To ask for evidence or for plain speech is a good procedure if evidence or plain speech is lacking. But if these are present, then to ask for more evidence or for plainer speech is only an attempt to avoid responsibility and shift the

blame. Let me illustrate. Suppose you are driving down a super highway at 65 miles per hour and that the speed limit is 55. A policeman stops you and says, "What do you think you're doing? Don't you know that the speed limit is 55?"

"That's a good question," you say. "Actually, I was wondering about that. Is it 55? I was going 65."

"I'll say you were," says the trooper, "and sometimes it was 70. Didn't you see that sign back there?"

"Oh! That sign!" you answer. "Well, actually I did see it; but that was a quarter of a mile back. It seems that if the state wants drivers to move along at that speed, it should mark the speed limit more plainly. There should be a sign here, for instance. And there should be one another hundred feet ahead, and another hundred, and so on."

What does the trooper do? Does He say, "I'm sorry I stopped you. I see your point. There should be more signs. Go ahead. We'll put up a dozen new signs next week." Of course not! If you would answer a trooper that way, he would have you ticketed so quickly you would hardly know what happened. The fault is not in the signs. The fault is in the driver who does not like to abide by regulations.

Do not tell God that He has not revealed the truth plainly. Say rather that you do not like the truth which He had revealed. Let that truth move you to repentance and to faith in the Savior.

Plain Teaching

I want to notice one more thing that is particularly important in the context of what is historically called Reformed theology. When the people of Christ's day asked that He speak plainly, He replied in the first instance by saying that He had spoken plainly, as we have seen. He had said everything that could be said. He had done everything that could be done. If they had not believed by this time, nothing else that He would ever say or do would move them.

But they had asked Him to speak plainly, and so He does speak plainly. And what comes forth is the most highly condensed statement of the doctrines of grace to be found in this or any other Gospel account.

It is always dangerous to ask Christ to speak plainly, for when He speaks plainly He really speaks plainly. And what He speaks is what we call Calvinism. He says:

You do not believe because you are not My sheep. My sheep listen to My voice; I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of My Father's hand (John 10:26-29).

Notice that Christ's words reflect the desperate state of the lost; that is, the state of all as they are apart from Christ. These verses show that such persons have lost spiritual life. Otherwise, it would not be necessary for Christ to speak of it as a gift. Originally, men and women had life. But when they sinned they died, a fact demonstrated by their hiding from God. Their desperate state is also suggested by the idea of a gift. It is the nature of a gift that it cannot be earned. If it could be earned, it would be wages. If it could be merited, it would be a reward. Eternal life is neither of these. It is a gift, which means that it originates solely in God's good will toward men. Again, we notice that men and women will perish apart from God's gracious provision for them. We are sinners. Sin makes us heirs of God's wrath. If God does not intervene, we stand under judgment, without hope, facing God's just condemnation. According to these verses, we cannot even come to Christ, for we are not of His sheep and so lack the ability to hear His voice and turn to Him.

The second point of these verses is grace. For while it is true that in ourselves we cannot come to Christ and so live

under God's just judgment, Christ teaches that God has nevertheless acted in grace toward some people who are perishing. Earlier this was expressed by saying that Christ died for the sheep—in other words, by the doctrine of a particular redemption (v. 11). In this section, we are told that Jesus has given eternal life to the same people (v. 28) and that God has given these to Him (v. 29).

You cannot trace the origins of our salvation farther back than that. In this, as in all things, the origins are to be found in the mind of God. Some say, "But surely God called them because He foreknew that some would believe." But it does not say that. Others say, "He chose them because He knew in advance that they would merit salvation." It does not say that either. What it does say is that the initiative in salvation lies with God and that this is found on the one hand in God's electing grace, whereby He chooses some for salvation entirely apart from any merit on their own part (which, of course, they do not have) and, on the other hand, in Christ's particular atonement by which He bore the penalty for the sins of His people.

The third of the Reformed doctrines presented by Jesus is what had been referred to as the effectual call, that is, that God's call of His people is accompanied by such power that those whom He calls necessarily come to Him, believing in Christ and embracing Christ for salvation. Jesus expresses this by saying: "My sheep listen to My voice; I know them, and they follow Me" (v. 27). It is a mark of the sheep that they both hear and follow their shepherd.

In the Puritan era it was the habit of many preachers to play on these two characteristics, calling them the marks of Christ's sheep. In the days when there were many flocks it was necessary to mark the sheep to distinguish them. In our day, at least in cattle, this is done by branding. On sheep it was often done by cutting a small mark into the ear. "Well," said the Puritans, "each of Christ's sheep has a double

mark—on his ear and on his foot. The mark on his ear is that he hears Christ. The mark on his foot is that he follows Him."

Finally, notice that these verses also speak at length of God's perseverance with His saints. That is, they teach us that none whom God has called to faith in Christ will be lost. Indeed, how can they be, if God is responsible for their salvation? Jesus says, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of My hand" (v. 28). "But," says someone, "suppose they jump out of their own accord?"

"They shall never perish," says the Lord Jesus.

"What? Never?"

"No, never," says Jesus. "They shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of My hand."

This does not mean that there will not be dangers, of course. In fact, it implies that there surely will be; for if Jesus promises that no one will succeed in plucking us from His hand, it must be because He knows that there are some who will try. The Christian will always face dangers—dangers without from enemies and dangers from within. Still the promise is that those who have believed in Jesus will never be lost. We may add that the Christian may well be deprived of things. He may lose his job, his friends, his good reputation. This has often happened to those who have been most faithful, particularly in a time of persecution. Still he will not be lost. The promise is not that the ship will not go to the bottom, but that the passengers will all reach the shore. It is not that the house will not burn down, but that the people will all escape safely.

I suppose that there is a way of explaining away almost everything, but I must say that I do not see how the opponents of eternal security can explain away this text. Am I Christ's? Then it is He who has promised that I shall not perish. If I do perish, then Jesus has not kept His word, He is not sinless, the atonement was not adequate, and no one

in any place can enter into salvation.

God Who Changes Not

Let me go back to our basic outline. I have said that God has spoken to us in Christ. Second, I have said that through Christ God has spoken plainly. Let me now add as a third point that the word which God has spoken to us plainly through Christ *does not change*. It does not change because Christ, the Word of God, is the same at the end as at the beginning.

Everything we know does change. That is why it is so hard for some to accept these doctrines. Some years ago I read Alvin Toffler's best-selling book *Future Shock*. I was particularly impressed at the time by the chapter on "The Throw-Away Society." He lists detail after mind-numbing detail to show the increasingly impermanent nature of our world. He shows it in regard to the home, where we throw away diapers, bibs, Kleenex, towels, non-returnable soda bottles, baking tins, and plastic sacks in which vegetables are cooked. He says that the home is "a large processing machine" through which objects flow, entering and leaving at an even faster and faster rate of speed.

Toffler refers to disposable clothes, made of paper. In a recent fashion magazine a bride is pictured in a long white train of lace-like paper. The caption underneath notes that it will make "great kitchen curtains" after the ceremony. There are portable playgrounds designed to adapt to the changing block patterns of the inner city. Buildings are not expected to last for more than short periods. Homes are being built with only five- to ten-year expected durability. Toffler speaks of "fad" industries.

All of this has tremendous impact in people living within our culture. They no longer expect anything to be permanent. Not long ago I had a personal example of this in my own family. Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia,

where I serve as pastor, was celebrating its 150th anniversary, and because of this we talked often about the church as it was in earlier decades of its history. On one occasion my wife and I were mentioning the enormous steeple that had originally stood on the northeast corner of the building but which had been removed at the turn of the century for safety reasons. We know it only through pictures, but at the time it was the tallest structure in Philadelphia. My youngest daughter Jennifer was listening. She was six years old at the time. She asked very intently what this steeple was like and then said wistfully, "I don't ever remember seeing it. I must have missed it. Probably they took it down when I wasn't looking."

What are we to say to a society that views normally "permanent" structures like that? How are we to communicate to them that the Word of God, like God Himself, is eternal? I am not sure I know the full answer to that, but I know the most important part of the answer. It is to point them to Christ who is "the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8), to Him Who said of His own teaching, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will never pass away" (Matt. 24:35).

First and Last

Jesus is not only the Word of God spoken to fallen men and women. He is the *first word* (we must begin with Him, for there is no other way in which we can truly learn of God and come to God), and He is the *last word* (we will not find God speaking anything else until we come to terms with Jesus). This is a thought vital to our text, for it says in full, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End."

Years ago Robert Anderson wrote a book titled *The Silence of God*. It was overstated in places, but the question it raised and the answer it gave were impressive. Anderson

asked why God is silent to the cries of men in this age. In past ages God sometimes spoke from heaven. He does not do this today. Anderson declared that a silent heaven is the “greatest mystery” of our existence. Why is God silent? After examining the various philosophical answers that have been given to that question, Anderson presented his own conclusion. It was that God has already spoken definitively in Christ. He has spoken His first and last words in Him. And when He next speaks—which He will one day do—it will be that word of judgment for those who have rejected Jesus.

Os Guinness, who has been associated with the work of L’Abri Fellowship, sometimes tells of an experience of Ingmar Bergman, the Swedish film director. According to Guinness, Bergman was listening to some music by Stravinsky, and while listening had a vision. He imagined that he was in a great cathedral. He was wandering around and came to a portrait of Christ. Suddenly Bergman realized the importance of this painting. So he went up to it and shouted, “Speak to me! I will not leave this cathedral until you speak to me.” There was no answer, of course. God said nothing. So the film that Bergman produced that same year, in which a number of characters despair of ever finding God, is called *The Silence*. God did not give Bergman an additional word, so he missed the word which God had already spoken.

Do not be like him. Learn that God has spoken clearly in Christ and that what He has spoken is both true and eternal. And come to Jesus!

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Dr. James Montgomery Boice serves as pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, PA. This article is a slightly edited version of an address given at the 1979 Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology. Dr. Boice is the author of numerous books.
