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# REVELATION AND PROPOSITIONS

by J. F. PETER

**P**ROFESSOR PETER, of the Theological College of the Presbyterian Church in Queensland, prepared this paper for delivery to the Theological Group in Brisbane last year ; and THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY is glad to make it available to a wider audience. The problems of revelation and communication have been vigorously debated in recent years, and Professor Peter's contribution to the debate should stimulate further thought about them. It is good to bear in mind that revelation—and divine revelation at that—can be communicated in propositions as well as in the mighty acts of God. From the first, the mighty acts of God would scarcely have conveyed an intelligible message to those who witnessed them had they not been interpreted in words by God's chosen spokesmen. Such prophetic words are as much a vehicle of God's revelation as are His mighty acts. But there are other propositions (those, e.g., of creeds and confessions) which, while not primary vehicles of revelation, aim at summarizing its contents. What is to be said of their adequacy for this purpose ?

## 1. *Revelation is God's making something known.*

**AS** a description of what revelation is, this seems well-founded.

"Making something known" suggests itself as an obvious synonym for the English word "revelation", which comes from the Latin *revelare* meaning "to unveil" or "to lay bare". It is just as obvious an equivalent for the word in the New Testament which is most frequently translated by "revelation".<sup>1</sup> This word, ἀποκάλυψις, also means literally an "unveiling", though in the New Testament it is used only figuratively.

But the "revelation" of which we are speaking is not *any* sort of "making known". Already in the New Testament the "unveiling" which was spoken of most frequently was that brought about by divine action, and it is *God's* making something known that we have in mind in our use, as Christians, of the word "revelation". The word is given a much broader connotation in

<sup>1</sup> The three occurrences which receive a different translation in the A.V. (Luke 2: 32; Romans 8: 19; 1 Peter 1: 7) can all (as the R.S.V. recognizes) be fittingly rendered by "revelation". The verb ἀποκαλύπτω is always in the A.V. translated by "reveal".

common speech, but our specific usage of it relates to the situation in which God makes something known.

It may be added that we are only concerned, when we speak of "revelation", with the situation in which God makes something known to men and women here in the world. It may be entirely proper to use the word "revelation" of God's making something known to the company of heaven, as well as to the birds and the beasts — and even to the flowers. But we are not concerned with what their experience of God's disclosure may be. We are concerned with the situation in which God makes something known to us men and women; and that is the situation covered in our present discussion of "revelation."

(a) Thinking of revelation in this way as God's making something known, as an act of God, enables us to make a distinction between "revelation" and "discovery".

As H. H. Farmer has pointed out, a similar distinction is generally preserved in common speech.

In discovery there is activity on the one side only; the facts are there, static, quiescent, unknown, and they remain unknown until someone searches them out; they never do anything to present themselves to the enquirer. But where there is activity on the other side, an activity of impartation to impartation, another word is required, the word revelation. . . .

Pre-eminently, the word revelation, even in popular speech, is appropriate to a two-term personal relationship where one actively imparts to another through a medium of communication, through speech; pre-eminently the word discovery is appropriate to our dealing with impersonal objects which do not in that sense actively convey themselves to us at all.<sup>2</sup>

The fact that very few people consistently use the words in these ways does not alter the fact that a distinction is there. There is a difference between the way in which we acquire knowledge from an object which remains inactive, and that in which we acquire knowledge from a person who himself plays an active part in the process.

Our concern, when we speak of "revelation", is with a situation of the latter kind, but one in which the other person — the active, knowledge-imparting person—is God. While there may be much that is unique about this situation — it is indeed the uniqueness imparted to the situation by His presence which makes discussion of revelation a different thing from an essay in psychology or epistemology — it shares with the other the characteristic

<sup>2</sup> H. H. Farmer, *The World and God* (London: Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1936), pp. 78-79.

of a conviction on the part of the knowledge-receiving subject that what he had acquired has not been by virtue of his own efforts alone. Revelation is a different thing from discovery.

(b) To think of revelation as God's act of making something known implies the presence in the situation of someone who receives this knowledge, and our discussion of revelation must include some consideration of the recipient.

We are immediately faced with the fact that not all men are recipients of revelation. There are some whose way of life suggests that they are not, and (mindful as we should be of the precept to judge not lest we be judged) we must take account of what we know of them by their fruits. There are in any case many who will readily declare that they have never had anything made known to them by God, and we cannot refuse altogether to accept such statements at their face value. We might feel disposed to argue that this situation is one of their own causing, but this does not alter the facts: it is still the case that they are not recipients of revelation. Any insistence that they are, but remain unaware of it, can only lead either to such a widening of the meaning of "revelation" as to leave the term with no meaning at all, or to a more careful delineation of it so as to include reference to the fact and the manner of the recipient's awareness of God's making known. The second alternative is the preferable one.

Accepting the fact that there are some who are not recipients of revelation, we go on to ask whether we can discern what distinguishes those who have received it from those who have not.

Our statement that revelation is God's making something known lays emphasis upon His action and initiative in the matter, and may be thought of as implying that what distinguishes the recipient of revelation from other men is the fact that God has chosen him to be one whom He will make something known.

Such a conclusion can claim the support of Scripture, as may be seen from some words of G. S. Hendry:

How then is revelation received by men? The knowledge of the mystery is only for those to whom it is given (Mark 4: 11) by God (Matt. 16: 17). Human intelligence and acumen are of no avail here; rather they constitute a disqualification (Matt. 11: 25, I Cor. 1: 19-25). Revelation is in fact so absolute that it can only achieve its own reception. Indeed it is not so much man that receives revelation as revelation that receives him. For man, as he is, is incapable of receiving it (1 Cor. 2: 14); he must be taken up into revelation. It is not something that happens to him but *in* him (Gal. 1: 16); he must be transformed if he is to know it (John 3: 3, Rom. 12: 2). The know-

ledge of revelation is not so much a knowing as a being known (Gal. 4:9).<sup>3</sup>

It can also claim the support of Christians generally, for their testimonies through the ages have consented to the truth that God has revealed to them such things as neither their virtue nor their capacity could enable them to discern.

To have written in this way may seem to have foreclosed the question whether, in the revelation situation, there is any activity on the part of the recipient. This is not so. One may agree with all that has just been said, and still consider that the action of God cannot be carried through without some responsive action on the part of man. In that case God's making something known will be thought of as an action only potential unless the potential recipient take whatever action is required for him to become a recipient in actuality.

Just what that action is, and what its effects, it may be impossible to discern. A man may reverently acknowledge that what he knows he knows because of an action of God in making something known, and at the same time confess that he is unable to declare with confidence whether any, and if so what, details of his knowledge are his (and perhaps his in a falsified form) because of some action on his own part.

(c) Understanding revelation as God's making something known enables us to reach certain conclusions concerning the content of what is revealed.

This is not to say that there can be advanced criteria such that any observer can on all occasions distinguish what is revealed from what has come to knowledge in some other way, or even from what is false. There are no such infallible criteria and, confident as a man may be that revelation has taken place, he cannot himself know — and certainly cannot convince all others — that empirical observation will disclose that such and such could have been made known only by God. Yet, as we have said, our understanding of revelation as God's making something known enables certain general conclusions to be drawn.

i. One thing that can be said immediately is that anything that is revealed will be something that it is God's will to make know; that is, something that He deems it fitting that the recipient should receive.

This, however, leaves open a field as wide as all knowledge.

<sup>3</sup> "Revelation"; Alan Richardson (ed.), *A Theological Word-Book of the Bible* (London: S.C.M. Press Ltd., 1950), p. 198.

and we have not progressed in our understanding of the content of revelation — certainly not far enough to provide ourselves with a criterion by which we may say of any piece of knowledge that it is, or is not, the result of revelation. What the recollection of this fact may do, however, is make us feel fairly confident that some pieces of so-called knowledge can *not* possibly have come by way of revelation.

ii. We may further say that what God makes known will be something that was previously unknown (or that was not known to have this particular significance), and that will continue to retain the character of mystery.

Mascall refers to three features which belong to a mystery.<sup>4</sup>

In the first place, on being confronted with a mystery we are conscious that the small central area of which we have a relatively clear vision shades off into a vast background which is obscure and as yet unpenetrated. Secondly, we find, as we attempt to penetrate this background in what I have described as an attitude of humble and wondering contemplation, that the range and clarity of our vision progressively increase but that at the same time the background which is obscure and unpenetrated is seen to be far greater than than we had recognised before. . . . The third feature . . . is the fact that a mystery, while it remains obscure in itself, has a remarkable capacity of illuminating other things.<sup>5</sup>

If we add to this feature that we are dealing with a *divine* mystery, we shall be using "mystery" in the sense of the New Testament *μυστήριον* — that is, of "a secret which has been, or is being, disclosed; but because it is a divine secret it remains mystery and does not become transparent to men."<sup>6</sup>

(d) This making known of something by God is an event; that is to say, it actually happens, and in its happening it never achieves a fixed state. Though, because of our conviction of His consistency, we may say that God has decreed unalterably that certain things are so, and that of these things all men should take knowledge, His making known of anything to this person and that is an event which takes place at this moment and that.

<sup>4</sup> He makes a useful distinction between puzzles, problems and mysteries. By a puzzle he means "something which purports to be a genuine question requiring an answer, but turns out on investigation to be a pseudo-question which vanishes into thin air when the terms in which it is stated are examined". By a problem he means "a question which does not evaporate on linguistic analysis and which we cease to ask only when we have discovered the answer". E. L. Mascall, *Words and Images* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1957), p. 77.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>6</sup> G. S. Hendry, "Mystery"; *A Theological Word-Book of the Bible*, p. 156.

## 2. *God's making known is by encounter.*

By the word "encounter" I mean to suggest that the situation in which God makes something known is akin to that in which one person, by the expression of his whole personality, communicates to another his attitude on some matter. In such a case, there is more than the uttering of certain words in description of the attitude; there is a standing of one person over against the other so that the line of communication is traversed by a reciprocity of offering and response which has no exact parallel in non-personal relationships. I am, in short, referring to the peculiar quality of the inter-personal encounter which Martin Buber has elaborated in his distinction between the I-thou and the I-it relationship.

(a) I have the impression that the use of this word "encounter" has been misunderstood by some of those who have objected to it.

Austin Farrer writes of the insistence upon revelation as "personal communication":

What does it mean? On the face of it, it suggests that God must speak to us somewhat as we speak to one another. But this obviously does not happen, nor is it going to happen. . . . I had myself (this at least is the impression I retain) been reared in a personalism which might satisfy the most ardent of Dr. Buber's disciples; . . . but neither out of the scripture that I read nor in the prayers I tried to make did any mental voice address me: . . . no "other" stood beside me, no shadow of presence fell upon me. . . . And this is why, when Germans set their eye-balls and pronounce the terrific words "He speaks to thee" (*Er redet dich an*), I am sure, indeed, that they are saying something, but I am still more sure that they are not speaking to my condition.<sup>7</sup>

There are some statements of H. P. Owen (as when he suggests that the image of encounter is more congenial to the German than to the British temperament) which suggest that he shares Farrer's uneasiness about the language of encounter; but I think he points to a better understanding of the matter when he writes:

Let us suppose a Christian is confronted with Christ's teaching about forgiveness, either in a sermon or in his own reading of the New Testament. . . . He may say: "Yes, I see; Christ's view is right; this is how I ought to behave." Or he may use the language of encounter and say: "This is a command which God is addressing

<sup>7</sup> Austin Farrer, *The Glass of Vision* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1948), p. 8, cited by John Baillie, *The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), pp. 30-31, and *Scottish Journal of Theology*, iv (1951), pp. 420-21.

to me; I must obey it."<sup>8</sup>

It is, I believe, a mistake to regard these two responses as essentially different; the first is as much encounter as the second; both of them, as Owen himself remarks, can lead to a decision.

Perhaps we have too readily taken over "encounter" or "confrontation" as a translation of the German *Begegnung* (the less severe "meeting" would serve as well); but we can appreciate the emphasis which the concept lays: that when God makes something known, He does so in a personal way, wherein the initiative is His own.

(b) This encounter does not take place in the absence of media.<sup>9</sup>

When the glory of a sunset leads me to bow in adoration of the God who has created such things, I am convinced that the God whom I thus adore has Himself put this evidence of His majesty before my eyes; yet I am convinced also that my adoration arose out of my observing the sunset. Similarly, when a particular sermon "strikes home" at this or that aspect of my life, impelling me to the forsaking of some habit or to the taking up some new responsibility, I am convinced that it is God Himself who has spoken to me; yet I am convinced also that the challenge I feel it impossible to disregard came to me only as I listened to that particular sermon.

While examples of this kind could be multiplied, enough has been said to indicate that while the knowledge we have of God is ours because He confronts us with Himself, we always have that knowledge given to us as we come by knowledge of other things.

It is *along with*<sup>10</sup> the story of Abraham, or of Daniel, or of some extra-biblical character, that we sense a significance which it has for us here and now; it is *along with* the glory of the sunset that we sense the majesty of creative power; and so on. These are media with which God brings Himself to us. They are not, on the one hand, things by means of which we could, unaided, rise to knowledge of God for, unless God Himself should decide to

<sup>8</sup> H. P. Owen, *Revelation and Existence* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1957), p. 65.

<sup>9</sup> The next three paragraphs largely reproduce portions of my article, "The Redemptive Mission of the Church", *Scottish Journal of Theology*, x (1957), pp. 156-57.

<sup>10</sup> John Baillie makes use, "without prejudice", of the Lutheran phrase, "in, with and under". *Our Knowledge of God* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), pp. 178 ff.



use them, they would not be media at all but simply others among the many things which fill our lives. Nor, on the other hand, are we able to dispense with them, along the mystics' line, as obstacles which hold God away from us. As the media of His choosing, they play an essential part in the mediating to us of His immediacy, and we have no knowledge of God apart from our knowledge of them.

(c) Thus our references to a divine-human encounter are not to be thought of as indicating a belief that revelation comes only in startling and spectacular ways. We mean by such references to assert that God's act of making known is one in which He Himself confronts us and, in a manner analogous to that of inter-personal relationships on the human plane, manifests His character and His will through the agency of this and that part of our creaturely existence. This is the truth of the statement, frequently made these days,<sup>11</sup> that what God reveals is Himself.

### 3. *This encounter can only be described in propositions.*

Any attempt to describe the event of revelation — either to oneself in order to appreciate more clearly what it was that happened, or to another with a view to his being introduced to a similar relationship — must result in the use of words put together in propositional form.

(a) We are here making a distinction between "describing" and "experiencing." The event of the encounter and the event of describing it are two different things.

Before I can begin to tell some other person what has happened to me, the event of its happening must be behind me. Having had experience *then*, I *now* describe it to him, and the *then* and the *now* indicate each a different event.

The same distinction is to be observed in respect of any reflection upon my experience in which I engage: I am in this case *now* describing to myself what happened to me *then*. Of course the chronological lapse may be so short as to be imperceptible, but the experiencing and the describing are two different events, and it is only the latter which involves propositional statement.

Of course there may be an interplay between these two activities. In the course of my reflection and description God may make other things known to me; and I may find that I cannot think of this additional knowledge coming in any way other than

<sup>11</sup> E.g., John Baillie, *The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought*, pp. 24, 29; William Nicholls, *Revelation in Christ* (London: S.C.M. Press Ltd., 1958), p. 9.

as a result of my attempts to describe what I already know — I may indeed think of this additional knowledge as being but the drawing out from within myself of what I already knew. And I may rightly consider that my work of describing is itself an activity in which God plays a part, enabling me to express in an understandable way what He Himself has made known to me.

Thus any complete distinction between the experience and the description of it may prove in practice to be impossible, and one can understand why some writers have declared that the revelation itself must be in propositional form.<sup>12</sup> Yet, however impossible in practice, such a distinction is essential in thought; the alternative is to attribute to certain propositions an infallibility<sup>13</sup> which rightly belongs only to God Himself.

(b) The term "proposition" is being used here in a very general sense to denote all forms of verbal statement. It thus covers every occasion on which words are used to express what God has done, or made known: whether it be an occasion of worship, of edification, of controversy or of apology. The significant thing is the employment of words; the occasion which prompts them is of no consequence for the classification of them as a description of the divine-human encounter in propositions. Nor is the form of their utterance of any consequence for the purpose of classifying them in this way: whether they be spoken, or sung, or written.

Thus understood, the term "proposition" covers what some modern writers have in mind when they speak of statements about God being "parables," and what writers over the centuries have meant by "analogy". For what these terms are intended to do is indicate that the words are to be understood in ways different from their usual reference; these writers do not suggest that words are to be done away with altogether as a means of describing what God has made known.

Two writers who make use of the term "parable" are A. M. Farrer<sup>14</sup> and I. M. Crombie.<sup>15</sup> We shall take a statement from each of them.

<sup>12</sup> See, for an example of this view, D. Broughton Knox, "Propositional Revelation the Only Revelation", *The Reformed Theological Review*, xix (1960), pp. 1-11.

<sup>13</sup> Knox rightly observes that the denial of propositional revelation involves the denial of what he calls "inerrant revelation". *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> Basil Mitchell (ed.), *Faith and Logic* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1957), pp. 9-30, 84-107.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 31-83. Anthony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (ed.), *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London: S.C.M. Press Ltd., 1955), pp. 109-30.

Because the primary subject of theological statements is, according to unbelievers, preposterous and, according to believers, 'transcendent', the statements about Him cannot be anything but parables borrowed from the world of our more direct acquaintance.<sup>16</sup>

The expression 'God' is to refer to that object . . . which is such that the knowledge of it would be to us knowledge of the unfamiliar term in the contrast between finite and infinite.

Statements about God, then, are in effect parables, which are referred, by means of the proper name 'God', out of our experience in a certain direction.<sup>17</sup>

These statements make it plain that, though the words may have a peculiar content when predicated of God, they are intended to describe Him or His actions. To make this point was precisely the intention of the mediaeval doctrine of analogy, and I do not think that the introduction of the term "parable" adds anything to it.<sup>18</sup>

Farrer's concept of "images"<sup>19</sup> seems to occupy an equivocal position. In the essays referred to, both he and Crombie use this word as apparently synonymous with "parables". This suggests that an "image" is something in words, and to be subsumed under the connotation of "propositions". On the other hand, his Bampton Lectures suggest that Farrer is anxious to distinguish his "images" from statements in words, and speak of them as the shape into which inspired thinking falls when divine truth is supernaturally communicated to men.<sup>20</sup>

The position may be summarily stated: if the image is God-given in its entirety, it is part of the experience of encounter; if it is man-made (not necessarily man unaided by God), it is part of the attempt to describe.

(c) The activity of describing what has happened in the divine-human encounter, and what it implies, is the practice of theology.

Thus all language about God is theological language, although G. C. Stead would give theology a narrower connotation.

Theology is marked off, not so much by the kind of language used as the use made of it. Religious language becomes theological where there is a deliberate intention to support, to qualify or to relate the symbolic expressions of unreflective piety, though without necessarily abandoning the symbolic form,<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *Faith and Logic*, p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, p. 124.

<sup>18</sup> Terence Penelhum evidently is of the same opinion. "Logic and Theology", *Canadian Journal of Theology*, iv (1958), p. 263.

<sup>19</sup> *The Glass of Vision* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1948); see also his earlier *A Rebirth of Images*.

<sup>20</sup> *The Glass of Vision*, p. 57, cited by Baillie, *The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought*, p. 37.

And it is true that we usually think of the statements of theology as having this more restricted function. This understanding of a more restricted function leads more naturally to the appreciation of dogmas as the propositions in which theological thinking results.

We have been reminded recently<sup>22</sup> that, while philosophy is the stating of what everybody knows in terms that nobody can understand, theology is the elucidation of the incredible by means of the unintelligible; and there is some theology — ancient and modern — which gives the impression that it has fallen into both camps. Yet this is not what we expect of sound theology (or doctrine, or dogmas). We mean by the practice of theology the bringing forward of propositions which describe, in as adequate a form as may be, what we believe God has said to us.

4. *The propositions are not adequate to the reality they describe.*

(a) No proposition, or series of propositions, is ever adequate for the description of reality. While we must make use of words in order to convey our ideas, and can in many instances feel that we have in fact “got across” the substance of what we have in mind, it is a mistake to imagine that the words are exactly equivalent to the reality — or even to the idea of the reality had by the person using them. To think that they are is to assume what Chesterton called “the infallibility of language”.

Every time one man says to another, “Tell us plainly what you mean”, he is assuming the infallibility of language: that is to say, he is assuming that there is a perfect scheme of verbal expression for all the internal moods and meanings of men . . . he is assuming that a man has a word for every reality in earth, or heaven, or hell. He knows that there are in the soul tints more bewildering, more numberless and more nameless than the colours of an autumn forest. . . . Yet he seriously believes that these things can every one of the, in all their tones and semitones, in all their blends and unions, be accurately represented by an arbitrary system of grunts and squeals. He believes that an ordinary civilized stockbroker can really produce out of his inside noises which denote all the mysteries and all the agonies of desire.<sup>23</sup>

Chesterton’s words on this occasion had particular reference to men’s inner thoughts and wishes; but what he says so forcefully

<sup>21</sup> “How Theologians Reason”, *Faith and Logic*, p. 110.

<sup>22</sup> In a Public Lecture given at the University of Queensland by Bishop Stephen Neill on 26th April, 1960.

<sup>23</sup> G. K. Chesterton, in his volume on G. F. Watts in *The Popular Library of Art* (London: Duckworth, 1904), p. 88, cited by E. L. Mascall, *Words and Images*, p. 100.

is true over the whole range of reality. There is no aspect of it for which we can find words which are entirely adequate.

And this is not only because our knowledge of all reality is incomplete. That, too, has to be kept in mind; but we are most conscious of the inadequacy of language with respect to those things which we know best.

(b) This inadequacy of propositions, which is true in regard to all reality, is *a fortiori* true of the divine reality. In all our use of language to describe the acts of God (valuable as we recognize that use to be) we must confess that it is never a complete description of what God has done.

(c) It is this inadequacy of any propositions to describe an act of God which leads me to challenge any idea of "infallible" dogmas.

Being, as they are bound to be, statements which describe, and statements which are inadequate, dogmas must be open to the possibility of replacement by more adequate dogmas. And if they are capable of replacement they are not infallible. The only alternative is to hold that there are certain dogmas which, on some authority, we may depend upon as being incapable of improvement, and I am at a loss to know on what grounds such an authority could be established. For unless we consider that God Himself has made certain things known by means of uttering certain words (and the whole of our discussion up to this point has shown that this is not what is meant by revelation), we must admit that any authority can only express itself by means of propositions which are themselves descriptive of an act to which they are not adequate.

The problem of complete communication by words is an insurmountable one for, as M. B. Foster has observed, "words do not mean but people mean things by words".<sup>24</sup> Whether it be communication from the authority to the believer, or from one believer to another, it is impossible to think of any form of words as conveying truth infallibly. *Toute traduction est une trahison.*

##### 5. *Some propositions are more adequate than others.*

(a) Propositions stand in a relationship of essential analogy to the reality they purport to describe.<sup>25</sup> That is to say, it is not merely by coincidence that our statements express (albeit incompletely) the truth about any situation: that is what they are intended to do, and it is upon the sufficiency of the way in which

<sup>24</sup> "We' in Modern Philosophy", *Faith and Logic*, p. 201.

<sup>25</sup> That is, insofar as they are true propositions; I am not forgetting that there are false (and sometimes deliberately false) propositions.

they do so that any judgment is made concerning their adequacy. This is what I mean when I say that the relationship is *essential*. But it is also an *analogical* relationship: the statements are never exactly the same thing as the reality itself.

We make each our own judgments concerning the measure of adequacy. If the reference is to a reality which we have ourselves experienced, we can claim to be in a better position than anyone else to know how adequate any propositions are as a description of it.<sup>26</sup> If the reference is to a reality of which we have not had experience, we can still make judgments concerning the adequacy of propositions about it: we may compare these propositions one against the other, considering the evidence in which they seem to rest and the reliability of those who assert them with other propositions of which we have knowledge, considering the extent of their mutual consistency and which of them can be accepted and which rejected. This is the sort of process in which our minds engage continually: every proposition which is put before us is immediately subjected to some judgment concerning its adequacy, and inevitably we judge some to be more adequate than others.

(b) The acceptance, by Christians generally, or by a considerable group of them, of certain series of propositions as the most adequate available is what occasions Creeds and Confessions.

Of course, the drawing up of any particular statement is occasioned by particular circumstances: it may be for the purpose of baptismal confession and instruction, for that of excluding heresy, for that of facilitating a union of separated bodies, and so on. But the particular occasion of each does not affect the classification of them all as series of propositions judged by a number of Christians to be the most adequate description that can be framed of what God has done.

G. C. Stead writes:

Creeds and articles, if they are to do their job, must be what they appear to be, namely carefully phrased assertions. Whether or not they treat of supernaturalia like God or the future life does not greatly affect their setting in theological discourse. They are intended partly as models, partly as tests of the language of actual worship. This is not to deny them all expressive or declaratory function at all; these are indeed attested by the devotional use of the Creeds; but theologians would regard the latter as a mere application of their primary assertive and regulative use.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> That is, as a description of our experience of it; we may readily concede that someone else can give a better technical description of it.

<sup>27</sup> "How Theologians Reason", *Faith and Logic*, p. 112.

Other groups of Christians, and successive generations, may accept these statements as being the most adequate that can be framed. Or they may, in the light of further knowledge as well as of changes in the connotations of words, feel themselves able to construct more adequate propositions. But the acceptance by any group, at any time, must be recognized as the declaration that they, for their part, can offer nothing better. And it is the recognition that Christians from age to age are, with their propositions identical or different, describing the same acts of God which attests, in one essential part, the continuity of the Church from generation to generation and the continuity of each in the apostolic tradition.

In the strictest sense, the Apostolic Tradition must mean the handing over of the revelation itself, that is, of personal knowledge of God through the Holy Spirit, indeed, the whole reality of the redeemed life, through the proclamation of the Word, the administration of the Sacraments, and the building-up of men in the corporate life of the Church. But to do this will also involve the handing over of the normative propositions of faith, as they come to be understood in each generation, and of certain authorized sacramental and other practice, both of which derive their authority from the fact that they are judged by the Church to be necessary expressions of the revelation itself.<sup>28</sup>

*Brisbane.*

<sup>28</sup> William Nicholls, *Revelation in Christ*, p. 108.