

But That's Not in the Word!

What do you think of “extrabiblical revelation”?

The reason I raise this question is because in the recent past, we charismatically inclined evangelicals have experienced a number of family quarrels concerning the ministry of certain leaders within our camp. There is no need to mention their names because I do not wish to deal so much with personalities as with principles. As these disputes—many a bit heated—have developed, it has been common for some leaders to criticize their opponents on the grounds that they believe in extrabiblical revelation.

The implication, of course, is that while *they* (the opponents) allow extrabiblical revelation, the one doing the accusing certainly does not. In other words, using that criterion, it's a way of saying, “*They* are wrong, and *I* am right.”

I am simplifying this as much as possible because, in my view, what I have just described is a clear violation of Jesus' principle of looking at the speck in your brother's eye but not considering the plank in your own eye (Matt. 7:3). Whoever in our midst feels he or she is exempt from allowing, believing in or applying extrabiblical revelation must be living in some sort of spiritual la-la land.

It is a simple fact that we all believe in the validity of at least *some* extrabiblical revelation.

God did not stop speaking and revealing Himself, His thoughts, His guidance, His desires or His holiness after the Bible was written. He continues to reveal Himself today.

What About the Bible?

As a starting point, let's recognize that all persons involved in these discussions agree that the Bible is the final,

authoritative, inerrant source for Christian doctrine and practice. The authority of Scripture has not been up for debate in any of our encounters. Since this is the case, it is obvious that no one on either side would accept or admit *antibiblical* revelation. We agree that any purported revelation contradicting the Bible cannot be regarded as valid.

Having said this, how about things we do or teach that do not contradict the Bible but that, at the same time, cannot explicitly be found in the Bible?

Let's first think about what we mean by "the Bible." I'm sure you would agree the Bible has 66 books. But how do we know? Nothing in the Bible teaches it has 66 books. The only way to know that is through extrabiblical revelation! There is no other choice.

How did God go about revealing to us what the Bible should or should not contain? Some will be surprised to find it actually took hundreds of years. In fact, we Protestants didn't finally decide on the 39 books of our Old Testament until the Reformation of the 16th century. That was when the reformers decided to exclude the apocryphal books of the Catholic Bible, which Catholics still include in their canon of Scripture.

A few years ago Ramsay MacMullen, the distinguished Yale University professor of history, wrote a fascinating book called *Voting About God in Early Church Councils*. The title itself reveals a great deal about the process through which the church received new revelation after the Bible was written. While God was revealing Himself on this matter, believers in those days became accustomed to a process of receiving that revelation that was not always as godly as we might assume it was.

The flyleaf of MacMullen's book says it well: "What was it like to be a bishop in the early church voting on what God's

law should be? How did bishops who disagreed about God's law conduct themselves? Often they were raucous, riotous, even violent in settling disputes. ... Drawing on extensive verbatim stenographic records, [MacMullen] analyzes the ecumenical councils from A.D. 325 to 553, in which participants gave authority to doctrinal choices by majority vote."

MacMullen finds that the literal physical battles involved in establishing the church's doctrinal creeds produced no fewer than 25,000 deaths! He says, "It disrupted [people's lives] not only by ending so many of them, once and for all, abruptly, but in other ways as well: through arson, wounds and injuries, displacement, losses of property, rioting, disorders, and deep abiding splits in communities."

To focus more specifically on the Bible you and I have ended up with, let me quote a vivid paragraph by missiologist Jonathan Bonk:

"There is no indication that those credited with penning the Jewish and then the Christian Holy Writ—political leaders, priests, chroniclers, poets, prophets, sages, amateur historians, and apostles—imagined that they were contributing to a body of writing that would one day be incorporated into a single volume universally known as *The Bible*. Nor could they have known that religious and political leaders of a later era—of whom Constantine may serve as a convenient representative—would engage in a prolonged, factious, and at times ethically unseemly effort to determine which writings should be allowed between the covers of this sacred book, and which ones should be excluded. As unsavory to modern sensibilities as was the process itself—to say nothing of the carnal motives and methods of its principals—the result was the book that we Christians now honor in word, if less frequently in deed: *The Holy Bible*."

I know it is shocking, but this vividly describes some of the process through which the body of Christ historically arrived

at its fervent conviction about how many books should be included in the Bible. Once again, it is important to recognize that you and I have received our doctrine of the canon of Scripture entirely through extrabiblical revelation.

But that's not all.

What About the Trinity?

The central doctrine MacMullen traces through the councils is not the canon but the doctrine of the Trinity. I customarily refer to God as the Trinity, meaning that God has always existed as three Persons in one essence—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I believe this is sound biblical doctrine.

Nevertheless, there is no appearance of the word *Trinity* in the Bible, nor is there any single passage that describes God as three Persons in one essence. That is why it took hundreds of years of debate to arrive at our trinitarian doctrinal conclusion. It obviously had to be the result of extrabiblical revelation.

In fact, do you know the phrase “It doesn't matter one iota”? This phrase originated from these controversies concerning the Trinity, which precipitated no fewer than 15,000 official church councils over that era of history. One of the chief items of debate was the difference between the Greek words *homousios* and *homoiousios*. If you look closely, you can see that the second word has an i (iota in the Greek) the first word doesn't have. The first word meant that Jesus was fully equal to the Father; the second word implied Jesus was somewhat inferior to the Father.

Of course, the theological issues were much deeper, but on the surface, the controversies were over an iota! Interestingly enough, neither of the words could be found in the Bible, so it was definitely an extrabiblical debate.

In the end, *homousios* won out. Why? Because it gained more

votes in more councils than *homoiousios*.

I know it is stretching, but this is the way some of our most important extrabiblical revelation was received by the church—revelation that most still hold dear today. As MacMullen comments, “*More trumped less*; there was in the end ‘validation from numbers,’ as a council president reminded a minority who were slow to give in.”

Did this form of revelation come by the Holy Spirit? Those involved thought so. As MacMullen writes, “All the proceedings in councils might therefore be attributed to the presence of the Holy Spirit, at least in the judgment of bishops who approved of the outcome.”

Surprisingly, this is how we received what some church leaders call “the faith once delivered to the saints.” Flawed as it might appear, it seemed to work. We today believe in the Trinity not because of direct biblical revelation but because of majority votes in certain councils—in other words, by extrabiblical revelation. Then when we check it out, we see that it fits with Scripture; it doesn’t contradict Scripture.

What About These Practices?

I have explained the extrabiblical nature of our doctrines of the canon of Scripture and the Trinity in more detail than I will use in the remaining items. My main purpose in compiling the following list, partial as it might be, is to bring to our attention how many of our generally accepted doctrines and practices are founded on extrabiblical revelation. The more we admit this, the more difficult it becomes to point fingers at each other simply because what others do that we don’t like may have come to them through extrabiblical revelation.

- **Christmas and Easter.** My family and I, as well as most churches, habitually celebrate Christmas and Easter as Christian holidays. Yet nothing in the Bible indicates that we should do this. These extrabiblical celebrations

were instituted by human beings hundreds of years after Christ walked the earth.

- **The abolition of slavery.** I am strongly convinced that God abhors slavery as a social institution and that advocating or even tolerating human slavery is an ungodly form of social injustice. However, in both Old Testament times and New Testament times, slavery was a culturally embedded social institution, and nothing in the Bible explicitly condemns this social institution. Our current persuasion on the abolition of slavery is, therefore, extrabiblical.
- **Praying to the Holy Spirit.** I am in the habit of addressing some of my prayers to the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Trinity. However, we have no example in the Bible of anyone addressing prayers to the Holy Spirit. I feel it is correct, but that feeling has to come from extrabiblical revelation, not from Scripture.
- **Sunday school.** I feel that Sunday school is a gift of God to the church. However, the idea cannot be found in the Bible. When Robert Raikes introduced Sunday school more than 100 years ago, he was accused by many of being wrong because the idea was labeled extrabiblical.
- **Worshipping on Sunday.** Speaking of Sunday school, I happen to believe Sunday is the principal, God-appointed day of the week (though not exclusively so) for Christian worship. Yet the Bible nowhere teaches this. The conclusion came through extrabiblical revelation.
- **Church buildings.** I am a strong advocate for local churches having their own houses of worship. Nevertheless, nothing in the Bible recommends this. The usual biblical practice was to meet in believers' homes.
- **Using musical instruments in churches.** I believe in using musical instruments in worship services in our churches today, but I cannot justify this by the New Testament practice of the apostles.
- **24/7 extended worship.** I admire and support ministries today that practice 24/7 worship and praise, some having

done so for years. However, I do not find this advocated or practiced by New Testament apostles. This has come by revelation or interpretation after the New Testament was written.

- **Weekly offerings.** I think taking weekly offerings in church meetings is an appropriate ecclesiastical behavior pattern, even though nothing in the Bible says we should do it.

What About Prophecy?

Jesus said, "He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches." (See Revelation 2-3.) While this is in the Bible, note the present tense: "is saying."

As I mentioned earlier, I join the company of those who believe God did not stop speaking to the churches when the canon of Scripture was completed. I believe in the gift of prophecy and the ministry of prophets who receive messages from God and who speak on His behalf. Much of what prophets say is biblical because they quote Scripture in their prophecies. However, much is also extrabiblical, because what God may be showing them cannot be found in the Bible. Through the years, I have received a considerable amount of valuable new revelation from God through prophets—revelation that is not to be found in the Bible.

We need to note once again that nothing we are dealing with here can be *antibiblical*. We cannot affirm any doctrine or practice or purported word from the Lord that would contradict Scripture in any way. Admittedly, this is sometimes a hard line to draw, but it must be drawn whenever necessary.

I hope you will conclude with me that any doctrine or practice with which we may not agree cannot be refuted or condemned simply on the basis that it may be derived from extrabiblical revelation. It may truly be a heretical doctrine that should be condemned, or it may be an ungodly practice that must be

rejected. But if it is either, this has to be argued on reasonable grounds beyond the all-too-common extrabiblical label.

My prayer is that this article will help clear the way for more amicable and higher-level discussions within the body of Christ than might have been conducted in the past.

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