

GOD'S DESIRE TO REVEAL HIMSELF

VERSUS

HUMANKIND'S INHERENT OBSTACLES

TO DISCERNING HIS REVELATION

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SUMMARY

This thesis looks into the inherent obstacles humankind faces in correctly discerning God's consistent self-revelation through multiple mediums. It then delves into Scripture's discernment principles to find means by which to overcome these obstacles and so counter deception.

DECLARATION

I, declare that the dissertation, which I hereby submit for the degree, **MA (Practical Theology)**, at the University of Pretoria, is my own work and has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other tertiary institution.

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God's desire to Reveal Himself versus Humankind's Inherent Obstacles to Discerning His Revelation

Chapter 1 Introduction

"In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God." (John 1:1)

Commenting on this verse, A.W. Tozer rightly says: "An intelligent plain man, untaught in the truths of Christianity, coming upon this text, would likely conclude that John meant to teach that it is the nature of God to speak, to communicate His thoughts to others. And he would be right.... God is forever seeking to speak Himself out to His creation. The whole Bible supports the idea. God is speaking. Not God spoke, but God is speaking. He is by His nature continuously articulate. He fills the world with His speaking Voice." (Tozer 2008:49)

This truth is at once exciting and daunting. It is exhilarating to think that God is unceasingly revealing Himself, expressing who He is through nature, by His Spirit, in the Scriptures, via the testimony of His disciples, by means of messenger angels, through dreams and visions, etc. Yet, as much as it stirs excitement, the thought should also stir up a weight of responsibility in every believer. For it is the task of every believer to discern God's voice amidst the humdrum of distracting and deceiving voices in the world. (1 John 2:18-27; 4:1; 1 Cor 14:29)

1.1. God's timeless desire for revealing Himself

Throughout Scripture we see that God initiates conversation with humankind. In an overview Says Kolb et al: "Luther insisted that God is a person, a person who speaks and enjoys

conversation with the human creatures he fashioned to listen to him and talk with him. God created his human creatures to be his conversation partners.” (Kolb & Arand 2008:138) Kolb et al points out how the creation account in Genesis teaches us that faith in our Creator’s Word is the key element for a relationship with Him. At the Fall, Satan cunningly opened a breach in that relationship by launching an attack on humankind’s faith in God by planting a seed of doubt and mistrust in their hearts with the vile question: “Did God really say?” (Gen 3:1 NIV) Sadly, they responded with a lack of faith and stopped listening to God. In Kolb’s words: “They had broken their relationship with Him by doubting what he had said.” (Kolb & Arand 2008:139) God pursued humankind ever since. Kolb says: “After Adam and Eve had tried to break off human communication with their Creator (Gen 3), God kept coming to human beings to revive the conversation.” (Kolb & Arand 2008:146)

The Fall of humankind is followed by a drastic downward spiral into evil, climaxing at the Flood. God, however, initiates a promising relationship with Abraham in order to establish a nation through whom he might reveal Himself to all humankind. His self-revelation culminated in the incarnation and, ultimately, as Kolb et al insists, in the “way of the cross as his means of communicating life.” (Kolb & Arand 2008:146)

While God is spirit, and therefore invisible in the material world, Barth insists that “He is the God who in his concealment is not absent but present, not veiled but manifest.” (Barth 1981:115) God might be invisible, Barth admits, but that does not make Him absent, nor does it make Him distant. God is very much present and very much involved with the world. It is “the world”, says Barth, who “is at fault for existing in the ambivalence of objective knowledge and subjective ignorance.” (Barth 1981:122) Where there is a breach between God’s self-revelation and humankind’s discernment of His revelation, it is humankind who is

at fault, not God. Barth insists that it is us, humankind, who is the bottleneck in this revelatory process.

God reveals Himself for the purpose of initiating and growing a personal relationship with us – a relationship of love. Yancey rightly warns that “it is wrong to speak of God’s *need* of love from his creation,” (Yancey 2007:518) as God is completely fulfilled and at peace within Himself. Yet, Yancey continues by counter-balancing this warning with a reminder that “God himself expressed his longing for that love: like a father starved for some response, *any* response, from his rebellious children; like a jilted lover who, against all reason, gives his faithless beloved one more chance.” We find these strong images of God’s desire for intimacy in the Old Testament prophets, and most vividly so in Hosea. Under God’s instructions, the prophet marries a prostitute who, in time, leaves him to return to her trade. Heartbroken, Hosea searches for her and brings her back home again... This is God’s heart cry – an unfathomable love for us shown in the riches of his grace and mercy. Says Yancey: “The deepest longings we feel on earth, as parents, as lovers, are mere flickers of the hungering desire God feels for us. It is a desire that cost him the Incarnation and the Crucifixion.” (Yancey 2007:518)

Sproul insists that, for all the weighty principles and sober ethic found in Christianity, “the heart of the faith is the commitment to a personal relationship with a personal God.” (Sproul 1995:192) With such a prominent emphasis on personal relationship, it would, at least on first glance, appear that Sproul differ from most mainline theologians who would insist that the essence of the Judeo-Christian religion is revelation. As Pinnock states, “at the core of the Biblical conception is revelation as divine activity in history.” (Pinnock 1971:31) The motivation of this self-revelation of God, however, is relationship. God reveals Himself in order to establish a love relationship with humankind, on a personal level as well as on a

corporate level. Says Blackaby: “God is the One who initiates a relationship with us... He’s willing and eager to share His heart and thoughts with us.” (Blackaby 2008:16)

“This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins...

“No-one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.” (1 John 4:10,12 NIV)

God is not an impersonal energy – like gravity or heat – revealing itself in the material world. No, Scripture teaches that God is Spirit. Sproul insists that, “when we say that God is a spirit, we are saying more than that He is not physical and that He has power. We are saying that God is personal.” (Sproul 1995:64) The same can be said of us. As spiritual beings we are capable of thinking, feeling and acting. These abilities distinguish us from the most sophisticated animals and enable us to interact with others of our kind on a *personal* level. Our spirituality is the key to intimate relations beyond that of hormonal desire and endearing affection. It enables us to enter into a *love* relationship.

Sproul makes this telling observation: “Because God is a personal spirit, we can have a personal relationship with Him. He can communicate with us.” (Sproul 1995:64-65) It is that communication – God’s self-revelation – which quickens in us a love in response to God’s love. (Sproul 1995:193) This love relationship with our Creator is not only His deepest desire but also our sole purpose. Ingram is adamant that God created us “for closeness, love, and friendship,” (Ingram 2004:20) and sees in the root elements of our religion the tools by which this love relationship is nurtured: “His Word is meant to disclose his deep, personal thoughts to you, and prayer is meant for you to disclose your deep, personal thoughts to him.” (Ingram 2004:20) Also Blackaby (2008:4) insists that God longs for an intimate relationship for the purpose of revealing those things spoken of in Jeremiah 33:3 - “great and mighty things, which you do not know.” Says Blackaby: “Almighty, infinite, all-knowing God

welcomes people to come to him and to allow Him to reveal things from his heart and mind that would amaze them.” (Blackaby 2008:4)

And so we have come full circle: God *reveals* Himself in order to facilitate a personal relationship – a personal relationship in which He desires to *reveal more* of Himself. He longs to reveal what Ingram calls, “his deep, personal thoughts”; those “great and mighty things, which [we] do not know.” (Jer 33:3)

God reveals Himself in order to establish a relationship in which He can reveal more of Himself. This circular statement fits snugly into the theology of the great Jonathan Edwards:

“[God] had respect for *himself*, as his last and highest end, in this work; because he is *worthy* in himself to be so, being infinitely the greatest and best of beings. All things else, with regard to worthiness, importance, and excellence, are perfectly as nothing in comparison to him... All that is ever spoken in the Scripture as an ultimate end of God’s works is included in that one phrase, *the glory of God.*” (Edwards 1851:253)

Edwards argues that the end-goal of all that God does has to do with His glory. God is jealous for His own glory and is zealous to display His glory. John Piper calls this “the God-centeredness of God.” (Piper 2008:6) Following an extensive survey of texts, Edwards remarks how “glory often implies the manifestation, publication and knowledge of excellency.” (Edwards 1851:252) It is to the glory of God that he displays his excellence. He chooses to reveal Himself to us that we, in response to seeing His excellence, would glorify Him. Ultimately then, God’s self-revelation is to and for His glory.

Humankind, as the crown of creation, is in itself a glorious display of God’s excellence. Calvin writes in the *Institutes*: “There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity... God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty... Men one and all perceive that there is a God and that

he is their Maker.” (Calvin 43-44) Even Descartes, when considering himself “a thinking thing” (Descartes 1641:44) must conclude “that God exists: for though the idea of substance be in my mind owing to this, that I myself am a substance, I should not, however, have the idea of an infinite substance, seeing I am a finite being, unless it were given me by some substance in reality infinite... for how could I know that I doubt, desire, or that something is wanting to me, and that I am not wholly perfect, if I possessed no idea of a being more perfect than myself...?” (Descartes 1641:45) Barth is as bold to state that: “Descartes is wrong, then, when he says: *Cognito, ergo sum* [I think, therefore I am]. For... we are less certain of our own existence than of God’s existence for us.” (Barth 1936:19) So great is God’s self-revelation in the world, that it even supercedes any proof regarding our own existence. Kolb et al rightly says that, “to be human means, first of all, to be in conversation with God, trusting him, obeying him, revelling in his gift of our being his human children.” (Kolb & Arand 2008:141)

God continues to reveal Himself today. It is up to humankind to rightly discern His self-revelation and to reverently respond to it.

1.2 Terminology

Before continuing, the researcher feels the need to clarify the following two terms as they are key to a correct understanding of both the crux and the scope of this study.

1.2.1 God’s self-revelation

“Can we really, in this life, pull back the curtain and the shroud of mystery and say, ‘I’ve seen all of God?’” (Ingram 2004:46)

To what extent can we here and now know God? If God were to reveal Himself to me, does that revelation constitute a full knowledge of God? Do I ever again need a further revelation of the Almighty Creator?

Let us briefly consider Moses' life experience: He was the man who heard God's audible voice from a burning bush, (Exod 3) who became the instrument through whom God's glorious power was displayed to a pagan nation and to God's faithless people, (Exod 7-11) who became God's chosen leader for the miracle-filled redemptive journey to the promised land, (Exod – Deut) who walked up the fiery mountain, into the holy cloud of smoke, towards the thundering voice of the Almighty, to receive those hand-written laws from God Himself, (Exod 20) who together with seventy of Israel's elders, *saw God* and ate and drank in His presence, (Exod 24:9-11) and who personally received God's detailed instructions for the tabernacle (Exod 25-32).

After all these glorious revelations and more, this man Moses asked: "Now show me Your glory." (Exod 33:18) What Moses really asked was this: "Reveal more of Yourself to me. I need to know You more. I've only just begun to see who You truly are, God. Take me deeper into a personal relationship with You." To some extent God granted Moses' request, except to actually show him His face. Yet, Moses came down that mountain after seeing God from behind, and he continued to go outside the camp to his tent of meeting where he would *daily* converse with God in the cloud of His glory. "As Moses went into the tent," Exodus tells us, "the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance, while the Lord spoke with Moses. The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend." (Exod 33:9,11a)

After so much revelation of God, Moses only ever sought to know God more. He never reached the point of contentment, as if he knew God fully in his earthly life.

On this note, Ingram continues by answering his courageous question: “Yes, we can know God truly, but no, we cannot know him exhaustively... You can receive genuine, compelling, and accurate knowledge of God. But demanding to see more of God than he chooses to reveal would simply lead to your demise.” (Ingram 2004:47) Fife agrees with Ingram: “God is the only One who can initiate revelation,” says Fife, “No matter how hard we may try to peek into the eternal things and understand His mysteries and secrets, our human efforts fail. Only He decides when to open the door or draw back the curtain and let us see into His presence.” (Fife 2001:47) Ingram is certain that, just like Moses, we may receive glorious revelations of God in this lifetime. Yet, no revelation, nor the sum of all revelations can ever bring us to the point where we might truly say: I know God fully. (Ingram 2004:47-48) Luther too saw in Scripture that, for all the revelation received of God, He does not tell all about himself. (Kolb & Arand 2008:137,144) We simply have to be content with the fact that creatures could never fully comprehend their Creator. Now, having addressed the *extent* of that term, “God’s self-revelation”, the researcher must turn his attention to the manner by which he believes such revelation to occur.

It would be fair to say that every human’s character and characteristics are made known by what they say, what they do and what they bring into being (create) during their lifetime. Torrance is cited by Thiemann to argue that the same is true for God, as Torrance believes that any and every revelation from God is in fact a revelation of God himself. The Scottish theologian puts it this way: “The ultimate fact with which we have to come to terms in all theological and biblical interpretation [is]... that divine

revelation is God himself, for it is not just something of himself that God reveals to us but his very own Self, his own ultimate being as God.” (Thiemann 1985:36)

Quere disagrees with Torrance. “God's being is incomprehensible,” he says, “What God reveals about his attributes, attitudes, and actions toward humanity tells us what he is like, but not what he is.” (Quere 1985:10) Barth, on the other hand, fully agrees with Torrance: “Knowledge of revelation,” says Barth, “can and must mean, then, knowledge of the far away, strange, and holy God... Knowledge of revelation does not mean an abstract knowledge of a God confronting an abstract man. Rather, it is a concrete knowledge of the God who has sought man and meets him in his concrete situation and finds him there.” (Barth 1936:12)

The researcher will argue on the side of Torrance by saying that one's attributes, attitudes and actions are in fact an accurate portrayal of who you are. With reverent respect, the same must be true for the great “I AM” who made Himself known to Israel by means of natural disasters, supernatural occurrences, written laws and in the symbolisms of a special tent in the middle of their camp, and by naming Himself. “[God] wants us to see him clearly, attribute by amazing attribute...” says Ingram, “He has taken several millennia, inspired hundreds of pages of Scripture, and gone through a traumatic incarnation to paint an accurate portrait of himself. He obviously cares what we think about him.” (Ingram 2004:26)

The incarnation is, without doubt, the most vivid of God's self-revelations. “Jesus is God's message about himself,” says Jensen and Payne, “When the Word became flesh, full of grace and truth, God himself pulled back the curtain and stepped onto the stage.” (1997:69) When Philip asked Jesus to show the disciples the Father,

Jesus replied: “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” (John 14:9) Says Ingram: “Jesus is the fullness of deity in bodily form... Because of who [God] is you can never know all of him – but all you need to know of him is in the person of Christ.” (Ingram 2004:47) “He has assumed our nature,” Barth asserts, “... To Him who is endowed with the fullness of the divine majesty, nothing that is human is foreign.” (Barth 1936:16)

When contemplating the incarnation of Christ and the manner in which Christ reconciled humankind to God, Barth makes a crucial observation concerning the nature of revelation. “This is what revelation means,” he says, “this is its content and dynamic: Reconciliation has been made and accomplished. Reconciliation is not a truth which revelation makes known to us; reconciliation is the truth of God Himself who grants Himself freely to us in His revelation.” (Barth 1936:17) The sum of Barth’s argument is this: revelation is relationship – a relationship that is made possible through the work of reconciliation which Jesus Christ completed on the cross. Revelation is not arbitrary strings of supernatural insight. It is God-revealing truths which enables a growing intimate relationship with our Maker. This truth brings us to the next defining aspect concerning God’s self-revelation: that of entering into a God-revealing relationship...

I agree with R C Sproul in that conversion is the entry point into greater revelation of God. “With conversion comes a new capacity for understanding and appreciating the true nature and character of God. We are now open and receptive to an unprecedented degree of acknowledging, loving and adoring the God who is.” (Sproul 1995:7) To be sure, there is a form of general revelation that predates ones conversion. Sproul tells of his intense hunger for personal knowledge of God that

started long before his own conversion. Says Sproul: “I know there is a God – we all know that. But that’s not nearly enough. I must know who He is. I must know what He is like.” (Sproul 1995:14) Nature portrays God to all humankind:

“For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities-his eternal power and divine nature-have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.” (Rom 1:20)

However, from the point of conversion, a personal relationship with God begins, wherein God makes Himself known to the extent that every person allows him to. (We will look into humankind’s obstacles for receiving revelation later on.) This God-revealing relationship is a lifelong experience. As Sproul rightly says: “Learning of the character of God is an experience that cannot be exhausted in a single lifetime in this world.” (Sproul 1995:7) Waltke echoes Sproul’s notion: “Because God is far beyond what our finite minds can comprehend, we do not know everything about Him... Yet our faith should continue in Him... my following of God is based upon my *relationship* with him rather than on a special ‘sign’.” (1995:16)

Increasing revelational knowledge of the Creator also leads to an increasing self-knowledge. As Calvin says: “man never attains a true self-knowledge until he has previously contemplated the face of God and come down after such contemplation to look into himself.” (Calvin 35) As we grow in knowledge of God, we discover our purpose, our intended holy nature, and our eternal destiny.

Finally, God left us with no doubt as to His intent for our revealed knowledge of Him. He makes known His desire for us to know Him – to *yearn and seek* to know Him. God says to every human being: “Call to Me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things, which you do not know.” (Jer 33:3) Commenting on this

verse, Blackaby remarks: “God invites His people to a richer experience... Almighty, infinite, all-knowing God welcomes people to come to him and to allow Him to reveal things from his heart and mind that would amaze them.” (Blackaby 2008:4)

1.2.2 The multiple mediums of God’s self-revelation

In communication science terms, a medium is a means through which communication takes place. Speech, gestures, letters, telephone, newspapers, television – these are but some of the multiple mediums through which humans communicate.

Barry and Connolly assert that “God communicates with us whether we know it or not... He shares himself with us even when we do not know that he is doing so.” (1982:33) Yet, how does God communicate? “Life itself communicates him to us,” they explain, “Sunsets tell us of grandeur. Friendship communicates to us the experience of loyalty and love. Blizzards and hurricanes impose on us the consciousness that the ordering of nature is ultimately outside our control. The harnessing of nuclear energy makes us aware that there is no limit to our ability to explore and exploit our universe, and nuclear accidents make us aware that we cannot perfectly control what we have discovered.” (Barry & Connolly, 1982:33)

When speaking about the mediums through which God communicates, we need to think much broader than language, writing and technological means of communication. Not only is God the Creator portrayed in every atom of the universe (Ps 19:1-4; Rom 1:19-20), but all of creation stands at His beck and call (this is called “general revelation”). Heaven and earth obeys the voice of their Maker. “Incontestably, he [God] is at the heart of world events and world affairs,” Barth asserts, “...he is already as its Creator the God who is objectively well known to it.”

(Barth 1981:121) The whole of creation is a loud-hailer through which God communicates unceasingly. This general revelation is a continual voice of witness to the glory of its Creator.

However, God communicates not only by natural means, but also by supernatural means (called “special revelation”). These are means which supercede nature’s laws, which themselves are given by God. Jensen and Payne list a number of such revelations to create an awareness of the wide scope of possibilities for God to communicate: “God spoke to Moses from out of the burning bush... God led the people of Israel out of Egypt using a pillar of fire and a cloud of smoke... God communicated his will through the Old Testament prophets... God spoke to King Belshazzar by writing directly on the wall... God spoke to various people in dreams... Angels conveyed God’s word to various people... God guided the apostles in their choice of Matthias through the casting of lots... Paul was guided into a new mission field by a vision of a man of Macedonia...” (Jensen and Payne 1997:66-67)

Having considered the multiple means of God’s self-revelation throughout Scripture, Deere zooms in on the striking number of mediums through which God supernaturally communicated around the time of Jesus’ birth (Matt 1-2 and Luke 1-2). Says Deere: “Zechariah knew what was about to happen because the angel Gabriel told him. Mary knew her womb would become his first home on earth because of Gabriel’s announcement. Elizabeth had to be filled with the Holy Spirit in order to recognize Mary was carrying the Lord Jesus. Joseph had to be told in a dream or he would have divorced Mary. The shepherds found their way to the child through an angelic announcement, and the Magi were guided to him by a star. Simeon and Anna were moved by the Holy Spirit to recognize him and speak prophetically of his mission.”

(Deere 1996:38) For Deere, the key aspect to be seen in these multiple mediums of revelation is that “God was setting the pattern early for all to see: no one would ever find their way to Jesus without direct, supernatural revelation.” (Deere 1996:38) Even though God’s prophets were foretelling and detailing the birth of the Messiah for hundreds of years already, only those to whom God the Father supernaturally revealed His Son knew that the Messiah had finally arrived.

In this thesis then, the researcher uses the term “multiple mediums” to refer to the numerous means by which God communicates, as seen in Scripture:

- Nature (Ps 19:1-4; Rom 1:19-20)
- God’s audible voice (Deut 5:4-5; Matt 3:17),
- the Incarnation (John 1:14),
- angels (Luke 1; Acts 10:30),
- theophanies (Gen 32:30; Josh 5:14; Judg 2:1),
- prophecy (Deut 18:14-22; Acts 21:10),
- dreams (Gen 37; Dan 4),
- visions (Dan 8; Acts 16:9),
- trances (Acts 10:10),
- the Holy Spirit (Luke 2:26; Acts 11:12),
- preaching and teaching (2 Tim 4:2-5),
- life-testimony of God’s children (Matt 5:16),
- and Scripture itself (Luke 24:27; Acts 8:35).

This list is by no means exhaustive, but indicates that God certainly speaks to humankind by numerous mediums when and as He pleases. While the researcher would call these the multiple mediums of God’s self-revelation, others might argue

that they are in fact the multiple mediums of God's prophecy. While prophecy is listed among the other mediums above, Wylie and Humphreys would argue that most of these mediums can in fact be listed under that term – prophecy. "The term 'prophecy' can be used relatively broadly," says Wylie et al, "as it is throughout the Bible... In the Old Testament, 'prophecy' was used to describe a wide variety of God-inspired communication... Ezekiel lying on his side was a prophetic action... The sermons of the prophets, for example Isaiah and Amos, are called prophecies among other labels and terms." (Wylie & Humphreys 2010:1) Towards New Testament times, the use of the term prophecy became much narrower, they point out. "When we speak about prophecy in the New Testament," says Wylie et al, "we are referring to... revelation that comes through the gifting of the Holy Spirit." (2010:2) This is certainly still a very wide, much-inclusive term. For that reason, while much of the researcher's sources would include discussions on the discernment of prophecy in particular, the researcher will use its input as referring to "the mediums of God's self-revelation". The terms are certainly not interchangeable, as prophecy is included as but one medium. Nevertheless, the term "prophecy" incorporates such a great scope of God's mediums of self-revelation, that any discussion concerning the discernment of prophecy relates well to the discernment of all the mediums of God's self-revelation.

Jensen and Payne raise the following caution with regards to the more dramatic means of God's revelation seen in Scripture: "Modern Bible readers," they say, "often assume that because God has acted in a certain way in the past, we could expect (or even demand) that he act in the same way today... This is a grave misunderstanding." (Jensen and Payne 1997:67) They rightly point out that the Bible is very selective in the history it recalls. Further, it captures numerous dramatic and abnormal events for specific reasons. We then on the one hand must admit that,

should He choose to, God can certainly reveal Himself to us through dramatic and abnormal means as seen in Scripture. However, we should not, in expectancy of such dramatic revelations, lose sight of the numerous less extravagant, seemingly “mundane” revelations of God – through nature, through the Word, through prophecy, preaching and teaching, through His faithful provision, etc.

Nevertheless, every revelation of God, whether dramatic or seemingly every-day, requires discernment on our part. We will now turn our attention to this fundamental responsibility.

1.3. The fundamental role of good discernment

To discern, as Morris and Olsen (1997:23) breaks it down for us, means...

- to separate or distinguish (from the Latin *discernere*);
- to test in crisis or distinguish good and evil (from the Greek *diakrisis*);
- to find the authentic and valuable and to recognize the counterfeit (like biting a coin to see if it is gold)

It is Daugherty, however, who pins the spiritual task of discernment down the best when she says “discernment is seeing what God gives us to see.” (1994:24)

In a rather unsettling article published some years ago in the *Christian Century*, MacDonald tells how “scholars and industry observers say readers have unmatched access today to books claiming to be divine revelation - that is, God's own words.” (MacDonald 2003) He refers to best-sellers like *Conversations with God*, by Neal Walsch (Putnam, 1999), and *The Celestine Prophecy*, by James Red-field (Warner Books, 1997). Both these “begot sequels and spawned followings who saw the authors as prophets,” says MacDonald. Lesser known

publications are Shyam D. Buxani's *Salam: Divine Revelations from the Actual God* (SAU Salam Foundation, 2003) and an Australian author known as "The Little Pebble" who "claims to provide direct messages from the Virgin Mary." (MacDonald 2003)

More recently, William P. Young's *The Shack* (Windblown Media, 2007) simultaneously caused an excitement and an uproar with its questionable theology communicated in novel form. On a possibly more "kosher" note, Rick Joyner published a very popular three part series of books, starting with *The Final Quest* (Whitaker House, 1997), in which he recalls heavenly revelations he claims to have received himself, some of it during transportations to heaven where he had extended conversations with Jesus as well as with past saints.

What do we accept? What do we reject? Which are truly revelations from God and which are deceptions from Satan or simply from fallen human nature?

Healthy discernment is crucial!

For reasons not fully known to us, God chooses to speak somewhat remotely in our world. By "remotely" is meant that, since the fall in Genesis three, humankind seldom saw a visible embodiment of God (Gen 32:22-32; Exod 33:21-23) and seldom heard God's audible voice (Deut 5:4-5; Matt 3:17). If these physically recordable mediums were the normative means by which God communicated – as enjoyed by Adam and Eve in Eden – discernment would have played a much less vital part in our Christian walk. As it is, however, healthy discernment is the only viable means we have of receiving true revelation of God. All of the many mediums by which God communicates with us – e.g. general revelation through nature, the image of Christ in Scripture, a personal dream or a sermon – each and every one requires discernment on our behalf in order to identify God's revelation to us. Morneau

(1994:32) rightly remarks that “discernment must deal with many voices seeking to capture our minds, hearts, and energies.”

Sadly, Jesus and Paul’s warning against the onslaught of false prophets (Matt 7:15; Acts 20:28ff) soon saw fulfillment in the early church (1 John 4:1), demanding a sound discretion from young believers and upcoming congregations. For this reason, the Holy Spirit gave the gift of discerning spirits, which enabled certain believers to have a supernatural keen ability to distinguish what is from God against what is not from God.

Discerning of spirits is a particular charismatic gift of determining the genuineness of allegedly divine messages and works. (1 Cor 12:10 is the sole occurrence of the actual term “discerning of spirits”) Liefeld explains how “it was recognized, not only in Christianity but also among other religious groups, that supernatural acts and utterances might come from evil as well as good sources. There was a consequent need for a means of discerning the motivating spirits.” (Liefeld, Glo 2009)

While some believers today still operate this spiritual gift, Rosscup insists that “not only the gifted, but all believers must exercise discernment to some degree, then as now (1 Cor 2:14,15; 1 John 2:20,27; 4:1-6; cf. Phil 1:10).” (Rosscup, Glo 2009) Satan’s tactics have not changed. His chief aim is still to plant seeds of doubt and distrust in our hearts concerning the true Word of God. Discernment is a believer’s only guard against the lies of Satan which attempts to lure us into disbelief. And so, as Rosscup warns: “every believer needs caution against evil spirits using false doctrine and also counterfeits from man’s own deceitful impulses and emotions.” (Rosscup, Glo 2009)

The question is: How are we to discern what is really from God and what not? How can we remain open to true revelation from God, and at the same time protect ourselves against

deception by demonic spirits or simply the human spirit? Or phrased more pertinently: What qualifies healthy discernment?

In the section that follows we'll be taking a quick look at the different tests for revelation as proposed by the liberal and neo-orthodox theologians respectively.

1.4. Traditional tests for revelation from God

Due to the key role of revelation in the Judeo-Christian faith, most theological movements have held up some sort of test by which they believe true revelation of God is to be discerned from the false. These tests are mainly derived from their understanding of 1.) the importance of revelation in our faith, and 2.) the manner in which revelation is received.

1.4.1 Reformed theology's tests for revelation from God:

In *Revelation and Theology*, Thiemann points out a definite shift in alliances to the absolute truth of God's self-revelation over the centuries. He says that, "despite the prominence of doctrines of revelation in nearly every modern theology written prior to 1960, very little clarity has emerged regarding the possibility and nature of human knowledge of God." (Thiemann 1985:1) He continues to describe how the Reformers saw revelation of God as a "background belief" (Thiemann 1985:10), meaning an axiomatic doctrine which is foundational to the Christian faith – an undisputed truth. Calvin serves as an excellent example of this absolute faith in God's self-revelation. Thiemann observes how "Calvin can speak of God's gracious implanting of knowledge of his majesty in his creatures as 'beyond controversy' precisely because it functions as a background belief." (Thiemann 1985:11)

Zachman points out the foundational perspective that Calvin had of revelation: “John Calvin claims that the foundation of Scripture is the oracles and visions revealed to the patriarchs, transmitted through countless generations by an oral tradition that faithfully preserved these oracles.” (Zachman 2009:117) In Calvin’s view, then, Scripture, Christianity and the church would be nothing without the background belief of God’s self-revelation. Also, because that revelation is “faithfully preserved” *in Scripture*, Scripture itself is both the transmitter of revelation and the test for true revelation.

While we see in Luther this same inseparableness of revelation and Scripture, we see a greater emphasis on the Word, not just as written Scripture, but as the power and revelation of God operating universally. Martin Luther’s way of thinking was framed and permeated by, what Kolb and Arand calls, “his multifaceted understanding of the Word of God” (Kolb & Arand 2008:130). Says Kolb and Arand:

“[Luther believed] God’s first ‘spoken’ Word was the creative ‘Let there be...,’ the mysterious way in which God formed all that exists. From that point on, God talked his way through the entire Bible.

His Word came to his chosen spokespersons as they delivered his message and effected his will among the Israelites... The God who used the prophets as his mouthpieces breathed into them the words of Scripture as well...

The Word then became flesh and made his home among fallen human creatures as God himself, in his divine Second Person, assumed the human person, Jesus of Nazareth... [Jesus] was at the same time God’s message of cruciform, self-sacrificial love for them...

Jesus Christ sends forth his Word through his Holy Spirit in oral, written, and sacramental forms.” (Kolb & Arand 2008:130)

For Luther, God’s Word is His revelation activities throughout time – starting at creation, through the patriarchs, spoken through the prophets, incarnated in Christ, sent forth through the Holy Spirit, captured in written Scriptures, preached through His disciples and portrayed in the sacraments. For Luther, “the mystery of the incarnation, the mystery of the atonement, the mystery of the justification of the

sinner – it all has to do with the way God works through his Word.” (Kolb & Arand 2008:136) He even went as far as to say that “God’s word-actions not only describe but also determine the reality of his creation.” (Kolb & Arand 2008:135)

Luther was convinced that “God is always acting, and his action is speaking.” (Kolb & Arand 2008:136) It reflected for him the nature of God as the Creator who revels in his love for his creatures and who thoroughly loves communicating with them. At the same time, he firmly believed that, for all the revelation received of God, he does not tell all about himself, for creatures could never fully comprehend their Creator. (Kolb & Arand 2008:137,144)

It is interesting to note that Luther’s orientation for reading the Bible came from professors trained in the philosophical and theological system called Ockhamism (sometimes associated with the more general philosophical stream called nominalism). While he later left behind much of what they taught him, Luther remained persuaded by the Ockhamists that “human creatures were totally dependent on the Creator’s revelation of himself through the church for their understanding of things divine.” (Kolb & Arand 2008:134) Their theology taught that humankind can only have certainty of God’s revelation through 1.) simple observation of the natural world, and 2.) faithfully receiving the teaching of God’s Word as delivered by the church. The teaching of the latter is supreme as it cannot be observed in nature, for it is in regard to things above the mastery of human reason. (Kolb & Arand 2008:134-135)

To understand Luther’s thinking on revelation and the Word, it is important to note how the Ockhamists understood the extent of God’s revelation. They taught that

human reason can never penetrate the mystery of God behind his revelation, which meant that human beings must be content with what God has revealed concerning himself. This does not, however, stop us from exploring God's revelation in both nature and Scripture by exercising the gift of reason. (Kolb & Arand 2008:135) Reason then, is a gift by which we are to both discern and delve into God's revelation.

This last point is fundamental as we move from the theology of the Reformers to that of the "liberals" (a movement marked by a less confident and less stringent interpretation and application of Scripture than seen in the Reformers).

1.4.2 Liberal theology's tests for revelation from God:

Starting with the "liberals", modern theology no longer holds the view that revelation of God is an undisputed truth. There has been, as Thiemann aptly puts it, "a shift from assumption to argument" (Thiemann 1985:11), which indicates that the belief in humankind's knowledge of God has lost its axiomatic status. The background belief has been opened for debate. Pinnock points to the same shift in status for revelation when he says: "Traditionally, revelation and the Bible were for all practical purposes identified. Scripture was taken to be the locus of the divine speaking. Now revelation and the Bible have been wrenched apart with devastating results for theology and faith." (Pinnock 1971:22)

The age of reason demanded of theologians to justify Christianity's claim to God's revelation. They felt the pressure to argue the reasonableness of revelation. In Thiemann's words: "Modern theologians have been asked to justify the claim to knowledge of God and to the God-given character of that knowledge with reference

to epistemologies developed independent of the Christian faith.” (Thiemann 1985:10) These epistemologies were primarily the brain-child of philosophers like Descartes, who lured theologians into developing a theology which agreed with the rationality of the age. Says Thiemann: “Descartes draws his conclusion about human dependence only after he has demonstrated both his own existence as ‘a thing that thinks’ and God’s existence as the source and ground of his idea of God.” (Thiemann 1985:12; compare with Descartes 1641:44-45) This kind of reasoning – starting with the creature and, in particular, his cognitive sphere – became the liberal approach to God’s revelation.

The crux of the “liberal” theology on revelation came down to a distinction between reason and revelation – reason being what can be proven, defended or argued cognitively, and revelation being what cannot be proven, defended or argued cognitively. The error in this reasoning, as Thiemann rightly points out, is that “the reason/revelation distinction simply contrasts the knowledge of God implanted by God’s grace in all of his creatures and that saving knowledge which comes only by the testimony of the Spirit through scripture. The unassailable axiom of the entire discussion is that *all* human knowledge is a gift of God’s grace.” (Thiemann 1985:11) Everything we know, whether by reason or by revelation, is God-given knowledge.

Thiemann agrees with most theologians of his time in saying that “Friederich Schleiermacher has provided modern theology with the classic model for revelation.” (Thiemann 1985:32) Schleiermacher, like Locke, held firm that God’s revelation must be conformable to universal standards of rationality. On how this rationality is to be tried and tested, Schleiermacher, in the researcher’s opinion, fell short.

At first Schleiermacher motivated for intense feelings as a qualifier of true revelation. Feelings, however, are skittish things, no matter how intense. As Thiemann rightfully points out, “the mere fervour of the experience is hardly an infallible guide to its meaning. We are rarely infallible interpreters of our feelings.” (Thiemann 1985:30) Pinnock has the same reservations in this regard: “Experience alone is quite insufficient as a basis for theology and apologetics, for the experience may be divine, demonic, or merely human in origin. Furthermore, it fails to convey substantial truth not already believed by the experiencing subject, and is incapable of validating its claims to truth over those of countless alternate religious experiences.” (Pinnock 1971:25)

Schleiermacher then counter-argued with his now famous concept of “immediate self-consciousness” within a momentary “experience of absolute dependence” on God (Thiemann 1985:30), but provided too little clarity on these terms to support its claim to a true test for revelation.

The drive for reasonableness not only tainted the reformed view of revelation, but also, in its wake, dislocated the Reformer’s high regard for the authority of Scripture. In Hackett’s words:

“The liberal outlook on revelation and biblical authority... maintains in general that the biblical writings are revelatory of God to the extent that they contain much religious truth... but that the truth thus recognizable is set in a context... pervaded by elements of error... from which that essential core of truth must be distinguished by extensive and painstaking reflection.

The biblical writings, then, cannot be in either word or thought wholly identified with the word of God (genuine religious truth).” (Hackett 1954:293)

The criteria for such religious truth differ for different liberal thinkers. As we saw, for the religious empiricist, like Schleiermacher, “the essence and principle of religious

truth is the experienced awareness of absolute dependence on God as the Infinite All.” (Hackett 1984:293) For the religious ethicist, like Kant and Ritschl, “the essence of religious truth and the criterion of its genuineness is the conformity of its expression to unconditionally authoritative and objective moral law.” (Hackett 1984:293)

1.4.3 Neo-orthodox theology’s tests for revelation from God:

Many twentieth century theologians made a clear break with their predecessors’ adamant insistence on the reasonableness of revelation, and this most notably in the work of Søren Kierkegaard and the early work of Karl Barth. Both the latter held firm that “revelation shatters the autonomous structure of human reason and communicates that which lies beyond reason’s grasp.” (Thiemann 1985:32) For that reason, they claimed revelation to be supra-rational – knowledge perceived through the channel of faith. While Kierkegaard went to the extreme of revelling in revelations’ utter non-rationality, most theologians of the time agreed that (although revelation supercedes ordinary reason) faith’s grasp of revelation remains reasonable. Pinnock and Thiemann agrees that Baillie and likeminded theologians, such as Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, were greatly influenced by the rationality of their liberal forerunners – men like Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Albert Ritschl and Kierkegaard. (Pinnock 1971:22; Thiemann 1985:11)

The Scottish theologian, Thomas Torrance, took a middle-ground approach and made a well-developed proposal to attest both the absolute uniqueness and the rationality of revelation. Sadly, he too fell short of providing a valid test for affirming the truthfulness of a revelation, as he rested his argument for God’s providence and

rationality “on the same incoherent notion of intuition which undermined his predecessors’ defence of revelation”. (Thiemann 1985:33)

The most crucial element in neo-orthodox theology for our discussion, is the belief that revelation comes to us primarily through the channel of Scripture. In the words of Hackett: “Revelation is characteristically mediated through the biblical witness which, although not itself revelation, is the mediating link to revelation.” (Hackett 1984:295)

That implies that Scripture becomes revelation only during an encounter with God through the Holy Spirit. The critical implications of this notion becomes clear when we attempt to answer the kind of onslaught brought by the revolutionary Deist, Thomas Paine, in his bestseller book *The Age of Reason*:

“Revelation when applied to religion, means something communicated immediately from God to man. No one will deny or dispute the power of the Almighty to make such a communication if he pleases.

But admitting, for the sake of a case, that something has been revealed to a certain person, and not revealed to any other person, it is revelation to that person only. When he tells it to a second person, a second to a third, a third to a fourth, and so on, it ceases to be a revelation to all those persons. It is revelation to the first person only, and hearsay to every other, and, consequently, they are not obliged to believe it.

It is a contradiction in terms and ideas to call anything a revelation that comes to us at second hand, either verbally or in writing. Revelation is necessarily limited to the first communication. After this, it is only an account of something which that person says was a revelation made to him...” (Paine 1794:20)

By this argument, Paine entirely dismisses the authority of Scripture. In essence, what he is saying is this: “I agree that God might have revealed himself to Abraham, Moses and David, but that has nothing to do with me. The story of the revelation they have received is of no consequence to me. It is nothing more than an historical account.”

Neo-orthodox theology will agree with Paine on one point: By simply reading Scripture, the reader does not receive any revelation. Cognitive comprehension of the Biblical text does not count as revelational knowledge. Hackett explains the neo-orthodox stance on this aspect of revelation and Scripture: “Revelation since the time of Jesus himself is characteristically mediated to human beings through the prophetic and apostolic witness in Holy Scripture, which, although not actually itself revelation in the primary sense, is nevertheless the normative witness for *revelation as encounter*.” (Hackett 1984:295, emphasis mine) Hackett explains that Scripture serves as a witness to the past events of God’s revelation among people. For this reason, he aptly calls the prophetic and apostolic writers the “mediating link” between God’s historical revelation and the reader of those Biblical writings. That “mediating link” of Scripture, Hackett argues, has the potential to trigger a similar personal revelation of God with the believing reader through the work of the Holy Spirit. “In a sense,” Hackett continues, “we can even say that the biblical writings – as such a witness to revelation as event (encounter and incarnation) – actually become revelation in propositional form when through their witness the event of revelation as encounter is actualized for a given person.” (Hackett 1984:295)

Continuing on the thought of Scripture as a witness, Thomson also explains how in neo-orthodox theology, and particularly in the theology of Karl Barth, “the Bible is seen as an authoritative *testimony* to God’s action in Israel and in Jesus Christ, i.e., to revelation, to the Word of God.” (Thomson 1978:34, emphasis mine) The Bible is not revelation in itself, but it testifies to God’s past revelation among people. Says Thomson: “This testimony is confirmed when through it and by the Holy Spirit we meet with Jesus Christ... Through the testimony of Scripture working faith in us by the

Holy Spirit... we are enabled to know that this man Jesus of Nazareth is at one and the same time the Son of God, divine.” (Thomson 1978:35)

This statement by Thomson identifies several elements that work together to make Scripture a personal revelation to the reader. Thomson is saying that,

- a.) “The testimony of Scripture,
- b.) works faith in the believer,
- c.) by the Holy Spirit,
- d.) in Jesus as the Son of God.”

All four of these elements – the testimony of Scripture, the believer’s faith, the Holy Spirit and Jesus – must be involved in order for the reader to receive a true revelation of God through the reading of Scripture. Let us break down the elements involved in order to simplify the method Thomson describes for this revelational encounter:

- God revealed himself to people in history (e.g. Abraham)
- The Bible contains a trustworthy, historical account of that revelation
- In faith, the reader receives the Bible’s testimony of that historical revelation encounter
- The Holy Spirit affirms within the heart of the reader the truth of God’s historical revelation
- That affirmation by the Holy Spirit becomes a personal revelation to the reader (what Barth calls “God’s self-authenticating Word” concerning the historical account (cited in Thomson 1978:35))
- That affirmation by the Spirit identifies Jesus as the true Son of God

As can be expected, the neo-orthodox view of Scripture is much higher than that of the “liberals”, in that it regards the testimony of the Bible as authoritative and as a key element to revelation. However, the neo-orthodox also believes, as Hackett puts it, that “revelation is not to be construed as statically identical with any book, doctrine, or conjunction of propositions, but is rather to be regarded in its primary occurrence as, subjectively, personal encounter with God.” (Hackett 1984:295) In other words, while Scripture is a key element for revelation from God, God is not bound to Scripture to reveal himself, but can use any other writing He pleases. What neo-orthodox theology cautions against in this view, is an elevation of the Bible above the true, personal revelation of God, so that a study of the Scriptures does not replace the seeking after a true and direct encounter with God. Rather, the study of Scripture should be pursued as a means to the higher priority: a personal revelation of God. The end-goal should always be a growing personal relationship with God, and not a growing knowledge of the Bible.

Emil Brunner excellently expresses the prime authority of personal encounter with God (personal revelation *by* God) over the authority of Scripture: “According to the Biblical conception of faith we believe in Jesus as the Christ not because it is taught to us by the Church or in the Bible, but because he, Jesus, the Christ, meets us as the true Word of God in the witness of the Scriptures. We do not believe in Jesus the Son of God because the Bible teaches this, but we believe in the Bible because, and in so far as, through it we have come to know Jesus as the Christ. The Bible is not the authority, on the basis of which we believe in Christ, but the Bible is the means which shows us and gives us the Christ. We cannot believe in Jesus Christ without the Bible; but we should not believe in Jesus the Son of God *because* the Bible says so.” (Brunner 1966:342) The fact that Jesus is taught to us by the Church and in the

Bible is by no means shunted by Brunner. Rather, what he is arguing is that our teaching in itself is not enough to stir true faith. It is *the-way-to* faith as well as the *growth-in* faith, but it can never be the essence (the root) of faith.

Continuing in this discussion, Brunner aptly uses the disciples of Jesus as an example: “[Jesus’ disciples] did not believe in Him on account of any doctrine that Jesus was the Christ,” says Brunner, “Because God, through His Spirit, opened their eyes, they ‘discovered’ Jesus as the Christ.” (Brunner 1966:342) What Brunner is rightly pointing out is that, even those who walked beside Jesus on this earth, who heard his teaching firsthand, who witnessed the many miracles – much more than is recorded in Scripture – even *they* did not come to faith in Jesus as the Messiah by any of those means. It had to be revealed to them personally by the Holy Spirit. (Matt 16:15-17) And then only, as Brunner points out, “after they had discovered the Son of God in Jesus Christ the Lord, gradually they also came to see what lay ‘behind’ or ‘in’ this knowledge of Jesus.” (Brunner 1966:342) They started to make sense of everything that Jesus said and everything that took place during their time with Him, only after the infilling of the Holy Spirit; “then they remembered His words.” (Luke 24:8; also Acts 11:16) Also, His teaching and life only then started to resonate with what they knew of the Old Testament prophecies. (Matt 1:22; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 21:4; 26:56; John 12:16, 38)

While this notion of Scripture becoming revelation in the instance of God’s personal self-revelation is, in the researcher’s view, correct, what thwarts the neo-orthodox test for the truthfulness of a revelation is their unwillingness to yield to the inerrancy of Scripture. Hackett points out the unreliability of arguing that an errant Scriptural proposition can produce a truthful God-encounter and in effect a truthful revelation of

God, as well as the danger of unsound theology that will result from accepting such revealed truth on unbiblical grounds. (Hackett 1984:297) He sees it as an open invitation for deception.

1.5. The purpose of this study: Discovering Scripture's discernment principles

This study will not venture to prove that God reveals Himself today - it will assume that this is true. This study furthermore takes the Reformers' view of God's revelation as, what Thiemann calls, a "background belief". (Thiemann 1985:10) It will not attempt to prove that revelation is in fact a true form of knowledge. It assumes, like Calvin and Luther, that God graciously reveals Himself and that a revelation of God is a trustworthy source of knowledge. The focus of this study is on the means of discerning whether a revelation is indeed from and of God. It is the researcher's conviction that the penultimate purpose of Scripture is to equip the believer to discern God's self-revelation, by whichever medium God chooses to communicate. Therefore, this study will look to Scripture for guidance on the matter of discernment, and not to, what Thiemann calls, "convictions independent of the Christian faith" (Thiemann 1985:12) such as scientific proof, conformity with other religions or even conviction by force of emotions.

Before attempting to find adequate Scriptural references for discerning God's self-revelation, the researcher will look into the following areas concerning the communicating and receiving of revelation in order to identify the obstacles humankind is faced with when attempting to discern God's self-revelation:

- a) First we will consider the primary mediums God uses for revealing Himself. We will look at Scripture to see how God has revealed Himself in the past and will so form an expectation of how God might unveil Himself to us today.
- b) Secondly, we will take a look at humankind's primary obstacles for grasping God's self-revelation. We will attempt to answer the question: "What stops us from seeing God as he longs for us to see Him?"

Having looked at the primary mediums through which God historically chose to communicate Himself, and having pointed out numerous obstacles humankind faces in the discerning of God's self-revelation, the last two sections of this thesis will look to Scripture's answers to overcoming such obstacles in our discernment. It will address what the researcher calls "the divine miscommunication".

- c) We will look to Scripture's answer to spiritual deafness. What does Scripture have to say concerning our inability to perceive God's self-revelation?
- d) Finally, we will look to Scripture's answer to spiritual deception by constructing a Biblical framework for healthy discernment of God's self-revelation – a Scriptural "checklist" by which to test any claim to true, godly revelation.

Chapter 2 The divine Communicator and the human audience

The communication between God and humankind – Creator and creation – is, with utmost reverence, an awkward conversation. It takes place within, what Molnar aptly calls, "a real relationship of completely different partners." (Molnar 1985:228) That the relationship between God and his reborn children are real, is testified to by countless Christians

throughout the ages. Yet, it is a relationship between an infinite Spirit and a finite spirit living in mortal flesh. Between an omniscient Creator and his fallible, time-space-bound creatures. Most notably, it's a relationship between the Holy, all-glorious King and his sin-stricken, grace-salvaged servants through whom His glory shines, even if ever so dimly.

For this reason then, when speaking about God communicating with humankind, we should take to heart Johnson's caution: "We must face the humbling fact that some distance exists (sometimes a small gap, often a yawning canyon) between the divine words themselves and our hearing of the words." (Johnson 1998:79) While the relationship between God and his Spirit-filled children are personal, we should not forget that every reborn child enters that relationship with a load of sinful baggage. Even when dead to the old nature, reborn into God's family and filled with the Holy Spirit, we remain humans with an inherent sinful nature living in a sinful world. (Rom 6-8) The relationship between God and his children will remain an imperfect relationship until all things are made new (Rev 21) and God's original intent for our communion is restored. While admitting this unassailable flaw, we should never be content with not hearing God speak to us. All of Scripture testifies to the fact that God overcomes the obstacles of a sinful world and sinful nature in order to communicate in particular with those who humble themselves and seek Him with all their hearts.

2.1 God's primary mediums for revealing Himself

Before we can look at what hinders us from discerning God's self-revelation, it is necessary that we very briefly look at the primary ways in which God reveals Himself. If we don't know how God reveals himself, we might end up looking for His self-revelation in the wrong places.

2.1.1 Ingram's categories for God's primary mediums of self-revelation

Like many theologians, Ingram (2004:40) divides God's self-revelation into the following three broad categories: 1.) God reveals Himself through Nature, 2.) God reveals Himself through Scripture, 3.) God reveals Himself through Jesus Christ.

2.1.1.1 God reveals Himself through Nature:

"The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.
There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard.
Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world."
(Ps 19:1-4a)

Nature, and especially the stars (as Ps 91 says), are a constant display of the glory of God. "The silent heavens speak, declaring the glory of their Maker to all who are on the earth." (NIV Study Notes on Ps 19:1) Their glory testifies to the omnipotence, wisdom and faithfulness of the One who created them. Every time we would stand still, take them in and "listen", their silent testimony leaves us speechless. They compel us to admit with Ingram: "God reveals himself universally through nature. He has clearly written evidence of himself into the created order." (Ingram 2004:40) "For since the creation of the world," says Paul, "God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse." (Rom 1:20) Expounding on this passage (Rom 1:18-21) in his *Truth Project* lectures, Dr Del Tackett (2008:2nd DVD) highlights how God's revelation through nature is "plain... because God has made it plain." (v19) Tackett prefers to use the word "obvious" instead of "plain", as it emphasizes the wilful decision that sinful humankind must take in order to ignore this universal self-revelation of God through nature.

Ingram would fully agree with Tackett. “People who insist that the world looks like an accident,” says Ingram, “are simply ignoring the facts... God displays speech, reality, and truth about himself throughout nature.” (2004:40) Ignoring this speech, reality and truth requires a wilful decision to overlook the obvious. In fact, Ingram implies that it requires blatant dishonesty, as he insists that “*honest* scientists are finding more evidence every day of a powerful designer behind the universe.” (Ingram 2004:40, emphasis mine)

Locke sees in nature the most uncontroverted of God’s self-revelations. He calls nature the most “legible characters of [God’s] works and providence.” (Locke 1824:25) In fact, so legible are these characters that, according to Locke, “they to whom [the] written word never came, could not (whenever they set themselves to search) either doubt of the being of a God, or of the obedience due to him.” (Locke 1824:25) Paul testifies to this truth, saying that humankind is “without excuse” (Rom 1:20) as to the obedience that nature calls us unto God.

Helm points out how John Locke (1632-1704) argues in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that “since the precepts of natural religion are both sufficient for salvation and clearer than the revealed truth of Scripture more attention should be paid to natural religion than to revealed [special revelation].” (Helm 1982:8, compare Locke 1824:25) Helm goes on to say how he understands that Locke would rather have us neglect Scripture (and all other special revelation) and turn our attention primarily to understanding God’s self-revelation through nature, “since then the precepts of natural religion are plain, and very intelligible to all mankind, and seldom come to be controverted” (Locke 1824:25) as opposed to the controversy that differing interpretation of Scripture often lead to.

But *how* does God reveal himself through nature? By means of dramatic events, such as earthquakes, tornados or volcanoes? Does He speak in the wind or bellow at us through the waves? Is His character displayed in catastrophes or providence? Helm seems to think that such “events” are the carriers of God’s revelation through nature. “It might be said,” Helm states, “that what the sentence ‘God reveals Himself through nature’ means is that through the events of the physical world God tells us things about himself that would otherwise be unknown to us.” (Helm 1982:3)

Jonathan Edwards also looked at the world through such eyes, and saw God’s revelation in everyday events of life. A classic example of how Edwards “heard God speaking” through everyday events took place in the spring of 1737. (Marsden 2008:47) Not long after a time of spiritual awaking in Edwards’ congregation, Edwards were disturbed by “some petty town-wide controversies” returning to his flock. It was at that time that “he believed that God had sent the town a dramatic warning.” Marsden tells how one Sunday, while the congregation were sitting in the old meeting-house, “the heaving from the spring thaw had shifted the building’s foundations, and the crowded back gallery pulled out of its supports and fell down with a thunderous crash onto the area where women with small children were seated below... while many were cut and bruised, no one was killed – not even a bone was broken.” (Marsden 2008:47-48) Edwards believed this seeming accident to have been a fearsome warning from God for the congregation to repent, turn from sin and return to Him.

Tozer, on the other hand, finds witness of God’s revelation through the very laws of nature – the backbone of creation. He puts it this way: “The why of natural law is the

living Voice of God immanent in His creation.” (Tozer 2008:49) The researcher resonates more with Tozer’s thinking than Helm’s, as tides, seasons, the water cycle, erosion and other natural laws testify to him of God’s glory in a way more powerful than any single natural event. Nature’s faithful obedience to the natural laws portrays the majesty of the One who designed and instituted those laws – the all-wise, almighty Creator God.

This then is the first and foremost revelation of God – nature – a constant testimony of the almighty, ever faithful, never failing Creator. Ingram firmly believes though that “observing nature will give you a true but only *partial picture* of who God is.” (Ingram 2004:41) Nature is a good introduction to whom our Creator is, but He reveals more of Himself than what nature tells us. “The second place he reveals himself,” says Ingram, “is through His Word.” (Ingram 2004:41)

2.1.1.2 God reveals Himself through Scripture:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.” (John 1:1-3)

“God is the original communicator,” says Ingram. “He created us as receptors of his Word.” (Ingram 2004:41) The Bible reveals God by being for us a faithful account of God’s multiple self-revelations to numerous people throughout history. Starting at creation, Hackett points out how Scripture documents the numerous ways in which God revealed Himself to humankind throughout biblical history. “The creation account itself (Gen 1 and 2),” says Hackett, “is replete with reports of what God is reputed to have said, both in connection with the project of creation and to the human beings who were the capstone of that creation on earth (Gen 1:3f, 27f, 2:1f).” (Hackett 1984:273) From creation onwards, God continued to make Himself known in a

personal way. Hackett continues: “This context of divine self-revelation to man seems henceforth to be normative for human experience. God is represented as having spoken, not only to Adam and Eve, but to their children (Gen 4), to Noah (Gen 6-9), to Abraham (Gen 12f)... to the other patriarchs of Israel, and finally, at great length, to Moses (Exod 3 and throughout the rest of the Pentateuch).” (Hackett 1984:273) These all are historical accounts of how God personally revealed himself to people of the past.

The Bible also contains accounts of God’s speaking through prophets in an authoritative manner which prompted them to declare: “Thus says the Lord”. While these prophecies were addressed to a definite audience of the time, their revelation of God still speaks to humankind today. Hackett says this of the prophetic writings: “In the account of the last words of King David, author of many of the Psalms, he is recorded as having said that he spoke, on particular occasions, in an oracular fashion – that the Spirit of the Lord had spoken through him, and that God’s word was on his tongue (2 Sam 23:2). With the prophets, this sense of divine self-revelation is, if anything, even further extended. Thus Isaiah in his vision claims both that God spoke to him and that, through divine appointment, he himself spoke the word of the Lord (Isa 1:1, 10; 6:8f). Jeremiah presents his prophecies repeatedly as the word of the Lord coming to him (Jer 1:4; 2:1; 7:1); nor is it essentially different with Ezekiel (1:3), or Daniel (2:28), or Hosea (1:1), or Joel (1:1), or any of the writing prophets right down to and including Malachi, the last of them (1:1). In general, the atmosphere pervading the Old Testament as a whole is an atmosphere of divine self-revelation which takes definitive form in the writings themselves.” (Hackett 1984:273)

The New Testament writers make it clear that they accepted the Old Testament as an authoritative revelation of God. Hackett points out several texts to show how the apostles “regularly revert to the indefectible authority of the Old Testament in all that they themselves teach and declare.” (Hackett 1984:273) Particularly important are the following two references to Paul and Peter’s approach to Old Testament Scriptures, respectively:

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim 2:16-17)

“And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”
(2 Pet 1:19-21)

Says Hackett: “A higher view of scriptural authority than that expressed in these texts is scarcely imaginable.” (Hackett 1984:274) When looking at the authority of New Testament Scripture, Hackett points out that both Paul and Peter refer to other books of the New Testament as falling into the same category as ‘Scripture’, “with all the authority that, as a quasi-technical term, this title implies.” (Hackett 1984:273) Here Hackett is talking about Paul quoting Luke 10:7 as divinely inspired Scripture in 1 Timothy 5:18, and Peter similarly referring to Paul’s writings in 2 Peter 3:16.

The apostle’s approach then to both Old and New Testament Scripture indicates that the record of God’s self-revelation recorded in it is authoritative in our lives. Hackett is as bold as to say: “The authority of Scripture, correctly understood, is precisely the authority of God himself,” (Hackett 1984:274) the reason being that God does not change. The way in which God revealed Himself in the past is still who and how He is

today. (Jas 1:17) Scripture's historical account of God's self-revelation is not just stories of the past. They convey truth about God that is still as accurate and relevant today as on the day it was first revealed. Blackaby calls Scripture "God's eternal truth" (Blackaby 2008:32) – the truth recorded in Scripture is not bound to time or space, as God himself is not bound to such temporal limitations.

One particular witness of God's self-revelation stands out in the midst of Scripture. Jonathan Edwards, just like the Reformers Luther, Calvin, Huss and many others, believed that "through God's revelation of the redemptive work of Christ, fully disclosed only in Scripture, one could find the clues necessary for understanding a universe with personal love at its center." (Marsden 2008:139) All of Scripture leads to and from this revelation of God: His Son, Jesus Christ.

2.1.1.3 God reveals Himself through Jesus Christ:

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

(John 1:14)

Scripture is the *key* to knowing God personally. It is not the end-goal – it is the means... the way-to. As Ingram says: "God's written Word is not an end in itself." (Ingram 2004:41) The revelation of God through His Word is meant to lead us to God. He reveals Himself for the purpose of initiating and deepening a personal relationship between us and him. "If we don't meet Jesus Christ in and through the Scriptures," says Ingram, "we have missed the central reason God gave the Word to us." (Ingram 2004:42)

Inspired by the teaching of Jonathan Edwards, Marsden writes these powerful words: “If there is a creator God, then the most essential relationships in the universe are personal.” (Marsden 2008:137-138) The Word leads us to God, as the incarnated Word himself *is* God. Yet, how can an impersonal printed copy of the Bible initiate that most important personal relationship with the Living God? Lefevre D’Etaples, the famed Bible scholar of the sixteenth century, gave us the answer when he, as Liardon puts it, “coined the phrase, ‘literal-spiritual’, meaning that only the Holy Spirit could interpret the meaning of Scripture.” (Liardon 2003:209) In order for the Bible to fulfil that God-ordained role of initiating a personal relationship with the One who inspired it, it needs to be read under the influence of God’s Holy Spirit.

Jesus constantly bumped heads with those who dealt with Scripture only on an impersonal, academic level (in particular the Pharisees, Sadducees, Scribes and teachers of the Law). In John 5 Jesus confronts them head-on with this accusation: “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.” (John 5:39-40) The very God who they “diligently studied” in the Scriptures was standing before them in the flesh, but they could not recognise Him, because they were not in tune with the Spirit of God. Ingram insists that “Jesus displayed every character trait of God perfectly while he walked this earth,” (Ingram 2004:41) and yet the religious leaders of the time missed it! “No-one has ever seen God,” said Jesus, “but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side [i.e. Jesus himself], has made him known.” (John 1:18) And again He said: “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” (John 14:9) He tried to show them who He was, but they were blind, even though they studied the very Scriptures that were meant to point them straight to Him. Jesus’ disciples themselves needed a revelation by the

Holy Spirit to recognise the man of miracles with whom they lived for three years as the Son of God. (Matt 16:16-17)

An academic pursuit of Scripture will only give us historical knowledge and, at the most, contextual insight into the Biblical text. It will not reveal God for us. However, if we humbly submit to the leading of the Holy Spirit, He will unveil God to us – especially as revealed through Jesus Christ, as His purpose is to glorify Jesus. (John 16:14) “As they walked between Jerusalem and Emmaus,” Ingram reminds us, “Jesus opened the Scriptures to two disciples and showed them that they were all about him (Luke 24:13-35). He will still do the same for us.” (Ingram 2004:42)

In categorising the mediums of God’s self-revelation, Pinnock takes on a different approach than that of Ingram, thereby highlighting a different aspect of God’s means of self-revelation.

2.1.2 Pinnock’s categories for God’s primary mediums of self-revelation

Pinnock’s approach is helpful in that He places the numerous mediums through which God reveals himself into, what he calls, the two chief facets of revelation. These two facets are 1.) revelation by *deed*, and 2.) revelation by *word*.

2.1.2.1 Revelation by deed:

“At the core of the Biblical conception,” Pinnock believes, “is revelation as divine activity in history.” (Pinnock 1971:31) God’s actions make Him known among humankind. Every deed of God reveals something of who He is. Just as something of the potter is revealed in his pottery, as something of the artist is revealed in his works of art, and as something of the king is revealed when looking at the state of his

kingdom, so also something of God is made known in His actions. As the old saying goes: the sum of a man is his actions.

Creation is the first of God's revealing deeds. (We reflected on how nature reveals the glory of God on page 41.) Scripture often points back to creation to recapture the brilliance of its display of God's glory. (Job 38-41) We will see that this revisiting of God's revealing actions is done with most of the other major actions of God throughout Scripture.

Two fundamental revelatory deeds of God shaped the history of the nation Israel and frames the Old Testament account. The first and most important of these is God's act of freeing Israel from slavery through an astonishing display of His almighty power. (Exod 20:1) Throughout the Bible the wondrous deeds of God during the Exodus are reflected on as revealing both God's unlimited power and His holy character. (2 Kgs 17:36; Mic 6:5; Ps 74) These mighty deeds of God became the benchmark for Israel's teaching about God and, ever since, God became known as "the God who saves". (Exod 29:45-46) Continuing throughout the Old Testament, Israel was called to remember these mighty acts of God, (Ps 78) for remembering these miraculous salvation works would lead to a reverent fear of God, thankfulness and ultimately faithfulness. Forgetting them would lead to irreverence, disobedience and ultimately, idolatry. The men of Ephraim serve as an example: "They [Ephraim – v9] forgot what he had done, the wonders he had shown them. He did miracles in the sight of their fathers in the land of Egypt, in the region of Zoan. He divided the sea and led them through; he made the water stand firm like a wall..." (Ps 78:11-13ff)

The second great revelatory deed in Israel was the Exile. The Chronicler in particular reflects on the exile as an act of God's judgment on the sin of the forefathers, and attempted to teach the nation from the mistakes of the past so that they may be certain to remain obedient to God.

In the New Testament, the primary revelation by deed is naturally Christ's incarnation. The very deed of incarnation – from miraculous conception to the mystery of God and man uniting – is in itself a revelation of who God is... Merciful, gracious and compassionate, eager to forgive and restore the lost unto Himself at any cost. Yet, Christ in the flesh also lead to miraculous deeds which each one reveals something of God. The apostle John speaks of these miracles as "signs" which pointed to who Jesus is – the promised Messiah and Son of God. (John 2:1-11; 4:43-54; 5; 6:1-15; 6:16-24; 9:1-41; 11)

Still today we should expect God to reveal himself by deeds. Some examples of God's modern-day revelation by deed will include His glorious display through nature, miraculous healing, display of miraculous powers, the living testimony of God's love within the church, visions, dreams, and raptures.

2.1.2.2 Revelation by word:

About revelation by word, Pinnock says: "The Bible gives an important place to the divine speaking. God's Word is central in the biblical concept of divine revelation... idols are dumb, but the Lord is a living, speaking God." (Pinnock 1971:33) Pinnock stresses that the deeds of God would be meaningless to us unless God gave us it's meaning by speaking to us about it. "The Bible is both a record of the historical acts

of redemption,” Pinnock claims, “and the transcript of the prophetic Word of God.” (Pinnock 1971:34)

In the scope of this facet of revelation, Pinnock largely reflects Luther’s perspective of the ‘Word’ as an all-encompassing term for the way in which God “talked his way through the entire Bible.” (Kolb & Arand 2008:130) God created through speaking, portrayed His holy character by speaking the Law to Moses, announced and initiated judgment through prophecy, became the Word incarnated, speaks His commands in our hearts through His Spirit, and empower us to proclaim His Word on earth. So overwhelming was Luther by this majestic scope of the Word of God, that he concluded: “God is always acting, and his action is speaking.” (Kolb & Arand 2008:136)

Still today we hear God being revealed. Examples of God’s revelation by word will include the written Scriptures, preaching, teaching, prophecy, speaking in and interpreting tongues, a supernatural word of knowledge, a word of godly wisdom, and the audible voice of God.

We see then how God reveals himself through multiple means that can be, as Ingram would have it, subdivided into His revelation through nature, through Scripture, and through His Son, Jesus Christ. Otherwise, as Pinnock suggests, God’s self-revelation can be divided into two broad facets, namely revelation by deed and revelation by word. Either way, God’s desire to reveal himself to people is abundantly clear. In fact, the researcher will argue that God’s choice of multiple mediums is in itself proof of His urgency to make himself known to us.

The problem is, however, that humankind has several obstacles that prevent us from discerning God's self-revelation. As Blackaby points out: "It's not that the Lord isn't willing to reveal more exciting truths to us; we limit our own capacity to receive more from God. The problem is never with God. The obstacle is us." (Blackaby 2008:4) What are these obstacles that Blackaby refers to? In what follows, the researcher will suggest several obstacles which form part of humankind's inherent hindrances for correctly discerning God's self-revelation.

2.2 Humankind's primary obstacles for grasping God's self-revelation

God invites all people to know Him intimately...

"Call to Me, and I will answer you,
and show you great and mighty things, which you do not know."
(Jer 33:3)

God's desire in this regard is abundantly clear. He does not want to be cloaked in mystery, hiding behind a veil. God wants to make himself known. However, for most people God is mysteriously unknown. As Blackaby sadly admits: "Many Christians today receive this enormous invitation [referring to Jer 33:3], and yet we rarely experience a fresh, dynamic encounter with God." (Blackaby 2008:4) What is the reason for this?

The researcher found numerous obstacles which hampers people's ability to grasp God's self-revelation. None of these obstacles operate by themselves. Rather, the researcher is observes that, in any case of ill discernment, two or more of these obstacles play a role in dulling a person's ability to comprehend God's self-revelation.

Following then are the primary obstacles with a brief description and discussion concerning the role they play in preventing sound discernment of true revelation.

2.2.1 Sin blocks our eyes and ears to God:

Most certainly the primary reason why humankind does not discern God's self-revelation is sin. We "suppress the truth by [our] wickedness." (Romans 1:18b)

Nothing prevented Adam and Eve from seeing God face to face. They enjoyed open conversation with their Maker... until they wilfully sinned. From that moment on the relationship was scarred and humankind became removed from God. Sin became a separation between the Creator and his creatures.

The sinful human nature is contrary to the Spirit of God. (Galatians 5:17; Romans 7:7-25) Every other obstacle to discerning God's self-revelation is rooted in the obstacle of sin.

2.2.2 Ignorance of Scripture:

Calvin refers to Scripture as a light that is switched on in the darkened sinful mind: "Scripture, gathering together the impressions of Deity, which, till then, lay confused in our minds, dissipates the darkness, and shows us the true God clearly." (Calvin *Institutes*) Scripture reveals God, shows us our sin, points to Christ for salvation and becomes a tool of the Holy Spirit to conform our mind to that of God. Johnson expresses this ongoing work of Scripture very well: "Scripture bears the message that the Spirit uses to cure blindness of heart and mind – not only initially in regeneration, when the light of Christ illumines darkened minds (2 Cor 4:3-6), but also

progressively throughout our lives, as our every thought is taken captive to Christ (10:3-5).” (Johnson 1998:78)

Seeing then as Scripture plays such a vital role in our relationship with God, it logically follows that ignorance of Scripture is a hindrance to our discernment of His self-revelation. Sadly, it is an obstacle that can easily be cured through self-discipline, and yet it often sees neglect.

2.2.3 Misconceptions about God:

Ingram (2004:20) insists that “misconceptions about God can certainly create a barrier in your relationship with him.” Ingram (p18-19) aptly uses an example of how he for three years struggled to have a normal conversation with a fellow student because he, due to misconceptions of her perceptions of himself, felt insecure in her company. Once, after three years, they managed to talk it out and clear those misconceptions, they immediately enjoyed a close friendship. Misconceptions are even more destructive in our relationship with God. Says Ingram: “The friendship, love, and encouragement you could be sharing with your heavenly Father are never realized – all because of wrong conclusions about him... What you think about God shapes your whole relationship with him. In addition, what you believe *God* thinks about *you* determines how close you will grow toward him.” (Ingram 2004:20)

How we perceive God will determine how (and if) we approach Him. Ingram uses the following examples: “If we see him as an overzealous policeman, we’ll always be walking on eggshells. If we see him as an angry judge, we’ll always feel guilty. If we

think he's just like us, we'll be casual about our sin." (Ingram 2004:20) Our perception of God will also affect every other aspect of our lives. Says Ingram: "When we don't see him [God] with 20/20 vision, it distorts every other area of our lives," (Ingram 2004:30) the reason being that God as Creator stands central to our understanding of stewardship, work ethic, morality, social structures, marriage, etc.

Luther gives us a stern warning concerning the seriousness of such misconceptions about God. He heeds that, "to try to venture beyond what God has told us of himself can only lead human beings into the maze and abyss of their own imaginations." (Kolb & Arand 2008:145)

Misconceptions about God springs from deception. We misconceive God when somehow we have been deceived to think of Him differently from how and/or who He truly is. Derek Prince (2008) is convinced that certain people are more easily deceived than others, due to their willingness to accept spiritual revelations without thorough investigation into the true source of such revelation. Prince (2008:145-146) gives the following characteristics of candidates who are open for deception by Satan: 1.) "Reliance on subjective impressions [such as emotions], 2.) Looking only to human leaders without checking what they say against Scripture, 3.) Accepting supernatural signs as a guarantee of truth, 4.) Unwillingness to face suffering or persecution, 5.) Ignorance of Scripture." Any of these errors can lead to misconceptions of God, as they open us up to receive false revelations of Him.

2.2.4 Reductionism / "The Shrinking God Syndrome":

One particular misconception about God is termed 'reductionism'. Reductionism is when our perception of God puts him into the service of humankind, rather than as

the be-all and end-all of everything. It is when, as Ingram says, “we make him accountable to us rather than humbly realizing we are completely accountable to him.” (Ingram 2004:35) Ingram believes that humankind is naturally prone to this error. “Left to ourselves,” he says, “we reduce God to manageable terms. We treat him lightly.” (Ingram 2004:35) Humans have a natural tendency to be self-centred. Our thoughts, our actions, and even our prayers gravitate around our own individual selves. Ingram sees how, “instead of falling down as servants before this awesome God, we try to get him to be our servant so we can use him for our purposes.” (Ingram 2004:35)

Also John Piper (2008) notices this natural tendency of reducing God. Piper recognises this tendency as people’s desire to be god themselves. Says Piper “Many people are willing to be God-centered as long as they feel that God is man-centered.” (Piper 2008:6) He warns that this is a subtle danger, because “we may think we are centering our lives on God, when we are really making Him a means to self-esteem.” (Piper 2008:7) Reducing God to less than the eternal, omnipotent One in whom and through whom all things exists, will blind our eyes and block our ears to His self-revelation. Says Ingram: “If we’re going to see God accurately, as he longs for us to see him, we’ve got to see him as he’s revealed himself. He is not like us and he will not submit to our reductions.” (Ingram 2004:40)

2.2.5 Spiritual mediocrity:

Blackaby (2008) believes that a crucial obstacle to people’s discernment of God’s self-revelation is spiritual mediocrity. “We’re far too easily satisfied,” says Blackaby, “We limit God in our lives.” (Blackaby 2008:4) Blackaby refers to promises in Scripture (such as Eph 3:20) that would indicate that God is eager to reveal more

spiritual glory and power in people's lives than what most Christians are experiencing. Blackaby's answer to such spiritual mediocrity is, what he calls, to increase one's capacity to receive truth from God. Says Blackaby: "Some believers are steadily increasing their capacity to receive truth from God, so the Holy Spirit is regularly revealing more to them." (2008:32)

Yet, how do you increase your capacity to receive more revelation? Blackaby insists that it only comes through spiritual maturity, which in turn comes through faithful obedience to God. "Spiritual maturity," says Blackaby, "comes not from learning secrets and gaining insider information about God's kingdom, but from walking faithfully with God and regularly obeying what He tells you." (Blackaby 2008:36) Johnson agrees with Blackaby in saying that "while we have been given the capacity to perceive God's goodness through the new birth in the Spirit, that capacity is something that must develop in us throughout our lives." (Johnson 2007:17) In *Face to Face with God* (2007), Johnson shares his personal experiences with God which followed his intense desire and fervent prayers for a greater revelation of who God is. His journey with God affirms Blackaby's insistence that a greater revelation of God must be preceded by a greater faithfulness, as shown in obedience to God's instructions.

2.2.6 Another dimension:

After experimenting with a mind-expanding drug and reflecting upon it, the philosopher and satirist, Aldous Huxley, concluded that most people "are satisfied with the measly trickle of experience that remains after the total possibilities of experience have been funnelled through the 'reducing valve' of our organs, brain and nervous system." (Kelsey 1996:82-83) Huxley bewails the fact that "we human beings

are open to a vast array of experiences, but that our total preoccupation with sense perception blocks out most of these data and keeps us bound to the physical world.” Whether Huxley experienced a rush of chemicals, intensity of emotions or a truly spiritual encounter while drug induced, we would not know, but he certainly struck the nail on the head by pointing out that there is more to life than meets the eye.

The very real divide between the physical and the spiritual realm is another obstacle to perceiving God’s self-revelation. Sproul believes that a revelation of God asks for a “passage to another dimension.” (Sproul 1995:47) God is spirit. Humankind is also spirit, but spirit dwelling within physical bodies that are time-bound. It is this physical body, Sproul believes, that is the obstacle in communicating clearly with God. Says Sproul...

“The Bible tells us that God is an infinite spirit who is present everywhere. Where is He? He is right here. Right now. The barrier between God and us is neither space nor time, neither the here nor the now. God is in the here and the now.

The barrier is dimensional. To step into his immediate presence would be to step not into the future or into the sky but through a dimensional veil. He is here with us and all that He is, is with us.” (Sproul 1995:47-48)

What escalates the problem, as Yancey (2007:535) rightly points out, is certain cultures’ tendency to separate the physical dimension from the spiritual dimension, or, as Yancey terms it, the natural and the supernatural. Yancey explains why this tendency exists: “The natural world that we can touch and smell and see and hear seems self-evident; the supernatural world, however, is another matter. There is nothing certain about it, no skin on it, and that bothers us. We want proof. We want the supernatural to enter the natural world in a way that retains the glow, that leaves scorch marks, that rattles the ear drums.” (Yancey 2007:535) As Yancey explains it, the dimensional obstacle boils down to the notion that, ‘what we cannot prove does

not exist'. Such thought will lead us to conclude that, if we cannot prove God's self-revelation in a physical dimension, then we cannot discern it.

Sproul admits to the challenges that come from being in a relationship with an invisible, spiritual God: "God's invisibility confounds me," says Sproul, "We human beings are sensual creatures. We respond to what we can see, hear and touch... It is hard to love and to serve someone I have never seen." (Sproul 1995:36) While we might at times 'feel' God's presence with a certain spiritual awareness, also here Sproul has to confess: "I don't always feel His presence." (Sproul 1995:48) The lack of physical evidence concerning God's self-revelation urges Sproul to reaffirm our desperate need for faith in order to remain in a relationship with God. "Here is where I cry, 'Lord, I believe, help Thou my unbelief.'" (Sproul 1995:48)

Philip Yancey recalls a disappointed woman's words concerning her inability to feel God's presence: "I kept hearing the phrase, 'personal relationship with Jesus Christ.' But I found to my dismay that it is unlike any other personal relationship. I never saw God, or heard him, or felt him, or experienced the most basic ingredients of a relationship," which lead her to conclude: "Either there's something wrong with what I was told, or there's something wrong with me." (Yancey 2007:295) Ingram believes that such inability to communicate with God in the spiritual realm comes when the Holy Spirit does not dwell in people. Such infilling of God's Spirit only occurs when a person is born again. (John 3:5-7) "Some people don't get it," Ingram insists, "because the Spirit doesn't live in them. They have not yet received the Spirit because they haven't yet received Christ as Saviour." (Ingram 2004:48) Only once the Spirit of God dwells within a person does God's self-revelation go beyond that

described in Romans 1 – the universal (natural) revelation. Without God’s Spirit in us, it is impossible for us to discern Him.

Paul underscores Ingram’s understanding one-hundred percent...

“We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us...

“The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.” (1 Cor 2:12,14)

Without the Holy Spirit, it is impossible to correctly discern God’s self-revelation. Our spiritual senses would either be dead or distorted, leaving us ‘isolated from God’ even while he is always present.

2.2.7 When God is silent:

Yancey would have us to admit that there are in fact times when God is ‘silent’ – when, while we are eager and ready to discern a revelation of Him, He chooses not to reveal anything new of Himself for an extended period of time. King David experienced such times in his life...

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, and am not silent.” (Ps 22:1-2)

“Awake, O Lord! ...
Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?”
(Ps 44:23-24)

David clearly felt removed from God. He cried out in distress but seemed to receive no answer from God. He was ready to hear God's voice, desperate to feel His presence and to be reassured of God's power and control over the distressing situations that he was experiencing. Yet, God was silent. Says Yancey: "We may experience times of unusual closeness, when every prayer is answered in an obvious way and God seems intimate and caring." (Yancey 2007:515) These are the times when we discern God's self-revelation. We understand what God is saying to us and experience the reality of His presence in our lives. But then, says Yancey, there are times when we feel as if we are removed from God. He calls this the "fog times", the times "when God stays silent, when nothing works according to formula and all the Bible's promises seem glaringly false." (Yancey 2007:515-516) Yancey points to these words of Job as a description of how these "fog times" feel...

"If only I knew where to find him [God];
if only I could go to his dwelling!
But if I go to the east, he is not there;
if I go to the west, I do not find him.
When he is at work in the north, I do not see him;
when he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him."
(Job 23:3,8-9)

Yancey explains these long periods of God's silence towards us as "the baffling, Morse-code pattern of divine guidance – a clear message followed by a long, silent gap." (Yancey 2007:513) He recalls examples of God's extended silence in the lives of Biblical characters in an attempt to explain God's possible reason/s for doing this. One such example is king Hezekiah (2 Chron 32; Isa 38) who, on his deathbed, was miraculously healed and were given a fifteen-year extension to his life. "What happened next?" asks Yancey, "*God left him* to test him and to know everything that was in his heart." (Yancey 2007:513) God remained silent in order to see whether he

would remain faithful to God, even though he did not hear God's voice or discern his close presence. Unfortunately Hezekiah failed the test, becoming unfaithful to God in his graciously extended period of life. Another example is Abraham who, at the age of a hundred, held on to the promise of a son that God gave him twenty-five years earlier. (Gen 21) Again God's silence came as a test: Will Abraham still believe the promise twenty-five years later, even though its fulfilment seemed more impossible with every passing year? ... Abraham passed the test. Job underwent God's test of silence in a period of severe suffering. The once wealthy man remained faithful to God in the good times. Now, will he remain faithful to God without any answers to his seemingly unjust suffering, or will he "curse God and die" (Job 2:9), as his wife suggested... Job also passed the test.

Smith (2008) sees the same pattern of God's working with people. She calls God's silent times "seasons of stripping" (2008:44). "When the winnowing begins," Smith says, "the very things we counted on vanish before our eyes... because all idols must be brought down. We experience betrayal and wonder, 'Where is God?'" (2008:44-45) God's purpose for not revealing himself at such times, Smith explains, is for us to realise our sole dependence on Him. "During these times," she says, "we realize just how powerless we really are." (2008:45)

While the greater weight of Scripture convinces us that God is always eager to reveal himself to those who are willing to listen and see, we also have to admit to the opposite. We see that there are times when God chooses to remain silent towards some people for an extended period of time in order to test their faithfulness to Him.

In conclusion, we see the following obstacles in humankind's discernment of God's self-revelation:

- i.) Sin blocks our eyes and ears for God
- ii.) Ignorance of Scripture cripples our understanding of God
- iii.) Misconceptions about God deceives us
- iv.) Reductionism fools us into believing that God is our servant
- v.) Spiritual mediocrity makes us lazy to push into a deeper relationship with God
- vi.) We cannot bridge the gap between the physical and spiritual dimension without the infilling of the Holy Spirit
- vii.) At times God chooses to remain distant in order to test a person's faithfulness

These then are the primary obstacles to discerning revelation. In the final and main section of this study, we will look at how to overcome these obstacles – how to address divine miscommunication by building a framework of healthy, Biblical discernment principles for God's self-revelation.

Chapter 3 Addressing divine miscommunication through Scripture

Sproul recognises in our generation “a crisis of faith about the nearness of God.” Says Sproul: “The mood of our culture reflects a sense of abandonment. God seems nowhere to be found.” (Sproul 1995:37) While this certainly rings true about many (most) societies today, it is somewhat ironic that Sproul himself would insist just some paragraphs earlier: “I believe the voice of God is silent today. We can read His words in the Bible, but apart from Scripture, we hear no words from God.” (Sproul 1995:36) If this would be true – if God is unwilling to communicate to humankind through a voice outside of written Scripture – should

we then be surprised to see such a “crisis of faith about the nearness of God” in society today? When we who believe in God declare Him mute, what response other than apathy can we expect from unbelievers or those who are weak in faith? Surely the cessation of a conversation would lead to the end of a relationship.

Rather than limiting God’s speaking to only his revelation through Scripture, as Sproul does, the researcher agrees with Luther’s thinking in saying that “the Word *establishes* the relationship of conversation between God and His human creatures.” (Kolb & Arand 2008:137) Once established through the Word, the researcher would also add to this role of Scripture the continuing role of nurturing the conversation. By this is meant, once the relationship is established through Scripture, Scripture would also continue to equip the believer to discern whether what is revealed is indeed of God. Yet, why test revelation with Scripture? one might ask. Thomson serves us well by pointing out the crucial relationship between revelation and Scripture: “There is... a distinction between revelation and the Bible,” Thomson claims, “the latter being a true witness to the former, i.e., to the Lordship of God, Father Son and Holy Spirit and so to the full deity of Christ.” (Thomson 1978:35) While Thomson, like Sproul, believes that revelation comes to us in and through the Scripture, he does not understand that revelation to be bound up in Scripture itself. Rather, he quotes Karl Barth (1984:217) who believed Scripture to be a witness, and therefore not identical with that to which it gives witness. Says Barth: “The fact that God’s revelation is contained in this book [the Bible] does not mean that the texts of this book are a revelation as such.” (1984:217) Thomson continues to explain how the Bible *leads to* revelation, in that the Holy Spirit interacts with the reader to personally reveal God through what is being read.

This notion is of utmost importance to the researcher as we move into to this final section of the study, as the researcher will use Scripture to establish a framework by which God’s self-

revelation can be discerned. As pointed out earlier in this study, God reveals himself through multiple mediums, Scripture being one of them. While being but one medium of God's revelation, Scripture also has the unique task of being the test for every other revelation. How one goes about testing revelation with Scripture, however, has everything to do with the extent of authority one is willing to grant Scripture. Hackett refers to Scripture as being "indefectibly authoritative," (Hackett 1984:293) the reason being that it is a self-revelation of God. "The Christian revelation claim," Hackett says, "contends that the books of the Hebrew-Christian Bible (the Old and New Testaments), rightly interpreted in their total historical, cultural, and literary context, constitute precisely, and in a unique, unparalleled sense, such an authoritative self-revelation of God." (Hackett 1984:258) However, what does granting Scripture such authority lead to? Hackett continues: "The effect of this claim is that, through Moses or David, Isaiah or Ezekiel, Matthew or John, Peter or Paul, God was also speaking his authoritative word, not only in statements that purported to quote some divine utterance, but also in the narrative text of the human author himself, when that text is understood in context." (Hackett 1984:258) Here Hackett continues by establishing the claim for the authority of Scripture, an endeavour successfully embarked on by many theologians before and after him. The researcher will not similarly argue for the authority of Scripture, but will suffice to state that the authority of Scripture has successfully been argued. For that reason it will here serve as an authoritative test for all revelations outside of Scripture and will also govern the manner in which all other tests are applied to God's self-revelation.

In what follows, the researcher will address the challenge of discerning revelation in two sections:

3.1 Scripture's answer to spiritual deafness: Here we will look at Scriptural references that give us insight into overcoming the hindrances of 'hearing' or 'seeing' God's self-revelation.

3.2 Scripture's answer to spiritual deception: Here we will look into Scriptural references that give us guidance on how to correctly discern God's self-revelation.

3.1 Scripture's answer to spiritual deafness

"Physical listening has its counterpart in the spiritual realm, as does deafness. Often we do not hear. At times, we choose not to listen; on occasions, some circumstance blocks us from hearing. Whatever the cause of deafness, we fail to discern..."

(Morneau 1994:45)

Blackaby points out a distressing truth concerning people's inability to 'plug into' the spiritual dimension: "Some people read their Bible and pray," says Blackaby, "yet hardly ever hear God speak." (Blackaby 2008:29) How do we remedy this disappointment? What can we do to perceive God's self-revelation? In what follows the researcher will look at various Scriptures that gives us insight into answers to the dilemma of not hearing and/or seeing God's self-revelation.

3.1.1 Gaining a godly world-view through Scripture:

The reading of Scripture has the power of transforming our world-view – from an earth-bound, sin-contorted, materialistic worldview, into a truthful, eternally-minded, godly worldview. If read with a faith that desires to know God, God will unveil Himself to us through the Scriptures. Every unveiling encounter with God transforms us and the way we look at our world. Says Sproul: "The more we interact with God's unveiling Himself in sacred Scriptures, the more light we are able to apprehend." (Sproul 1995:7)

Hackett points out the resulting revival after the discovery of the Book of the Law in the temple during the reign of Josiah, king of Judah. (2 Kgs 22-23) This and many other spiritual revivals and transformed communities, Hackett argues, is proof "of the

revelational status of the word of God in written form.” (Hackett 1984:273) Reading the Bible in expectant faith of a growing relationship with God is life-transforming.

The worldview proclaimed by Scripture is one that starts with God as the uncreated One who is the Creator of all. This is an all-transforming truth – everything changes once we accept this incomprehensible reality. Says Johnson:

“We have not fully understood any particle of the universe until we see it as created by the Creator to achieve his purposes.

We need the spectacles of Scripture not only to perceive what creatures tell us about their Creator but also to perceive all that they tell us about themselves. Special revelation in the written Word of God has primacy, disclosing to us the most important thing to know about quarks, salamanders, ozone, rain forests, black holes, and plutonium: They are not accidental effects of random, mindless forces; rather, they come from the hand of the Creator, radiant with meaning and related in infinitely intricate order.” (Johnson 1998:78)

The more we see the world in the light of Scripture’s truth, the better we will be equipped to discern God’s self-revelation in our world.

3.1.2 Faith is a requirement:

“And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” (Heb 11:6)

Without faith, it is impossible to discern God’s self-revelation. God is invisible in the physical realm – He chooses to be so. What is more, God’s audible voice is seldom heard in our world. Therefore, in order to discern God, we are required to be “certain of what we do not see.” (Heb 11:1) We need to count things that be not as though they were (Heb 11:11-12), for this is exactly the way in which God operates – He is “the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.”

(Rom 4:17b) In order to discern God, we are required to step into *His* realm, into *His* way of life... into faith.

Yancey believes that God values our faith to an extent that we cannot fathom. “Ever since God took the ‘risk’ of making room for free human beings,” Yancey says, “faith – true, unbribed, freely offered faith – has had an intrinsic value to God that we can barely imagine.” (Yancey 2007:518) Yancey sees a connection between the exercising of faith in God and the expression of love for God. It is his conviction that “there is no better way for us to express love to God than by exercising fidelity to him.” (Yancey 2007:518) This link between faith and love would underscore God’s desire for fidelity, as God desires nothing more than for humankind to be in an intimate love relationship with Him. (John 3:16-17)

Unfortunately humankind has shown a terrible weakness for faith in God’s Word since the beginning. Satan targeted this weakness when he stirred doubt in Eve’s heart concerning God’s intentions to give her all good things. Says Kolb et al: “The question: ‘Did God really say?’ (Gen 3:1) opened a breach. Sin resulted from Satan’s luring human beings to question whether God meant what he had said.” (Kolb & Arand 2008:139) By giving in to Satan’s luring, Adam and Eve declared God to be untruthful and therefore unreliable. “Denial of the reliability of God’s Word,” Kolb et al believe, “meant the cessation of the conversation, the end of the relationship... Adam and Eve had stopped listening to God. They had broken their relationship with him by doubting what he had said.” (Kolb & Arand 2008:139) Without faith in God, there can be no relationship and no conversation with Him. God cannot reveal himself further to someone who is unwilling to yield to Him even a morsel of faith in response to His general revelation.

In order to receive God's self-revelation, faith in God needs to be restored. "Faith 'saves,'" Kolb et al explains, "because faith is the restoration, on the human side, of the trust that provides the fundamental orientation for all of life." (Kolb & Arand 2008:142) Faith in God rebuilds the bridge that sin destroyed and initiates the intended relationship and conversation between God and humankind. Yet, even once faith in God is restored, humans remain prone to doubt in God. CS Lewis believes that "no conviction, religious or irreligious, will, of itself, end once and for all this fifth-columnist [this doubting/lack of faith] in the soul." (Lewis 1995:41-42) It is a weakness that humankind is stricken with and stuck with. The only remedy for lack of faith, Lewis believes, is "the practice of Faith resulting in the habit of Faith." (Lewis 1995:41-42) The weakness needs to be strengthened one faith-filled decision at a time – one faithful step after the other. Lewis also wisely points out that doubt is a universal experience and not only a Christian experience...

"Just as the Christian has his moments when the clamour of this visible and audible world is so persistent and the whisper of the spiritual world so faint that faith and reason can hardly stick to their guns, so, as I well remember, the atheist too has his moments of shuddering misgiving, of an all but irresistible suspicion that old tales may after all be true, that something or someone from outside may at any moment break into his neat, explicable, mechanical universe. Believe in God and you will have to face hours when it seems obvious that this material world is the only reality: disbelieve in Him and you must face hours when this material world seems to shout at you that it is not all."

(Lewis 1995:41)

One final remark regarding faith is appropriate at this point, and that is that God intentionally grows our faith in Him. More often than not, this is done through trials. "In this you greatly rejoice," Peter writes to the suffering church, "though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ

is revealed.” (1 Pet 1:6-7) While this might seem harsh and unfair on God’s part, we must remind ourselves of the priceless value of faith, as it is the means by which we gain eternal life as well as intimacy with our Almighty Creator. Trials serve to highlight our absolute dependency on God and gives us opportunity to display greater trust in His faithfulness. Yancey says it well:

“The kind of faith God values seems to develop best when everything fuzzes over, when God stays silent, when the fog rolls in.” (Yancey 2007:512)

3.1.3 Seek and knock:

God invites humankind to initiate conversation with Him. “Come near to God and he will come near to you.” (Jas 4:8a) When we are ‘deaf’ to God’s self-revelation, it might well be due to our own quietness in the conversation. God makes numerous promises in Scripture concerning His response to those who take initiative in their zealous quest to know Him more. “He rewards those who earnestly seek him.” (Heb 11:6c)

God opened the way for all who earnestly seeks to know Him. The blood of Jesus Christ removed the barrier of sin so that, “having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water” we may “draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith” (Heb 10:22) By God’s grace, “a better hope is introduced [being the New Covenant], by which we draw near to God.” (Heb 7:19) This drawing near, as with the entire relationship, is God’s initiative, not our own. He extends the invitation: “Come now, let us reason together,’ says the Lord. ‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.’” (Isa 1:18)

God made our spirits to desire Him – to desire a relationship with Him – to desire an ever-increasing revelation of Him. Sproul would argue that it is the Christians’ *calling* to seek to know God more. Says Sproul, “It is not enough for the Christian to know *that* God is; we must be driven by a holy passion to know *who* He is.” (Sproul 1995:8) It must be an active seeking – a purposeful digging into a deeper relationship with God. “Seeing God is not a laid-back spectator sport,” Ingram (2004:49) aptly points out.

God gives us a sure promise of His response to our pursuit of Him: “You will seek me and find me...” (Jer 29:13a). The only requirement for God being found in this way, is that we are to seek Him with zealous abandon. You will find Me, God says, “when you seek me with all your heart.” (Jer 29:13b) “The pursuit of the knowledge of God must never be undertaken as a casual exercise,” Sproul admonishes, “It must be the chief business of our lives.” (Sproul 1995:8) We find this prerequisite of passion with our God-seeking in Proverbs’ wisdom...

“...and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.”
(Prov 2:4-5)

God weighs the heart of those who draw near to them. Of the inhabitants of Jerusalem in the time of Isaiah, He said: “These people come near to me with their mouth and honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” (Isa 29:13) Their words sounded right, but their heart attitude made it clear to God that they did not really seek to know and honour Him. “Seeking’ may seem like a vague spiritual concept,” Ingram admits, “but God’s Word doesn’t leave us in the dark.” (Ingram

2004:49) Ingram is referring to Jesus' open invitation in the Gospel of Luke: "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened." (Luke 11:9-13)

Ingram (2004:50) believes that seeking God involves the following steps: Firstly, accept, learn, treasure, and store up the Word of God in our hearts. Secondly, submit to God, be teachable and desire to be taught by God. Thirdly, develop a passionate prayer life. Fourthly, make your quest for God a daily priority. And finally, receive the promise that if we seek God with all our heart, we will experience the knowledge of the Holy One. We will discuss some of these steps in the points that are to follow.

3.1.4 We need the Holy Spirit:

"But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth."

(1 John 2:20-21)

This "anointing from the Holy One" is the Holy Spirit, who is also called "the Spirit of truth." (John 14:17; 16:13) The Holy Spirit makes known truth to those whom He indwells. He unveils the reality of how things truly are.

With Jesus standing before him, Pilate asked with disdain: "What is truth?" (John 18:38)... not realizing that the very embodiment of truth was facing him at that moment! As God in the flesh, "grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." (John 1:17) When John opens his Gospel with an introduction to Jesus as the Word of God, he makes it clear that every word that comes from Jesus' mouth is divine truth. It comes as no surprise then that the Spirit of truth is not sent to tell us and remind us of

random, impersonal "did you know?" truth snitbits. Rather, He is sent to tell us and remind us of all that Jesus says (John 16:13). The Spirit of truth makes known a Person - Jesus Christ, the embodiment of Truth. The Holy Spirit's ministry in the believer is often referred to as "illumination". Where God is revealed, the Holy Spirit illuminates the believer in order to discern such revelation. The illuminating work of the Holy Spirit is key to an increasingly revealing relationship with God. Without Him one would stand in Pilate's shoes, staring Truth in the face without understanding it.

Deere (1996:37-38) points out how only those who received direct spiritual illumination from God recognised the baby Jesus as the Messiah. Those acquainted with the Old Testament prophecies concerning His birth were unaware of what was taking place. "The most striking *absence* at the birth of Jesus," Deere points out, "was that of the current reigning religious intelligentsia. The Bible scholars of the day never made it to the manger." (Deere 1996:38) What Deere is pointing out is that "even knowledge of the Bible is an insufficient guide to Jesus." What is required is direct spiritual revelation from God. "The revelatory ministry of the Holy Spirit surrounding the birth of Jesus demonstrated that we are utterly dependent on the voice of God to find and recognize the Messiah... The birth of Jesus teaches us the need for supernatural guidance, regardless of our intellect or knowledge of the Bible." (Deere 1996:38)

3.1.5 Seeing God's self-revelation must lead to increased holiness:

In an Old Testament study on Israel's inability to at times discern false prophets from true prophets, Poysti comes to the valuable conclusion that "a condition for discernment is repentance." (Poysti 1982:24) At times when the majority of the nation chose to follow "the stubbornness of his evil heart" (Jer 18:12), it was impossible for

them to discern the false from the true. "For those who had lost the faculty of knowing Yahweh and what he stood for," Poysti says, "true prophecy proved to be utterly useless." (1982:28)

"True spiritual experience," McDermott asserts, "is transforming." (1995:159) Johnson agrees: "When God invades a person's life, things change. Not only that, but the impact of that life on the world also changes. The measure of God's glory that rests upon a life following these unusual divine encounters affects every person we touch." (2007:15) We cannot truly encounter God's self-revelation and return from it unchanged. We must be transformed by it into a greater holiness – a greater Christ-likeness. For this reason, Neufeld points out the necessity of transformation as a crucial part of our intimate relationship with God: "Because God brings transformation when we are most vulnerable," Neufeld believes, "we must re-examine how we nurture intimate relationships with God. Through entering into this relationship with God, we receive a promise that we will be fashioned... a new thing on the earth." (Neufeld 2008:36) Neufeld insists that "Intimacy requires honest interaction with God." (2008:36) Johnson's perception in this regard is most valuable, as he insists that "the degree to which we perceive the face of God corresponds directly to the degree of our yieldedness to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit into the image of Christ." (Johnson 2007:3-4) The crux of his argument is that a revelation of God must lead to an increase in Christ-likeness. If we refuse this transforming work of the Spirit in us, God will no longer be revealed to us. Poysti affirms this: "Abiding in self-satisfaction and unrepentance will be accompanied by blindness to the true word of God. Falsehood is the inevitable consequence when a living fellowship with God is replaced by reliance on a soothing theology. Without obedience it is utterly impossible to discern the truth." (Poysti 1982:29)

For Prince, “the fruit of repentance” is a crucial test as to the authenticity of a revelation of God. “In the New Testament,” says Prince, “God demands repentance more than He demands faith.... When Jesus came, the first recorded word He preached was ‘*Repent*’. (See, for example, Mark 1:15.) He instructed the multitudes, ‘*Unless you repent you will all likewise perish*’ (Luke 13:3).” (Prince 2008:22) Prince adds this valuable comment concerning the essence repentance: “It is not an emotion but a decision of the will – a decision to turn away from sin and unrighteousness to the lordship of Jesus Christ.” (2008:22)

Repentance of sin then is a prerequisite for rightly discerning God’s self-revelation. Where sin is stubbornly held onto, God’s self-revelation will become less and less evident, until complete blindness towards His truth sets in, and yet, “in our despairing darkness God offers us relational intimacy and the hope of transformation.” (Neufeld 2008:37)

We conclude then that the following are definite prerequisites for perceiving and discerning God’s self-revelation:

- i.) One needs to gain a godly world-view through Scripture which will gradually heal the twisted lies and misconception caused by sin and will enlighten the eyes to seeing God’s self-revelation more clearly
- ii.) Faith is a requirement – a demonstration of trust in who and what God is
- iii.) One needs to be continually guarding against complacency, as there is always more of God to be revealed to us. We need to quicken a greater desire for God within ourselves at those times when our inner drive to seek more of Him loses its fervour

- iv.) Without the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the illumination that He brings, God will seem far-off to us. His indwelling allows us to experience God in a personal way. Cultivating a sensitivity for His leading within us is by far the greatest asset that we have for perceiving and discerning God's self-revelation
- v.) Unrepentance creates an obstacle between us and God and needs to be guarded against. We need to yield to the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit to ensure that we do not allow unrepented sin to create an obstacle between us and God

3.2 Scripture's answer to spiritual deception

God never expects humankind to blindly accept any revelation of any kind. In fact, Scripture consistently instructs us (even warns us) to test revelation in order to ascertain its origin to be God Himself. For this reason, Pinnock insists that revelation claims are never self-validating and cautions us in this regard: "Many voices are urging us to bow to their claims to authority," says Pinnock, "Discrimination between them is a necessity. A mere claim to revelation may reflect nothing more than a psychological experience or, indeed, demonic influence." (Pinnock 1971:24-25) Morneau's observation in this regard is right on the money: "Discernment must deal with many voices seeking to capture our minds, hearts, and energies." (1994:32)

In his enlightening book, *Seeing God*, McDermott (1995) expounds on Jonathan Edwards' twelve tests for true spirituality, as found in his well-known *Religious Affections* (written in 1746). Importantly, McDermott also points out Edwards' twelve *unreliable* tests for true spirituality, i.e. tests that might deceive us to believe that something demonic is in fact from God. While McDermott (as Edwards) applies these potentially deceptive signs specifically to the sincerity of a person's intimate relationship with God, in doing so, he also points out for us possible pitfalls when discerning the truthfulness of a God-revelation.

Edwards' unreliable signs involving religious experience (McDermott 1995:45-55):

- *Intense religious affections*: As seen in the crowds shouting hosannas to Jesus just days before they would shout out “Crucify him!”, intense emotions are no guarantee for true relationship with God. While intense love, gratitude and more is certainly due to God and fitting in a personal relationship with Him, in itself it can be deceiving, as such affections can be stirred up in many other ways. “My friend,” cautioned Thomas a Kempis (Creasy 2007:92), “do not trust the way you feel at the moment, for your feelings will soon change.”
- *Many religious affections at the same time*: McDermott concurs with Edwards that, as with true emotions, one deceptive emotion often stirs up a host of other emotions. For example, terror stirs up fear, which can stir up false hope in seeming salvation outside of Christ, which in turn can lead to relief, joy and gratefulness to the source of that false hope. Therefore, a varied onslaught of strong emotions cannot serve as proof for God's self-revelation or true spirituality.
- *A certain sequence in the affections*, Edwards claims, is no guarantee for authentic spirituality, nor for a true self-revelation of God. Because God reveals Himself in many ways, people are drawn into relationship with Him in many ways. “Some are drawn by sorrow for sin,” says McDermott (1995:52), “some by beauty, some by truth, some by the sense that they are missing something. Others are led to Christ by the fear of hell.” There is no set sequence, and therefore any regular sequence cannot serve as a guarantee for authenticity or truth.
- *Affections not produced by the self*: McDermott points out that sudden, uncontrollable, dramatic spiritual experiences are indeed seen in Scripture, but that the opposite is also present. Therefore, such experiences cannot serve as proof for God's self-revelation or true spirituality.

- *Scriptures come miraculously to mind*: “Satan showed that his mind could be focused on Scripture when he used it to tempt Jesus in the wilderness.” (McDermott 1995:53) If Satan then could conjure up Scripture for his own deceitful purposes, the miraculous coming of Scripture to mind is no proof for revelation, nor for true spirituality.
- *Physical manifestations of the affections*: While McDermott readily admits that “spiritual experiences affects the body” (1995:54), he cautions that such “bodily effects are no sure sign that the Holy Spirit is at work.” Demons can bring about similar physical manifestations for deceptive purposes.

Edwards’ unreliable signs involving religious behaviour (McDermott 1995:56-65):

- *Much or eloquent talk about God and religion*, McDermott points out, is not a sure test for true spirituality. This is because “words themselves do not infallibly indicate what kind of heart produced them.” (1995:57)
- *Frequent and passionate praise of God*: “We cannot conclude that a person who praises God is truly submitted to God,” says McDermott (1995:59) To illustrate this point, he again points to the crowds who praised Jesus on his way to Jerusalem, just to turn around and mock him some days later at his crucifixion.
- *The appearance of love*: Jonathan Edwards called love “the life, essence and sum of all true religion.” (1821:71) While Edwards admits that love is “directly contrary to the devil, whose very nature is enmity and malice” (1821:71) he holds that there is indeed a pretence of love that will for some time deceptively save face as true, godly love. For that reason, McDermott cautions that the appearance of love then, also, cannot serve as a water-tight proof for authentic spirituality, nor for a true self-revelation of God.

- *Zealous or time-consuming devotion to religious activities:* While McDermott admits that “saving grace causes a person to delight in such [religious] activities” (1995:63) he holds that one’s immersion into such activities cannot serve as proof for a person’s spirituality, as it is easily counterfeited.

Edwards’ unreliable signs involving assurance of salvation (McDermott 1995:66-78):

- *Being convinced that one is saved:* McDermott firmly states that “assurance of salvation is not arrogant presumption but a wonderful gift God wants to give his children while they are still on earth.” (1995:68) Nevertheless, he continues by pointing out that two kinds of people often have false assurance of salvation. Firstly, those who are “noted for outward morality and religiosity,” (1995:69) who feel secure in their seemingly blameless lives, and secondly, those “who have had visions, heard voices or had other kind of remarkable spiritual experiences.” (1995:69) Such false security in eternal life can lead to gross deceptions. Assurance of salvation is therefore excluded as a proof for true spirituality.
- *Other’s being convinced that someone is saved* can also not stand as a proof for authentic spirituality, for the same reasons as the above.

With all these potential signs nullified, the question necessarily arises: What reliable signs are there that can serve as tests for true spirituality, and more to our point, for true revelation? To answer this question, the researcher will first point out some checklists proposed by others as tests for true revelation of God. Thereafter, the researcher will propose a checklist of his own, partly inspired by the lists below.

3.2.1 The Cindy Jacobs checklist for discernment

3.2.2 The Robert F Morneau checklist for discernment

3.2.3 The Morris and Olsen checklist for discernment

3.2.4 The Edward N Gross checklist for discernment

3.2.5 The Walter L Liefeld checklist for discernment

3.2.1 The Cindy Jacobs checklist for discernment:

The well-known prophetic minister, Cindy Jacobs, offers a brief checklist for testing prophecy in her book *The Voice of God* (1995:74-80). While her checklist is very vague in detail, and equally loose on Scriptural grounds, it serves as a good introduction to what the researcher is about to expound on. Jacobs' checklist illustrates the fact that every point we are about to discuss separately, is in fact only one of numerous checkpoints within a healthy discernment of God's self-revelation. Here then follows Jacobs' six checkpoints for correctly discerning God's voice, particularly through prophecy: (Jacobs 1995:74-80)

1. Jacobs' first test is to answer the question: *"Is what has been shared as a prophetic word scriptural?"* While an obviously crucial test, Jacobs offers no details on how to do this. How do we use Scripture to test prophecy? Should it 'sound like' Scripture? Should it be quoting Scripture? The researcher hopes to answer such questions in this final section.
2. Next Jacobs suggests that we ask: *"Does the prophecy display the character of Christ?"* She goes on to say: "Sometimes wolves in sheep's clothing manipulate Scripture for their own purposes. Just because someone is quoting chapter and verse to you doesn't make a prophecy accurate." Again, the character of Christ is not expounded on, and practicalities concerning the comparison of prophecy with Christ's character are not explained. And yet again, it is a crucial test which needs consideration.

3. The following test, as Jacobs would have it, is to look and see “*what is the fruit in the life of the person giving the prophecy?*” Here Jacobs refers to Jesus’ warning:

“No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognised by its own fruit... For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.” (Luke 6:43, 45)

We will deal with this test in detail later.

4. Next Jacobs asks the question: “*Is anything tainting the word?*” Jacobs clarifies the vague term ‘tainting’ in saying the one bringing the prophetic word “may look at a person’s outward appearance and it can influence what they pray or prophesy.” In other words, the prophet speaks deceptively by, wilfully or not, adding into or leaving out of the Word given by God something of their own.
5. Jacobs’ fifth checkpoint deals with the witness of the Holy Spirit in every believer. Jacobs asks: “*What is the Holy Spirit giving me in the way of an inward witness?*” She is rightly referring here to Jesus’ encouraging words to His disciples...

“The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice.... his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognise a stranger’s voice.”

(John 10:2-5)

“When the Lord is speaking to us,” Jacobs says, “an answer from within our hearts will cry, ‘Yes, that is God speaking to me.’ We will *resonate* with the word. This is what I mean by a witness in your spirit.” If the word is not from God, Jacobs says there will be a “check in your spirit”.

6. Jacobs’ last point is very unhelpful, seeing as it only restates the original problem. She says: “A prophetic word can have three possible sources: The Spirit of God... Demonic spirits, [or] the flesh.” How to discern each source respectively is not dealt with.

While not included in her six-point checklist for testing prophecy, Jacobs further on in the chapter raises two aspects of testing prophecy that might well supercede some of the above tests.

7. Jacobs suggests we ask the question: “Do brothers and sisters in the Lord witness to this word, especially those in authority over me?” (1995:85) As we have just seen, corporate testing of revelation is the norm in Scripture, and thus a given test for the validity of any prophetic utterance.
8. “A good thing to remember is this:” Jacobs says finally, “God never minds confirming His word to us... If you are unsure whether something is from God, ask Him for further confirmation.” (1995:86) Here Jacobs points us to Matthew 18:16, which says: “By the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.” Scripture abounds with examples of God’s gracious affirmation of His revelation by means of a confirming second, third or even fourth revelation.

While, in the researcher’s view, Jacobs is too vague on many of these tests – how they are to be applied and on what grounds she suggests we should use them – we will be including more tests from Jacobs in our checklist than from any of those still to follow. Naturally, Jacobs’ first test for Scriptural compliance will be incorporated. The researcher, however, will do more work to explain how such a test should practically be applied to a revelation. Also Jacobs’ test for the fruit will be included in our checklist, although the researcher intends to place more emphasis on the fruit produced by the outcome of the revelation than by the prophet or other channel by which the revelation comes. Jacobs’ term for the inward witness of the Holy Spirit – “resonance” – will form a subdivision of the researcher’s checklist, as we will look both for an inward resonance with the revelation, as well as a resonance with

Scripture and with the spiritual community of the believer (especially with overseers, as Jacobs suggests). Finally, Jacobs' insistence that one should ask God to confirm a revelation, should there be any uncertainty regarding it, will be taken up in the researcher's checklist.

To conclude then: Jacobs' insights, although vaguely applied and only somewhat loosely supported with Scriptural grounds in her book, will contribute greatly to the researcher's end product in this thesis.

3.2.2 The Robert F Morneau checklist for discernment:

Morneau proposes that Christian discernment should be governed by certain principles. It is his belief that discernment cannot be taught, as it is a gift that every Christian receives from God. He argues as follows: "Discernment is a gift to be exercised. Principles are abstractions offering meaning. Both are significant for human and spiritual growth. This essay presents the principles; the reader brings the gift and the experience. The hope is that the roads intersect rather than run parallel."

(1994:30) The following is a summary of Morneau's ten discernment principles:

1. "Discernment is a prayerful process by which experiences are interpreted in faith" (1994:30)
2. "Discernment must deal with many voices seeking to capture our minds, hearts, and energies." (1994:32)
3. "Discernment is cultivated in listening love that allows one to hear the felt-experience of good and evil movements within oneself, others, and society." (1994:35)
4. "Discernment relies on two foundations: Jesus and revelation." (1994:37)

5. “Discernment assumes that God is continually working in the depth of every individual and community.” (1994:39)
6. “Discernment respects the nature of time and is willing to wait freely for a decision that has need of clarification, detachment, and magnanimity.” (1994:42)
7. “Discernment is a gift (grace) given to those who are properly disposed to receive it because of obedience and surrender.” (1994:44)
8. “Discernment blends faith and pragmatism: it searches out God’s will in radical trust and does it.” (1994:46)
9. “Discernment looks to consequence for its authenticity: decisions are of God if ultimately they lead to life and love.” (1994:48)
10. “Discernment leads to truth and, through truth, into freedom.” (1994:50)

While the researcher agrees with most of Morneau’s principles, they stand too removed from application in the manner which they are compiled – it would be difficult to use them in practice. Morneau also sees this lack: “Helpful as they might be,” he says of these principles, “life is lived in experience, not reflection.” (1994:52) With some effort, though, these principles might be reworded in order to present them as a practical checklist.

Morneau’s sixth principle will contribute to the researcher’s application of the test for confirmation, as we will see that patience is a requirement when applying such a test. Respecting “the nature of time”, as Morneau words it, is of utmost importance in our relationship with God. The lives of Abraham, David and Jesus himself testifies to this fact, as they waited numerous years on God’s timing for the fulfilment of promises, and thus the confirmation of revelations. Also Morneau’s second principle, regarding

Jesus and revelation as the foundations of discernment, will be incorporated in the researcher's checklist. In this principle, Morneau asserts that one cannot accurately discern God's self-revelation outside of an intimate love relationship with Jesus Christ. In conclusion of Morneau's discernment principles then, we must say that it contains a wealth of truth which is sadly presented in a somewhat distant, philosophical manner. Had his principles been geared more towards practical, day-to-day application, we would certainly have enjoyed a greater contribution from Morneau in our final checklist.

3.2.3 The Morris and Olsen checklist for discernment:

Morris and Olsen (1997:78-107) offers a linear process approach as a guide for discerning revelation. The researcher found this approach to be very unique and possibly very helpful.

1. *Framing*: Clearly identify the focus for discernment of God's will.
2. *Grounding*: Determine what boundaries which are to be set concerning the revelation at hand – what doctrines and beliefs are addressed by the revelation.
3. *Shedding*: Lay aside your own pre-conceived ideas concerning the revelation in preparation for its comparison with Scripture (next step).
4. *Rooting*: Try to connect Biblical truths (Scriptures, stories or doctrines) to the revelation.
5. *Listening*: Still the mind and heart to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit.
6. *Exploring*: Free the imagination to discover possible options for understanding.
7. *Improving*: Take each option that came to mind and broaden out on it until it becomes the best that we can imagine.

8. *Weighing*: Sort and test the options or paths in response to the leading of God's spirit.
9. *Closing*: Move towards the selection of an option which is given weight by the Spirit of God.
10. *Resting*: Test the decision by allowing it to rest for some time. See if it stirs feelings of peace or distress, which will confirm or contradict the decision made.

Linear thinkers will certainly find this approach to discernment a very helpful guide. In essence, the process deals with only three real tests, though. One might summarise it in the following way: Step 1 and step 9 are cognitive actions in the process – step one (framing) being a wilful cognitive focus on the area of discernment, and step nine (closing) being a decisive conclusion to the process. Steps 2 to 4 (grounding, shedding and rooting) are all markers in the process of testing a revelation with Scripture. First one checks the revelation to determine what parts of Scripture might be relevant to it (grounding), then personal bias is moved aside (shedding) in an attempt to look at what Scripture says about the revelation (rooting). Steps 5 to 8 (listening, exploring, improving and weighing) are all dealing with the inward guidance of the Holy Spirit (what Jacobs calls “resonance”). Morris and Olsen would have us quiet our hearts to be sensitive to the Spirit's voice (listening) in order to engage in a conversation concerning the discernment of the revelation (exploring, improving and weighing). Step 10 (confirmation) is the last of the three tests included in this process.

While all three of these tests are certainly important checkpoints in discerning revelation correctly, they are in themselves insufficient. One gaping hole in this checklist is the absence of the spiritual community of the believer in the process of

discernment. What the researcher takes away from this checklist, though, is its clear attempt to be both “user friendly” and easy to memorise. Morris and Olsen are trying to give us discernment principles for everyday use.

Lastly, in step three (shedding) Morris and Olsen raise a very good point: They would have us “shed” biases and preconceived ideas before attempting to test a revelation with Scripture, as our own misconceptions would taint our view of Scripture and hence hinder us from correctly discerning the stance of a revelation with God’s Word. What they however forget, is that we are blind towards our own biases and preconceived ideas. We don’t see the “dirty glasses” through which we observe the world (and Scripture). To safeguard ourselves against self-deception through biases and preconceptions, a discernment checklist would have to bring in some sort of counterbalancing tests which are unlikely to be tainted by such skew views. Only after such a counterbalance should the checklist then move towards a test of Scripture (which is always very likely to be tainted by our biases and preconceptions).

3.2.4 The Edward N Gross checklist for discernment:

Gross (1990) is particularly concerned for discerning whether a miracle is of God or not. This applies to the researcher’s concern regarding discernment of God’s self-revelation, as God’s miracles reveal who He is (see the discussions in this regard starting from page 13 and again from page 49). The following is a summary of Gross’ three discernment tests for miracles in particular:

1. The Word of God: “The first test in discovering whether a miracle is of God involves God’s Word. God will not work a miracle in support of a teaching that opposes his holy Word.” (Gross 1990:78)

2. The Nature of God: “The second test to be applied to miracles regards the nature of God. Scripture teaches that the nature of God is seen in the world... Any act that opposes the nature of God as revealed in his Word cannot be an act of God.” (Gross 1990:81-82)
3. The Fruit of God’s Spirit: “The third major test to be applied to a miracle involves the fruit of the Spirit of God... If they [miracle workers] do not manifest the fruit of the holy Spirit, they are not ministering under the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Gross 1990:83)

As with Morris and Olsen, Gross gives us three very good tests, but it is unfortunate that there are only these three. In fact, the researcher will merge Gross’ first test (the Word of God) and his second test (the nature of God) into one test, as Gross himself asserts that “the nature of God [is] revealed in his Word.” (Gross 1990:82) Both tests are then in fact a test for Scriptural compliance.

What the researcher finds helpful in Gross’ checklist is his test for “the fruit of God’s Spirit”. Here Gross is not just testing for the general fruit or outcome of a revelation (or of the channel producing such a revelation, as Jacobs would have it), but for the evidence of specifically the ninefold fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control.” (Gal 5:22-23) This brings us to a greater measurable when considering Jesus’ insistence of checking for the fruit of a revelation and of false prophets in particular. (Luke 6:43)

3.2.5 The Walter L Liefeld checklist for discernment:

Liefeld (Glo 2009) helpfully points out several Scripture passages which tell us how to test prophecy and other claims to God’s self-revelation:

1. Deuteronomy 18:22 tells us to look for the outcome of predictions – if it takes place as foretold, it is of God, the only One who can see the future perfectly.
2. Matthew 7:15 f. tells us to look for the evidence of fruit – if the fruit that comes as a result of the revelation testifies to the character of God, then the revelation is indeed of God.
3. 1 John 4:1 ff. tells us to look for a commitment to the orthodox belief in the deity and humanity of Christ (cf. v. 15) – if this truth is denied, the revelation is not of God.
4. 1 John 4:5 f. tells us to look for a submission to the authority of the New Testament apostles – if the revelation indicates rebellion to such authority, it is not of God.
5. 1 John, passim, tells us to look for evidence of Christian moral character – where it is lacking, the revelation is not of God.

We are much indebted to Liefeld, as four of these Scriptural tests raises points that are missing in the former checklists. The outcome of predictions, a clear and obvious confirmation, must certainly be included in a checklist for godly revelation, as must John's insistence for commitment to the dual nature of Christ, the submission to New Testament apostolic authority and the evidence of Christian moral character. As the researcher is particularly concerned with Scripture's discernment principles, every one of these passages will be included in the checklist which is to follow.

Chapter 4 The researcher's checklist for discernment

Having considered the discernment checklists of others, the researcher now concludes by offering a checklist of his own compilation. This checklist is partly inspired by the insights of those above, and supported by the discernment principles found in Scripture. As important, though, is the fact that it is undergirded by the numerous considerations regarding God's desire to reveal himself for the sake of a personal relationship, as expounded throughout this thesis. The discernment of God's self-revelation must start with the acknowledgement that God desires to birth and grow a personal relationship with every human being. For this reason, this checklist starts off with the tests for relationship.

Here follows an outline of the researcher's checklist for discernment...

4.1 Relationship tests:

4.1.1 Does the revelation glorify Jesus?

4.1.1.a Does it acknowledge Jesus' divine and human nature?

4.1.1.b Does it acknowledge Jesus' supremacy?

4.1.2 Does the revelation evoke love for God?

4.1.2.a Does it drive out fear?

4.1.2.b Does it stir faith?

4.1.2.c Does it produce brotherly love?

4.2 Resonance tests:

4.2.1. Does the revelation resonate with Scripture?

4.2.2. Does the revelation resonate with my spirit?

4.2.3. Does the revelation resonate with my spiritual community?

4.2.3.a What do my overseers say?

4.2.3.b What do my disciplers say?

4.2.3.c What do those with the gift of discernment say?

4.3 Confirmation tests:

4.3.1. Does God confirm the revelation?

4.3.2. Does the fruit confirm the revelation?

The following brief remarks are important concerning the outline of this checklist:

- If humans were not prone to error and bent on sin, the only discernment test required in this list would have been “Does the revelation resonate with my spirit?” (4.2.2). If not for sin, our spirits would know God intimately with no barrier to distract our discernment. We would instantly recognise our Maker and Friend, even from the sound of His footsteps in the garden! (Gen 3:8) This is the manner of discerning maturity we should be growing towards – to discern clearly the voice of God’s Holy Spirit speaking to one’s own spirit. The other tests in this checklist are not there to compensate for difficulty with recognising the voice of God’s Holy Spirit, but are in fact there to help us grow in identifying that voice of the indwelling “Spirit of truth.” (John 14:16-17) So, as we grow in maturity of discerning the inner voice of the Holy Spirit, we should gradually find our dependence for guidance in discernment shifting away from some form of checklist, more and more towards the guidance of the indwelling Holy Spirit.
- The checklist is compiled in descending order of application, meaning the Relational tests should be applied first, and thereafter the latter tests: first the Resonance tests, and finally the Confirmation tests.
- A revelation gains credit with every test it passes down the checklist. One would seldom see a deceptive revelation pass the Relational tests to continue into the Resonance tests. It will be even more unlikely for such a deceptive revelation to pass the Resonance tests and to continue into the Confirmation tests. However, because

our enemy is called “the father of all lies” the entire checklist is necessary to confirm that a revelation is indeed of God.

In what is to follow, the researcher will discuss each test in order to explain what is understood by its purpose and application. Thereafter the researcher will conclude with a summary of this checklist, which will shed light on its practical use for the discernment of God’s self-revelation by every believer and in the Christian congregation.

4.1 Relationship tests:

The first tier of tests investigates the revelation’s compliance with the essence of Scripture, as summarised by Jesus in the Great Commandment: Love for God and love for humankind.

“‘The most important one,’ answered Jesus, ‘is this:

“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.”

The second is this: “Love your neighbour as yourself.”

There is no commandment greater than these.”

(Mark 12:29-31)

Love for God must be undergirded with an acknowledgement of what and who He is. God requires that our expression of love for Him (worship) must be “in Spirit and in truth” (John 4:23-24) – in keeping with *what* He is (spirit) and in keeping with *who* He is (His true identity, nature and character).

4.1.1 Does the revelation glorify Jesus?

The first test for true, God-given revelation is whether such a revelation glorifies Jesus. Piper argues that “the Christian Gospel is the gospel of the glory of Christ, because its final

aim is that we would see and savor and show the glory of Christ. For this is none other than the glory of God.” (Piper 2001:22) Piper stresses that Jesus is the exact representation of Father God in the flesh (Heb 1:3), and the image of the invisible God on earth. (Col 1:15) As discussed earlier (page 47), Jesus is the clearest, most perfect revelation of who God is. Glorifying Jesus is in effect glorifying God.

In his book, *John Calvin and His Passion for the Majesty of God*, Piper shows how the glory of God was the central passion of Calvin’s life. He quotes John Calvin in saying: “Set before [man], as the prime motive of his existence, zeal to illustrate the glory of God.” (Piper 2009:16) Calvin firmly believed that the purpose of life is to glorify God, and that in particular through glorifying Jesus Christ. At the age of thirty, Calvin described an imaginary scene of himself at the end of his life, giving an account to God. He said: “The thing [O God] at which I chiefly aimed, and for which I most diligently labored, was, that the glory of thy goodness and justice... might shine forth conspicuous, that the virtue and blessings of thy Christ... might be fully displayed.” (Piper 2009:19) Even on the key Reformation matters, such as justification by faith, Calvin’s concern was for God’s glory to be manifested through Christ. Piper quotes Calvin in answering the Italian Cardinal Sadolet: “You... touch upon justification by faith, the first and keenest subject of controversy between us... Wherever the knowledge of it is taken away, the glory of Christ is extinguished.” (Piper 2009:17) The essence of the matter remains the glory of God in the face of Christ. It infuriated Calvin that Rome had “destroyed the glory of Christ in many ways – by calling upon the saints to intercede, when Jesus Christ is the one mediator between God and man; by adoring the Blessed Virgin, when Christ alone shall be adored; by offering a continual sacrifice in the Mass, when the sacrifice of Christ upon the Cross is complete and sufficient.” (Piper 2009:18)

Scripture tells us that God the Father seeks the glory of His Son: “I am not seeking glory for myself,” Jesus said, “but there is one who seeks it, and he is the judge.” (John 8:50) It would be reasonable then to argue that any seeming self-revelation of God which does not glorify Jesus, cannot be of God. The first step then in glorifying Jesus is to acknowledge who Jesus is: The Son of God and the Son of Man. Any true revelation from God must acknowledge that Jesus is both fully God and fully man.

4.1.1.1 Does it acknowledge Jesus’ divine and human nature?

Early on, heresies with corrupted views on both elements concerning the dual nature of Christ, threatened to derail the church. Arian controversy in the fourth century reasoned that Father God (Jehovah) alone is deity in the true sense, and that Jesus Christ was in fact no more than a created being. (Brown 1990:90) Gnostic thinkers on the other hand, denied or qualified the statement that Jesus Christ came “in the flesh”. (Walker 1997:66; Candlish 1973:79) In fact, some of our greatest church fathers and theologians had at times some difficulty comprehending the unity of Christ’s deity and humanity - even the great Justin Martyr. (Brown 1990:89)

Though difficult to grasp, the full deity and full humanity of Jesus Christ (e.g. see 1 John 4:1-2; John 1:3,14) stands central to the only means of our salvation: the sinless Son of God, the second Adam, once and for all punished on behalf of sinful mankind.

“But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honour, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone.” (Heb 2:9)

Not only is the full deity and full humanity of Jesus Christ important for our salvation, but Erickson (1990:703-704) rightly points out the following implications of the deity of Christ: In the first place, Erickson argues, the deity of Jesus Christ allows us to have

real knowledge of God. When Philip asked Jesus: “Show us the Father”, Jesus replied: “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). The Father (God) whom to Philip – and the Jews of His time – has only been known at a distance, stood before His eyes in human flesh: the greatest revelation of God as yet!

Jesus spoke the words of the Father (John 3:34) and did the works the Father gave Him to do (John 5:36), so that through Jesus we can see who and how God is. In this regard, Torrey goes as far as to say: “Very many statements which in the Old Testament are made distinctly of Jehovah, God, are taken in the New Testament to refer to Jesus Christ; i.e. in the New Testament thought and doctrine Jesus Christ occupies the place that Jehovah occupies in Old Testament thought and doctrine.” (1957:80) For these reasons and many more, 1 John 4:1 commands us to reject any revelation which does not acknowledge the full deity and humanity of Jesus Christ. Seemingly addressing an early seed of Gnostic thought, the apostle John cautions first century Christians to test prophecies. “Dear friends,” says John, “do not believe every spirit, but *test the spirits* to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.” (1 John 4:1) The first truth that resonates from this text is that God never expects us to take revelations at face value. We are to test it. Kistemaker points out that “he [John] wants them to know that there are two spiritual spheres in this world: one is the domain of the Holy Spirit; the other is the domain of the devil.” (1986:323-324) In chapter 3 verse 24 John made it clear to them that the Holy Spirit dwells in the children of God. (He confirms this again in 4:4) Now, in what is to follow, John will point out that “the spirit of the devil lives in false prophets who speak in his name.” (Kistemaker 1986:324)

“This is how you can recognise the Spirit of God:

Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.”

(1 John 4:2-3)

A clear test is given here: “Anyone who separates the human nature from the divine nature of Jesus Christ speaks without God’s authority,” Kistemaker interprets, “And anyone who denies either Jesus’ human nature or divine nature ‘is not from God’.” (1986:325) Already in 1 John 2:22, John made it clear that the spirit of the antichrist “denies that Jesus is the Christ” and denies “the Father and the Son”. This refutation of the core message of the Gospel is evidently an ancient strategy of Satan, and something that every Christian should be aware of. Commenting on this passage, Carson et al says: “The test is the attitude to Jesus Christ. If the Spirit of God is in the claimant to inspiration he will affirm that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh... This is not a human discovery but something God reveals.” (Carson et al 2009:1406)

Derek Prince gives this test for the authenticity of godly revelation pre-eminence. “If a doctrine does not acknowledge that Jesus the Messiah has come in the flesh,” says Prince plainly, “that constitutes a false doctrine.” (Prince 2008:112) Dodd affirms this with the same fervour: “No utterance,” he says, “however inspired, which denies the reality of the Incarnation, can be accepted by Christians as true prophecy.” (2008:103) The reason Dodd gives for this is that “the fundamental doctrine of Christianity is the Incarnation.”

This first test then not only clearly identifies a false revelation, but also points out the false prophet. In analysing this text (1 John 4:1-6), Dake (2001:485) points out how it identifies the following seven distinct characteristics of false prophets:

- *Their confession of Jesus:* They do not believe that the Son of God came into the world as fully human. (1 John 4:2-3)
- *Their relationship with the world:* They receive the world with open arms and the world receives them likewise. “They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world...” (1 John 4:5; 1 John 2:15-17; Jas 4:4)
- *How they receive Christianity:* They do not receive the true Gospel of Christ wholeheartedly, for “whoever does not know God does not listen to [true Christians].” (1 John 4:6)
- *Their attitude toward the commandments of God:* They also do not receive the commandments of God wholeheartedly. (1 John 4:6; 1 John 3:20-24; John 14:15)
- *Love of the brethren:* They do not love as God loves. “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.” (1 John 4:7-21; 1 John 3:11-16; John 13:34-35; John 15:12-15)
- *The indwelling Holy Spirit:* They do not have the Holy Spirit – “He that is in you.” (1 John 4:4-6)
- *The Word of God:* They do not have the Word of God written on their hearts, which resonates with the message of the Gospel. (1 John 4:6; 1 John 5:10; 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Cor 4:4)

Should the revelation acknowledge the dual nature of Jesus Christ – human and divine – the second part of this test is to see whether the revelation acknowledges the supreme authority of our Lord.

4.1.1.2 Does it acknowledge Jesus’ supremacy?

Christ's deity means that worship of Christ is appropriate, as much as worship of God the Father is appropriate. The majesty, honour, glory and holiness of God the Father – all that makes Him worthy of worship – is also part of who Jesus Christ is. “Jesus Christ is the Creator of the universe,” says Piper, “Jesus Christ is the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last. Jesus Christ, the person, never had a beginning. He is absolute Reality. He has the unparalleled honor and unique glory of being there first and always. He never came into being. He was eternally begotten.” (Piper 2001:31) Considering the surpassing excellence of Jesus Christ, Piper concludes that “seeing and savouring this glory is the goal of our salvation.” (Piper 2001:31)

In an exposition of John 1:1-5, Morris comes to the conclusion that “‘the Word was God.’ Nothing higher could be said: all that may be said about God may fitly be said about the Word [Jesus].” On the same text, Warfield makes this telling observation: “The language is coloured by reminiscences from the Tabernacle, in which the Glory of God, the Shekinah, dwelt.” (1958:147) The Word that became flesh among us comes from before time, from the glory of God. That same glory still indwelt Christ on the earth, and now, at the right hand of the Father in heaven, it remains His part (John 17:5).

Starting at his birth and climaxing at his crucifixion, Jesus was utterly humiliated “in the sight of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth” (Ignatius to the Trallians 9:1). Now, God has reversed the order completely – He who became the lowest is exalted above all else. Because of His ultimate sacrificial obedience to the will of the Father, we see in Philippians 2 that the Father elevated Jesus above every name and authority in all of creation. Therefore, any true revelation of God must acknowledge that Jesus is 1.) “the name that is above every name” (Phil 2:9), 2.) the

name at which “every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth” (Phil 2:10), and 3.) the name which every tongue must confess “is Lord” (Phil 2:11)

Olshausen raises a notable point here: “He [Jesus] has attained to such glory,” he says, “not merely in so far as he was already a person ere He became man... but that He, as this Jesus, has been exalted to the fellowship of the divine glory, and therefore this name, the name Jesus, has been made a name above every name.” (1866:77) Olshausen’s point is this: as part of the God-head, Jesus was *already* all-glorious and exalted above all even before creation. He could receive no greater supremacy than what He already had. For that reason Jesus prayed to the Father: “And now, Father, glorify me in your presence *with the glory I had* with you before the world began.” (John 17:5, emphasis mine) Any revelation, therefore, that withholds glory from Jesus Christ, in effect withholds glory from God. In addition, it denounces the praise-worthy, self-sacrificing obedience by which the name Jesus came to be elevated above all other names.

Prince lists this – “the fruit of exalting Jesus” – as his primary test for authentic revelation of God. Says Prince: “In John 16:13-14, Jesus promised His disciples, ‘When He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth... he will glorify Me’... [The Holy Spirit’s] supreme function is to glorify Jesus. Any authentic spiritual manifestation also glorifies Jesus, focusing our attention on Him alone.” (2008:25) Prince insists that “everything the Holy Spirit does glorifies Jesus... Nothing and no one other than Jesus receives His glory.” (2008:41) In Prince’s view, the simple question “Does it glorify Jesus?” provides us with “a foolproof test of whether something is of the Holy Spirit.” (2008:41)

In conclusion of this first test then: Any revelation that does not glorify Jesus by acknowledging His full humanity and deity, as well as His ultimate supremacy, is not a revelation from God.

4.1.2 Does the revelation evoke love for God?

“God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.”

(1 John 4:16b)

As expounded on throughout this study (and especially in the sections starting from page 13 and again from page 40), God desires relationship with humankind more than anything else. Says Johnson: “Scripture is saturated with the theme that we were made for a relationship that allows us to know by experience the supernatural God who created us.” (2007:7) God’s primary reason for revealing Himself, therefore, is to draw us to Himself, that we may witness His glory and respond to it in a suitable expression of love (in worship).

“The heart to seek God is birthed in us by God Himself,” Johnson says. “Like all desires, it is not something that can be legislated or forced, but rather it grows within us as we become exposed to God’s nature.” (2007:2) Johnson believes that God reveals Himself to us in order to stir up a desire *for Him* within us. As we then respond to seek Him more, He again reveals more, which serves to intensify our desire after Him ever increasingly. In Johnson’s own words: “He creates an appetite in us for Himself by lavishing us with the reality of His goodness – His irresistible glory.” (2007:2-3)

Scripture tells us that, even before creation, God’s intent was for us to know Him intimately – personally. “He chose us in him [Jesus] before the creation... In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus...” (Ephesians 1:4-5) When sin marred that glorious intent God had for humankind, He sent his Son with “the ministry of reconciliation.” (Romans

5:11; 2 Corinthians 5:18) Jesus was incarnated for the sole purpose of reconciling us to God, back into that intimate love relationship with the divine which humankind was destined for. This foundational truth of the Gospel of Jesus must serve as a test for all revelation claiming to be of God: If we are saved for the purpose of entering into a love relationship with God, then all revelation of God will ultimately serve to foster a greater love for God.

Four questions can be asked to help discern the true love of God from deceptive counterfeits in a revelation...

4.1.2.1 Does it drive out fear?

“There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.”

(1 John 4:18)

Quite clearly, John affirms that “there is no fear in love.” The love of God is free of accusations and guilt, for judgement has passed over those who place their trust in the redemptive work of Christ.

While there is a reverent fear of God which draws us in awe towards God, the fear which Satan stirs up is fuelled by the guilt of sin, and drives us away from God. (John 5:45; Rev 12:10) If such fear is stirred up by a revelation, that revelation is not from God, but from the “accuser of brethren” who is Satan.

In this regard, it is necessary to briefly deal with the manner in which the salvation message of Jesus is often preached in a style that became known as “fire and brimstone.” This fierce manner of preaching emphasises the eternal suffering that will be in hell, so as to stir fear in people in an attempt to turn them to Christ for salvation.

Following the success of some fiery sermons by Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield during the Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s, such preaching became the norm for evangelical crusades. Reflecting on such preaching, a young theological seminary student is recorded to have said: “Old-time preachers scared the people into serving God by preaching hell fire and brimstone. I'd rather be scared into Heaven than pacified into Hell.” (Jet Magazine 1961:30)

For example then, considering the manner of God’s love, can a “fire and brimstone” sermon rightly be a self-revelation of God? If, as John so firmly declares, “there is no fear in love” and if “God *is* love”, to whom would those who quake at such a dreadful sermon respond? For surely it cannot be God.

Sir Thomas Browne, the highly intelligent seventeenth century Englishman, said in this regard:

“I thank God, and with joy I mention it, I was never afraid of hell, nor never grew pale at the description of that place...

they go the fairest way to heaven that would serve God without a hell; other mercenaries, that crouch unto him in fear of hell, though they term themselves servants, are indeed but the slaves, of the Almighty.”

(Dunn 1950:171)

God desires the love of His children, not terrified mercenaries, as Browne would call them, who run to Him out of fear for hell. The ultimate drawing card for the Gospel is not what we *won't* get (eternal hell), but what we *will* get: eternal intimacy with God.

Jesus declared the ultimate purpose of His coming not to be for judgment but for salvation: “For I did not come to judge the world, but to save it.” (John 12:47) Yes, there does await a fierce judgment for sin, and yes, there must be remorse for sin

when coming to salvation, but no, God desires love, not dread. The Christian's proper response to God is thankful worship, not horrible trepidation.

In concluding this point then: Any revelation that stirs up a fear which causes one to quiver away from God, is not a true revelation of God. "Perfect love drives out fear."
(1 John 4:18)

4.1.2.2 Does it stir faith?

"And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." (Heb 11:6)

Healthy relationships require faith – it expresses trust between the partners. For this reason God delights in our faith. He takes pleasure in our expression of trust in Him, knowing that our relationship cannot grow without it.

Uncertainty undermines trust. We cannot express trust in someone whom we are uncertain about. For this very reason, God reveals Himself. He makes Himself known at any and every opportunity we would give Him in order that we might become increasingly sure of Him, increasingly certain of who He is, increasingly trusting of Him.

"He who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does."
(Jas 1:6b-8)

God is not into mysticism. He does not delight in making us uncertain or in making Himself unclear. Quite the opposite: He takes pleasure in revealing Himself as much as we are willing and able to receive His revelation.

Satan, on the other hand, delights in mystifying humankind. He made it his goal to create uncertainty concerning God and God's will, and has been doing so since the garden of Eden. "Did God really say...?" he asked Eve, and so created a breach between her and God, resulting in a breach between humankind and God. Since that beginning Satan's mystifying tactics could be seen in the multiple gods of many world religions and in the self-contradicting messages in many religious writings of this world. In stark contrast, God made himself known in personal relationships and proclaimed His will in reasonable, logical terms. Still today, God gives wisdom and understanding, knowledge and revelation. He does not want to remain far off, out of reach. Rather, He wants to be known.

Quite clearly then, any revelation promoting uncertainty in our relationship with God, is sure to undermine our trust and our expression of faith in Him. Therefore, such a revelation cannot be from God.

4.1.2.3 Does it produce brotherly love?

"If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother." (1 John 4:20-21)

Prince insists that a true sign for a revelation of God is "the fruit of love for fellow Christians." (2008:26) True love for God is seen in sincere love for people, which is why Jesus' commandment of brotherly love is "like unto" the greatest commandment of all: "Love the Lord your God..." (Matt 22:37-40) In essence, Jesus taught that no one can love God and not love people at the same time. Love for God will overflow in love for people.

“In John 13:35,” Prince observes, “Jesus told His followers, ‘By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.’... When a move of the Holy Spirit occurs, we must ask: Does it produce Christians who sincerely love one another, regardless of denominational labels?” (2008:26-27) Prince goes on to say that, where such evidence of brotherly love is absent, we cannot accept the spiritual experience to be of God.

Where God reveals Himself, it will draw us closer to Himself, resulting in a greater love relationship with Him. An evidence of this must be a greater love relationship with people, and especially fellow Christians.

4.2 Resonance tests:

4.2.1 *Does the revelation resonate with Scripture?*

“The only way to know whether a sign or wonder is true is to measure it with truth – with the Word of God. In John 8:32, Jesus said, ‘You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.’ Scripture is the sole determinant of truth or falsehood.”

(Prince 2008:8)

The researcher found the test for resonance with Scripture to be the only consistent, agreed-on test in every Christian checklist for true revelation of God (except for those who, as already noted on page 29, generally do not have a “high” view of Scripture as inspired, authoritative or necessarily fully reliable).

While testing a revelation against the truth of Scripture is most certainly a primary test, the researcher would only apply this test here, after the former Relational tests. The reason for this is that texts can easily be puppets in the hands of cunning interpreters, which we all have danger of becoming at one time or another. Calvin coined it stunningly: “We know the

great propensity of men to vanity, for they have a natural appetite for deception, and indeed every man has a genius for deceiving himself.” (1972:236) Prince agrees with Calvin and points out such warnings against self-deception in Scripture: “Our hearts are incapable of discerning truth on their own. Proverbs 28:26 teaches, ‘He who trusts in his own heart is a fool.’ We must not be fools by trusting our hearts. Whatever our hearts tell us is unreliable, as Jeremiah 17:9 attests: ‘The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?’” (Prince 2008:7) Should we truly desire a revelation to be off God (or not), there will always be a temptation for proof-texting it with God’s Word in order to convince ourselves and others of its validity. Therefore, the Relational tests should serve as a protective pre-screening for deceptive revelations which might entice us to look at Scripture through tainted glasses.

Buttrick believes that an honest and humble approach to Scripture helps to guard us against such self-deception. Says Buttrick: “The Christian must bring to his Bible what should be brought to any other study, viz. complete honesty and the willingness to be proven wrong. He must have the scientific support of facts and be ready to let facts speak for themselves.” (Buttrick 1953:450) This likeness to a scientific approach has an end though, Buttrick points out: “Just one factor distinguishes the Christian’s responsibility toward his Bible from the responsibility of any critic to any book whatsoever. In the Bible one faces at least the possibility that here he will confront the Author of his being... If the belief of the ages is in the slightest degree true, then in this study man is in the presence of the voice and the will of God himself, and the outcome relates to the eternal issues of life and death.” (Buttrick 1953:450-451) This last truth is in fact the very reason why the test for revelation against Scripture is such a fundamental test. It is a God-inspired record of God’s self-revelation throughout the ages.

Now, when we come to the test for Resonance with Scripture, the test is not to find a verse in the Bible which says what the revelation says, or even to find a portion which *sounds like* the revelation we received. Jacobs gives us this stern warning: “Sometimes wolves in sheep’s clothing manipulate Scripture for their own purposes. Just because someone is quoting chapter and verse to you doesn’t make a prophecy accurate.” (Jacobs 1995:75) Rather, the test is asking that we see whether the revelation concurs with the *whole* of Scripture. Lloyd-Jones insists that “Scripture must be viewed as a whole.” (1958:37) “There is nothing more important,” Lloyd-Jones emphasizes, “if we are concerned about the authority of Scriptures, than to start with the whole Bible first, and to consider the details in the light of the whole, and not in the reverse order.” (1958:37)

Prince points to 2 Timothy 3:16-17 when he says: “The Holy Spirit authored all of Scripture, and He never contradicts Himself. Therefore, every genuine manifestation of the Holy Spirit must concur with Scripture.” (Prince 2008:5-6) It must not only concur with a-portion-of-Scripture, but with Scripture... all of it. The question naturally arises: How do we test a revelation with all of Scripture? The researcher will attempt to answer this question by means of the following three guidelines...

4.2.1.1 Know Scripture:

To begin with, it demands that we know Scripture. Every Christian should consistently increase their knowledge of the Bible through personal reading, corporate study and regular exposure to good expository preaching. There is no subsequent for this. Apart from an intimate personal relationship with God, knowledge of Scripture is the best safeguard every Christian can have against deception.

The effectiveness of this test – resonance with Scripture – is naturally determined by the extent of our knowledge of the Scriptures. This means that the extent to which we know the Scriptures in fact determines the extent to which we are open for deception. The less we know, the higher the risk. In speaking about the warning against false prophets in Deuteronomy 13:1-5, Gross remarks: “If the people were ignorant of God’s Word, they would have no safety against such evil workers [i.e. false prophets]. They would not have a standard by which to test his teaching.” (1990:79)

4.2.1.2 Ask how it contradicts Scripture:

Secondly, it will be wise to begin a comparison with Scripture by asking the question: How does the revelation contradict Scripture? If it clearly contradicts the Bible, it is not of God, for “God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind.” (Num 23:19) Because He does not change, what God says and does today must agree with what He said and did in His written Word.

False miracles, wonders, supernatural knowledge and seemingly fulfilled prophecies are all part of the package by which Satan and his demons attempt to lure people into deception. (Gal 1:8-9) Gross warns that, should we “forget that a miracle could be caused by an evil source, [our] souls would be in grave danger.” (1990:79) Pierson agrees and cautions: “The fact that we cannot explain a wonder by no means justifies following either a practice or a teaching upon which God has thus set in advance the distinct seal of His disapprobation.” (1970:33) No supernatural occurrence is ever above the authority of Scripture. Says Warfield: “No proposition clearly perceived to be false... can possibly be validated to us by any miracle whatsoever.” (1972:53)

Expounding on the test for a true prophet as found in Deuteronomy 13:1-3, Pierson says: “Even though a man should perform a miracle of utterance in prophecy, or a miracle of performance in action, if he is at the same time teaching doctrine contrary to the Word of God, we are not to heed him.” (1970:30-31) The danger which Pierson is pointing to is the fact that supernatural occurrences stirs excitement and wonder, which can easily lead to bad judgment concerning its origin. Speaking of the same danger, Gross says: “We must never forget that it is God’s declared will to subject alleged miracles to rigorous testing.” (1990:73) In support of this emphatic statement, Gross points to 1 Corinthians 14:29-32 and 1 Thessalonians 5:19-21...

“Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said.” (1 Cor 14:29)

“Test everything. Hold on to the good.” (1 Thess 5:21)

While neither of these passages specifically mentions Scripture as the actual “weigh” and “test”, Paul’s writings leaves us no doubt that Scripture is indeed the plumbline for what is of God and what is not. Bruce admits that “no criteria are suggested here for distinguishing genuine prophecy from false,” but quickly adds that, “consistency with revelation already received would be one obvious test.” (1982:126) It is similar reasoning to Bruce’s that leads Henry to apply 1 Thessalonians 5:21 to mean: “We must search the scriptures, whether what they [the preacher or prophet] say be true or not.” (1960:1882) Both Bruce and Henry imply that the weighing of prophecy would fundamentally rest on the truth that God does not contradict himself. Also Pierson insists that Scripture remains the yes or no for any revelation. He offers the following two criteria as a test for prophecy in particular: “There are some things greater than miracles, as testimonies to God,” Pierson insists, “and He distinctly tells us that a true prophet must be known by two great criteria: (1) the harmony of his predictive

teaching with historic events; and (2) the higher harmony of his perceptive teaching with the mind and will of God as already revealed in scripture.” (Pierson 1970:30-31)

In conclusion, if a revelation contradicts the teaching of Scripture, or is given in support of false teaching, it is not a revelation of God and must be rejected.

4.2.1.3 Ask how it confirms Scripture:

Finally, look to see how the revelation confirms Scripture. In their fourth step to testing a revelation, Morris and Olsen would have us “Try to connect Biblical truths (Scriptures, stories or doctrines) to the revelation.” (1997:78-107) Given the great variety of revelations one might receive from God, it is not always possible (or at least, not as straightforward) to connect a revelation with specific texts, stories or doctrines from Scripture. However, while we might not find a text that is exactly similar to the revelation received, we should recognize sufficient similarities with the Bible to tell us that we have encountered the same living God in the revelation as we do in Scripture.

Psalm 19:7-10 gives us a helpful guide at those times when revelations are not easily compared with Scripture. The passage is helpful in that it gives us a description of Scripture itself – not so much of its specific content, but of its *nature* or *character*...

“The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.
The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple.
The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart.
The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes.
The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever.
The ordinances of the Lord are sure and altogether righteous.
They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold;
they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb.”

If this is a true description of Scripture, then, in order to liken a revelation of God to Scripture, we can ask the following questions: Does the revelation revive the soul? Does it make the simple wise? Does it give joy to the heart? Does it give light to the eyes? Will it endure forever? Is it sure and altogether righteous? Is it more precious than gold? Is it sweeter than honey? To be fair, only God agrees with every one of these characteristics, and for that reason also His Word and His self-revelation. Therefore, it is safe to say that, should a revelation agree with these standards, it is indeed a self-revelation of God.

The test for *Resonance with Scripture* is often easier said than done and just as often easily tainted by our own misinterpretations of Scripture. For that reason, the test for Resonance includes two more phases: *Resonance with my spirit*, and *Resonance with my spiritual community*. The latter serves as a check for our own possible misinterpretations. It allows our spiritual community to correct possible errors on our part.

4.2.2 Does the revelation resonate with my spirit?

“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.”

(John 10:27)

As on the day of Pentecost, the presence and work of the Holy Spirit is at times clearly distinguished. There are at times physical evidence for His spiritual activity. Commenting on 1 John 4:6, Smalley makes an interesting comment in this regard: “A common sign of the Spirit’s presence in the early church,” he says, “was powerful speech, notably glossolalia and prophecy... The danger belonging to such a spiritual phenomenon, however, and one of which Paul himself was well aware, lay in its inevitable subjectivity. How could genuine,

spirit-activity be distinguished from false?” (Smalley 1984:216) Even with physical signs, Smalley observes, there cannot always be certainty of the presence and work of the Holy Spirit. And yet, Jesus boldly announced that His followers will recognize when it is He who is speaking to them. (John 10:27) We do not see Him, we seldom if ever hear Him with our physical ears, and yet our Shepherd, Jesus, is absolutely sure that we will recognize Him as he speaks to us. How can this be?

As a fifth checkpoint in her test for true revelation, Jacobs deals with what she calls resonance in the spirit of the believer. Jacobs asks: “What is the Holy Spirit giving me in the way of an inward witness?” (1995:76) She is rightly referring here to Jesus’ encouraging words to His disciples (John 10:27), as quoted above. “When the Lord is speaking to us,” Jacobs says, “an answer from within our hearts will cry, ‘Yes, that is God speaking to me.’ We will resonate with the word. This is what I mean by a witness in your spirit.” If the word is not from God, Jacobs says there will be a “check in your spirit”. (1995:76)

Kistemaker calls this inner witness a spiritual “recognition” (1986:322), which it clearly must be. Jesus is saying that our spirits will recognize His Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, which He sent to us shortly after ascending into heaven. “But you know him,” Jesus said of the Holy Spirit, “for he lives with you and will be in you.” (John 14:17b) The fact that we *know Him* would imply that we will also recognize His activity. The former part of that verse states the counterpart of that truth: “The world cannot accept him [the Holy Spirit], because it neither sees him nor knows him.” (John 14:17b) This would mean that non-Christians are unfamiliar with the Holy Spirit or with His doings in the world. They will therefore be unable to recognize His activity. Says Allen et al: “The Holy Spirit reveals spiritual realities to those who are open to receive them. Not possessing the Spirit, the natural man does not have the spiritual sensitivity to interpret spiritual reality which God reveals in the crucified Christ and makes actual in the present Christian life.” (Allen 1970:308)

“We are from God,” John writes, “and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognise the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.” (1 John 4:6) On this passage Dodd remarks: “The line is drawn... with the utmost sharpness. On the one side is the pagan world, including, as we know, the heretical teachers with their semi-pagan faith. On the other side is the Church affirming the true faith. The antithesis is absolute: they belong to the world, therefore they speak as inspired by the world, and the world listens to them: we belong to God - he who knows God listens to us; he who does not belong to God does not listen to us.” (2008:100) There is then clearly a spiritual recognition of both God’s Spirit (the Holy Spirit) and the spirit of this world (dominated by the fallen angels). Paul likens this spiritual recognition to an aroma:

“For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life.”

(2 Cor 2:15-16)

This test then simply asks the question: Does my spirit recognise the Spirit of God in the revelation? While it is seemingly the simplest test, it is surely the most profound. In essence, the test rests on the intimacy of our relationship with God. The better acquainted we are with someone, the more likely we are to recognise their silhouette on a horizon. Similarly, the more intimate we grow in our relationship with God, the more accurate we would be in recognising His involvement in any revelation.

4.2.3 Does the revelation resonate with my spiritual community?

“It is because one antelope will blow the dust from the other’s eye
that the two antelopes walk together”

(African Proverb, cited in Johnson 1990:135)

Johnson insists that “the human perception and formulation of the will of God occurs in community.” (1990:136) Hackett fully agrees and points out a crucial aspect concerning Scripture’s take on individual and corporate discernment: “The New Testament... clearly recognize a genuine guidance of the Spirit extended to all believers (1 John 2:26-27; Rom 8:9f),” Hackett remarks, “but this guidance should be viewed as quite compatible with fallibility on the part of believers in general as to just what insights are to be regarded as emanating from the Holy Spirit.” (1984:271) Yes, the Holy Spirit is ready and eager to guide every believer, Hackett grants, but humankind is fallible in its reception, interpretation and execution of such guidance. “Hence,” Hackett continues, “the instruction already noted (1 John 4:1) that the spirits must be tested (implying that confusion here is possible in principle), and hence also the intimation of Paul that even believers prophesying in the name of God may need the counterbalancing and correction of the prophetic insights of other believers.” (Hackett 1984:271)

What Hackett sheds light on here is the fallibility of every believer, even when under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Our previous test – recognition in the spirit of the individual – is vital, but fallible. Identifying the voice of God personally is a must, but it is not a foolproof measure for discernment. For that reason, Johnson insists that “The human perception and formulation of the will of God occurs in community.” (Johnson 1990:136) There is no true guard against deception outside of *corporate* discernment of revelation. So convinced is Smit about the central role of corporate discernment in the community of believers, that he makes the emphatic statement: “Christian congregations are communities of discernment.” (Smit 2001:8) He firmly believes that “the practice of discernment... is an intrinsic dimension of congregational life that needs urgent restoration.” (2001:8)

Hackett's use of the word "counterbalancing" is a pithy description of how such corporate discernment should function in practice, as we weigh up our individual insight on God's guidance on any given matter to arrive at a corporate agreement on what God is in fact revealing to us. Dougherty's observation in this regard is spot-on: "Discernment happens primarily through our willingness to invite another into our discernment." (1995:35)

Scripture has much to say regarding corporate testing of revelation. In fact, we never get the sense that any testing of prophecy, spirits, teaching, nor any other form of revelation are only to be discerned individually. When addressing the testing of such revelations, the biblical authors either speak to a group of believers on the matter or address the overseer of a group, with the notion that the instructions will be carried out in the group.

In corporate testing of revelation then, three specific groups should be included in the discernment process...

4.2.3.1 What do my overseers say?

The first step in discerning revelation corporately is to submit under the protective covering of the overseers (elders) in the church. Says Wylie et al: "Whilst every Christian has the responsibility to test prophecies in a congregational setting, this would certainly be a role that the elders should proactively fulfil." (Wylie & Humphreys 2010:21) One should sound-board the revelation with an elder in the church in order to confirm whether we have discerned God's revelation correctly. But why is this important?

This test is fundamental, because God ordained overseers to watch over the spiritual well-being of the church. The duties of an overseer are to teach and preach (1 Tim

3:2), to direct the affairs of the church (3:5), to shepherd ("pastor") the flock of God (3:5; Acts 20:28) and to guard the church from error (Titus 1:9; Acts 20:28-31). (Stewart, GLO) Because of these responsibilities, overseers are required to know the Scriptures well and to interpret it soundly.

"[An overseer] must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it." (Titus 1:9)

Being responsible for the purity of God's Word in the church, overseers would naturally also be responsible for testing the correct interpretation of godly revelation in the church. While they may not dictate the interpretation of such revelations to individuals, they are given as a protective covering to guard the flock of God against deception. Paul summarises this duty of an overseer well in his farewell address to the overseers of Ephesus...

"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!"

(Acts 20:28-31a)

This test should bring peace to the heart of every Christian, knowing that God has ordained spiritual oversight in the church for the purpose of protecting us against deception.

4.2.3.2 What do my disciplers say?

The church exists solely for the purpose of making disciples - faithful followers of Jesus who have died to themselves and came to new life through Christ, and who then continually live in obedience to Jesus' teaching. (Matthew 28:19-20a) Everything

the church does - whether it is teaching, preaching, running soup kitchens, giving literacy classes or building orphanages - everything must have disciple-making as its end goal, if we are to obey Jesus' great commission.

The nature of discipleship, as modelled by Jesus' training of the first twelve, asks for a close, day-to-day relationship between the discipler and the disciple. It is marked by an element of coaching as the discipler trains up the disciple in the practicalities of living in a close relationship with God and obeying Jesus' commands.

For this reason, the researcher believes that a crucial test for the authenticity of a God-revelation is to share it with one's discipler in order to hear what he/she thinks about it.

The researcher could find no references to support this specific test for revelation, but feels strongly about its necessity. This could well be an area to consider for future study.

4.2.3.3 What do those with the gift of discernment say?

Morneau rightly observes that "discernment is a gift given to those who are properly disposed to receive it because of obedience and surrender." (1994:44) Every believer must grow in the ability to discriminate between right and wrong, true and false, godly and demonic. And, as Morneau says, obedience to the will of God and surrender to the Spirit of God is certainly the path to such maturity. However, we see in Scripture that God gifted certain Christians with a particularly keen ability to discern between what is of God and what is not. (1 Cor 12:10) This gift is "a manifestation of the Holy

Spirit in some believers... enabling them to discriminate what is genuinely of God from what is of demonic spirits or merely the human spirit.” (Rosscup, Glo 2009)

“Though every believer is responsible for discerning the spirits,” Flynn clarifies, “some have a particular power to do so. This is the gift of discernment – a special ability to distinguish between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.” (1974:153) This special, keen discernment is a gift and not only the result of a mature walk with God, as Morneau insists. Nevertheless, it goes without saying that also this gift needs to be discovered and matured in order to benefit the gifted as well as the church.

Liefield (Glo 2009) points out how, from early on in the church and still today, “the outcome of predictions (Deut 18:22) or the evidence of fruit (Matt 7:15 f.) cannot always be waited for, and God’s true message must be quickly recognized and heeded (1 Thess 5:19-21).” At such times, when discernment needs to take place quickly, or when the outcome and fruit is not as clear as is needed to make a good judgment, those with the gift of discernment are a crucial asset to the church. Flynn points out the powerful tool that this gift provides:

“A person with this gift can read a religious book and almost immediately detect any subtle error. He can hear a sermon and put his finger on any deficiency of truth. He can listen to some new cultic teaching with its mixture of truth and error and not be taken in but soon sense the area of aberration. He can tell whether the atmosphere in a service is mere emotion, or emotion based on biblical truth.” (Flynn 1974:153)

Considering the brilliant clarity that comes with the gift of discernment, it would be wise to seek the counsel of those in one’s spiritual community who have this spiritual gift, when uncertain regarding the authenticity of a claim to revelation of God. If one is unsure who these people are in the church, one should ask the overseers of the

church, as they would have recognized this gifting operating in certain members of the church.

To summarise, the resonance tests asks that we test revelation with...

- The message as well as the character of Scripture,
- The testimony of the Holy Spirit within oneself,
- The spiritual community in which one worships God, and more specifically...
 - The overseers of that spiritual community,
 - The discipler with who one shares a close walk in relationship with God, and
 - Those in the spiritual community who demonstrate the spiritual gift of discernment.

Finally then, the checklist for discernment finishes with two last tests of confirmation.

4.3 Confirmation tests:

4.3.1 Does God confirm this revelation?

This test applies to a particular medium of God's self-revelation, being prophetic predictions (note: not prophecy in general). Because predictions are dealing with future events, testing its authenticity can be somewhat more difficult than testing other revelations. However, Scripture gives us a definite test for such prophecies, and nowhere more clearly than in the book of Deuteronomy...

"If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously.

Do not be afraid of him."

(Deut 18: 22)

Commenting on this passage, Pierson says: “Here it is taken for granted that any sensible and rational man, when he hears a prophet professing to speak in the name of God, will challenge him: ‘How am I to know that the word you speak is the word of God?’” (1970:30) Pierson points out the obvious answer given in the text: “If that which he prophesies comes to pass, we shall know that God has spoken; if not, we shall know that God has not spoken.” (1970:30) Buttrick et al believes that “these words summarize Israel’s answer to the perennial problem of how to distinguish between the true spokesman of God and the great number who speak falsehood in his name.” (1953:451) Otherwise said: it constitutes Israel’s “checklist” for discerning the true from the false prophet. “The only test of the true prophet,” Buttrick emphatically concludes, “is the verdict of history.” (1953:450)

In a dramatic confrontation between Jeremiah and Hananiah, the weeping prophet reverts back to that same clear-cut test mentioned in Deuteronomy: “The prophet who prophesies peace,” Jeremiah says, “will be recognised as one truly sent by the Lord only if his prediction comes true.” (Jer 28:9) Jeremiah, as with Moses, is pointing to the outcome of a prophetic prediction as the ultimate test for its Godly or non-godly source. In the words of Honeycutt: “The content of the prophetic word was the test of its authenticity... Did its content come to pass? Was content consistent with performance? These criteria are continuing tests for the validity of the prophetic word.” (Honeycutt 1979:140-141)

Looking at these texts from Buttrick’s perspective (above), testing prophecy, at least as far as predictions is concerned, would seem like child’s play. Von Rad would disagree with Buttrick here: Says Von Rad: “Deuteronomy believes it can provide its hearers with an infallible criterion for distinguishing between true and false prophecy: the word spoken merely presumptuously does not come true. However in setting up criteria the preacher is probably making things too easy for himself.” (1966:125) While Von Rad is certainly correct

in pointing out that the test for the fulfilment of predictions is an insufficient test in itself, Schultz would argue that it is not the Deuteronomist's intent to provide us with a complete test for the authenticity of prophecy. "The statement of the criteria for distinguishing true and false prophecy contained in these verses," Schultz remarks, "is manifestly incomplete." (cited in Driver 1914:230) Schultz continues by pointing out that the text does not address instances in which prophetic predictions might not occur, even though God truly predicted them. He raises two instances which may give occasion for such a non-fulfilment of a prediction by God: "[A] non-fulfilment of a prediction uttered truly in Jehovah's name [may occur] in consequence of a moral change in the character of those to whom it is addressed, or even as the result of an effectual intercession, addressed to Jehovah on their behalf." (cited in Driver 1914:230)

Schultz is quite right in both these instances. In Jeremiah 18 we see that God holds for Himself the right to leave predictions unfulfilled, should the moral character of those who are concerned with it change...

"If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned."
(Jer 18:7-8)

This non-fulfilment of God's prediction was demonstrated in the near destruction of Nineveh in Jonah's time. "When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened." (Jon 3:10) This indeed is why God send prophets to warn people of looming punishment for sin – that there might be repentance and forgiveness of sin, leading to blessing instead of the predicted curses. God's plea is always thus: "Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending

calamity. Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing...” (Joel 2:13-14a) Unfortunately, also the opposite is true. Where moral character and relationship with God changes for the worst, we see that predictions of blessing do not see fulfilment either. (Deut 28:1-2,15)

“If at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.”

(Jer 18:7-10)

Schultz’ second instance for non-fulfilment is also amply demonstrated in Scripture. God is often seen to relent from bringing the predicted disaster on sinful people at times when godly people intercede on their behalf. (E.g. Moses (Exod 32:14), Hezekiah (Jer 26:19) and Amos (Am 7:3))

So we find that, while the test of time is certainly a clear indication of the authenticity of a prophetic prediction, it is often an insufficient indicator by itself. The following reasons apply:

- As already discussed, there are circumstances in which God’s predictions will not be fulfilled.
- Moreover, there are times when Satan will attempt to misguide people by getting futuristic predictions right. Deuteronomy gives us a safeguard in such instances by pointing out that “the true prophet spoke in the name of Yahweh, [while] the false prophet spoke in the name of other gods, enticing people to idolatry (cf. 13:1-5).” (Thomson 1974:214) Should then a prediction be made in the name of anyone other than Yahweh, whether fulfilled or not, it is clearly not of God. Honeycutt insists that “there is an exclusivism about biblical faith which excludes pagan religious practices.” (1979:40) Referring us to the prophetic guidelines of Deuteronomy 18, he explains his conviction by saying: “The uniqueness of that revelation from the Lord led to the

condemnation of pagan religious practices. (Deut 18:9-14) As the faith community searches for the basis of ultimate authority, we may be sure that it does not rest in systems and practices which stand over against the Lord and covenant commitment.” (1979:140)

- Finally, prophetic predictions at times require a response in light of its forthcoming fulfilment. Joseph needed to build storehouses before the seven plentiful years arrived. (Gen 41) Joshua and the nation needed to march around Jericho in order to see the predicted destruction of the city fulfilled. (Josh 6) Paul needed to be obedient in going to Jerusalem so that he could be placed in chains for his journey to Rome. (Acts 20:22-24) In each of these events, the prophecy demanded an act of obedience as a demonstration of faith in God *before* the prediction was fulfilled. That is, some form of confirmation of authenticity came before the fulfilment of the prophecy. Von Rad believes that similar instances may still occur today, and so asks the valid question: “If a serious matter arose, could the question of the genuine authority of the prophet be left in suspense until it had at last appeared that his message had come true?” (1966:125) Von Rad’s answer is “no” and he therefore argues that another form of authenticity needs to be in place in order to discern whether a prophetic prediction (and any other revelation) is of God or not.

In conclusion: Scripture upholds the fulfilment of predictions as a confirmation of an authentic God-revelation, and not as a self-sufficient test. While then the fulfilment of prophetic predictions serves as a confirmation that such a revelation was indeed of God, like all other revelations of God, it must be counter-tested with the other Scriptural tests, as indicated in this checklist.

4.3.2 Does the fruit confirm this revelation?

“It is an invariable rule that apples grow on apple trees while figs grow on fig trees. Nature knows no exception to this principle.” (Barclay 1975:7)

The New Testament very often makes use of the image of “fruit” as an evidence or outcome of some spiritual presence or encounter...

- A repentant heart must be accompanied by some evidence as to its sincerity: “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance... The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Mat 3:8,10)
- Anyone claiming to be a prophet of God must bare evidence of godliness in his/her life as proof of authenticity: “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognise them.” (Mat 7:15-16a)
- The indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the believer is seen by the moral excellence which He brings forth: “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” (Gal 5:22-23a)
- A conversion from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light must be accompanied by moral excellence: “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.” (Eph 5:8-11)
- Faith and conversion through Jesus Christ must bring about righteous living. Paul's prayer is that the Philippians would be “filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ - to the glory and praise of God.” (Phil 1:11)
- The outcome of believing and receiving the good news of Jesus Christ must produce some sort of fruit as evidence to its life-changing power. “All over the world this gospel is

bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth.” (Col 1:6)

- A personal relationship with God must be evident in the fruit of good works: “And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God.” (Col 1:10)

Scripture is clearly adamant that every spiritual conviction, activity or encounter must bring forth some sort of measurable evidence in the physical realm which will either confirm or contradict God's hand in it. It therefore insists that a revelation is never an inconsequential event. It always has repercussions. It always bears fruit. Commenting on John the Baptist's insistence for fruit as an evidence for repentance (Matthew 3:8 and Luke 3:8), Calvin says: “Penitence expressed in words counts for nothing, unless it is proven in real action... for repentance is an inward thing that has its seat in the heart and soul, but results in the production of fruit by a change of life.” (Calvin 1972:122) Every spiritual thing – and so also God's self-revelation – must be scrutinized by the fruit it produces.

Calvin does well to point out God's reason for requiring physical evidence for spiritual things. In looking at Luke 3:10 he notes that “the duties of charity are named not because they are superior to the worship of God, but because they testify to men's devotion, so that pretence is revealed if any boast with their mouth what is far from their heart.” (1972:124) God is not elevating the physical by making it a test for the authenticity of the spiritual. On the contrary, He is showing that the spiritual is so influential that it will always manifest itself in the physical. There will always be fruit by which to identify a true revelation of God.

The test for fruit will be discussed in two parts. The reason for this is that Scripture demands the evidence by fruit in all aspects of a claim for revelation. On the one hand, it demands

that the channel by which a revelation comes (e.g. a prophet, teacher or visionary) should produce fruit in their lives which testifies of Christ-like character. On the other hand, it demands that a revelation itself should be tested by looking at the fruit which it produces in the person who receives the revelation. Both tests are crucial.

4.3.2.1 Test the fruit of the revelation barer (e.g. the prophet)

“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognise them.”

(Mat 7:15-16a)

Under Old Testament law, the penalty for a false prophet was death. Saying that God said something that He in fact did not, is certainly a matter of life and death – hence the harsh punishment. For this reason, as Wylie et al points out, “prophecy was ‘evaluated’ not by saying ‘Which part of the word is good and which is bad?’ but by saying, ‘Is this a true prophet of God speaking the word of God?’ The evaluation was centred primarily upon the person, not necessarily upon specific parts of the prophecy.” (Wylie & Humphreys 2010:6) Wylie et al does well to point out the crucial task of testing the fruit of the prophet. Yet, as we have already seen, several Scriptures clearly instructs us to test the message of the prophecy (or any other revelation).

Jacobs agrees: should revelation come by means of a prophet, she insists that we look not just at the fruit of the revelation, but also at the fruit of the prophet. “What is the fruit in the life of the person giving the prophecy?” (Jacobs 1995:75) Jacobs asks in light of Luke 6:43-45. She is quite right in demanding this test, as clearly Jesus warns that we are to test the fruit of any person who intends to offer us a revelation from God. In heeding this instruction, we are faced with two questions though:

- First, we should ask ourselves the question: Where does this fruit manifest itself? If “by their fruit [we] will know them”, then where do we see the fruit in their lives?
- Secondly, we should ask ourselves: What is the fruit to look for?

Winward (1981:16) believes that the symbolic use of the word “fruit” refers to three main kinds of products or outcomes in the lives of people. Says Winward:

- “Jesus says that the *words* of a man are the fruit... of what that person is... ‘For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth evil’ (Matt 12:33-35).
- “Jesus also taught that *deeds* are fruit. ‘You will know them by their fruits’ was spoken of false prophets who did ‘many mighty works’ (Matt 7:15-23). What they didn’t do was God’s will.
- “When John the Baptist said to the people, ‘If you are repentant, produce the appropriate fruits’, he went on to tell them of six good things they should do (Luke 3:8-14 JB). Fruit is more than words or deeds; it includes the *qualities of character* from which those words and deeds issue, ‘for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true’ (Eph 5:9). Outstanding among the ‘truly good qualities’ of Christian character are the nine aspects of the fruit of the Spirit. They include all three: words, deeds and virtues. For love, joy, peace and all the fruits of the Spirit are revealed in what we say, in what we do and in what we are.” (Winward 1981:16)

In looking at Matthew 7:15-23, Emerton (1988:702-719) disagrees with Winward. He interprets the word “fruit” to refer to a person’s deeds, as, in his view, verses 21-23

deals specifically with the presumptuous words of false prophets. Calvin (1972:239) argues on the side of Emerton by pointing out that false prophets are indeed cunning enough to (at least for a time) evade Jesus' general rule which says: "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." (Matt 12:35) Says Calvin: "The hypocrites often present something in their words quite different from what is in the depths of their hearts..." (1972:239) Furthermore, both Calvin and Emerton point out that John the Baptist's use of the word "fruit" in Matthew 3:10 refers to "good works". (Calvin 1972:122; Emerton 1988:706)

The researcher agrees with Calvin and Emerton and would affirm that "fruit" in fact refers to deeds. The words of false prophets would generally seem good and right, as it is more often than not their words which are in fact deceptive. Yet, their deeds will expose their deception – the fruit which their lives produce. "In the long run," Calvin insists, "their hypocrisy is exposed, for there is nothing more difficult than the pretence of virtue." (1972:238)

Yet, what fruit should be seen in the deeds of true prophets? How do we identify the true from the false? Calvin addresses this question in his commentary on Matthew 3:8-10...

"So what fruits does the Baptist [i.e. John] commend at this instance? The duties of charity, and of the second table of the Law, not that God overlooks outward profession of worship and his service, but because this is a more certain criterion, and less often deceptive. Hypocrites make weary efforts to show themselves as God's worshippers in ceremonial, all the while leaving a concern for true righteousness unheeded; they are now cruel to their neighbours, now set on fraud and robbery. So they must be called back to a closer examination – do they foster fair dealing among men, or help the poor, or spare the wretched, or share with generosity, all that God has conferred upon them (Matt 23:23)?"

(Calvin 1972:124)

Calvin's insights here are very helpful. It is certainly consistent with other passages of confirmation by fruit. Paul told the Colossians to bear fruit "in every good work." (Col 1:10) The Philippians were encouraged to be "filled with the fruit of righteousness," (Phil 1:11) and the Ephesians were told that "the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth." (Eph 5:9) Smalley points out two moral tests raised by John: "John has mentioned righteousness (1 John 2:29; 3:10) and love (1 John 3:14; cf. 4:8) as moral tests for recognizing the genuine believer." (Smalley 1984:216) All of these points to fruit as being moral excellence: good works, righteousness and truth. To these we must add the fruit of the Spirit, which is "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." (Gal 5:22-23a)

In commenting on Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit, Longenecker raises a fundamental truth which must direct our understanding of the application of this test. Says Longenecker: "The phrase 'the fruit of the Spirit' may be used here in conscious opposition to 'the works of the flesh' that heads the catalogue of vices earlier, and so was meant to suggest (1) the spontaneous quality of a life directed by the Spirit as opposed to human efforts to live according to the directives of the law of the flesh... (3) that these virtues are given as a gift by God through his Spirit as opposed to being effected through human activity." (1990:259) These insights are crucial, as it undergirds the guaranteed success of testing for the fruit of the bearer of a revelation. Because of our fallen nature, no human being can consistently bring forth such fruit in our deeds. Where it is present it is a testimony of the Holy Spirit dwelling within the person. "The fruit of the Spirit are not human products but the result of God's Spirit dwelling within men," says Longenecker (1990:259)

We conclude then that anyone claiming to bring a revelation of God must be seen to manifest the fruit of the Spirit in their deeds. Considering Calvin's insights, we might add to them fair dealing, helping the poor, sparing the wretched and sharing with generosity. (Calvin 1972:124) In short, a true prophet must display Christ-likeness.

The researcher feels the burden to add one caution here, for we see in Scripture how, on rare occasions, ungodly people bring true prophecy. When the Holy Spirit came upon him, the cowardly Saul prophesied, seemingly without choice. (Sam 10:9-11) We see Balaam, a man who practiced sorcery and divination, clearly speaking the truth of God. (Num 23-24; Josh 13:22) The high priest, Caiaphas, who led the Sanhedrin in their plot to kill Jesus, prophesied concerning Jesus' atoning death. (John 11:49-52) God's use of ungodly people to proclaim His will corresponds with God's use of ungodly people to perform His will. God hardened Pharaoh's heart that He might create an opportunity to execute judgment on all the gods of Egypt (Exod 10:27; 12:12). God used "his servant" Nebuchadnezzar to punish Israel for their sin. (Jer 25:8-11) God used the decree of "his servant" Cyrus' to bring the Jews back into Israel and to start restoration of the land. (Isa 44:28; 1 Chron 36:22-23).

For this reason, it is crucial that we balance our test for the fruit of the revelation bearer with a test for the fruit of the revelation itself.

4.3.2.2 Test the fruit of the revelation

While a revelation might seem too mundane or even too strange to be of God, what it brings about in the life of the one who experiences it might well prove it to be of God, and vice versa. As introduction to his book *Protection from Deception*, Derek Prince tells in what manner he came to be a born-again Christian. At one point in his

experience he “laughed in the Holy Spirit”, an experience which at the time seemed too unusual for Prince to except it as of God. The fruit of Prince’s spiritual experience, however, was the following: “A life converted from sin to righteousness, from agnostic babbling in the occult to an unshakable faith in Jesus Christ as revealed in Scripture; a life that has brought forth fruit in God’s kingdom.” (Prince 2008:15)

Prince cautions us not to reject a revelation simply because it seems strange or unconventional, but to test it by looking what kind of fruit it produces in people. “The simple fact that something is unconventional or unusual,” says Prince, “should not provoke automatic wariness, for it may indeed be from God.” (2008:16) Prince does well to remind us that “in the Old Testament, God’s prophets did some unusual things... in the gospels, Jesus Himself healed people in unconventional ways... in the book of Acts, many features and events of the early church are unconventional compared to the church today.” (2008:16-17) Therefore, when considering the authenticity and truth of a revelation, we should be careful not to reject it merely on the grounds of its appearance, but rather on the grounds of its fruit – that is, its long-term transforming effect in people’s lives.

The question is then, what should be the fruit – the outcome – of a revelation of God? What kind of long-term transformation should it bring about in the person receiving the revelation? Prince gives us a list of fruit which he believes to be the outcome of a true revelation of God. Says Prince: “Movements from God bear fruit that identifies them as such. The following are five primary fruits by which we can authenticate [them]...” (2008:21)

- i. “The fruit of repentance: In the New Testament, God demands repentance more than He demands faith.... When Jesus came, the first recorded word He

preached was *'Repent'*. (See, for example, Mark 1:15.) He instructed the multitudes, *'Unless you repent you will all likewise perish'* (Luke 13:3)... It is not an emotion but a decision of the will – a decision to turn away from sin and unrighteousness to the lordship of Jesus Christ.” (Prince 2008:22)

- ii. “The fruit of respect for Scripture: In Isaiah 66:2, the Lord says, ‘This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.’ Here God combines repentance – a humble and contrite spirit – with a fearful respect for His Word... We will ultimately be judged by God’s Word (John 12:48).” (Prince 2008:24)
- iii. “The fruit of exalting Jesus: In John 16:13-14, Jesus promised His disciples, ‘When He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth... he will glorify Me’... [The Holy Spirit’s] supreme function is to glorify Jesus. Any authentic spiritual manifestation also glorifies Jesus, focusing our attention on Him alone.” (Prince 2008:25)
- iv. “The fruit of love for fellow Christians: In John 13:35, Jesus told His followers, ‘By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.’... When a move of the Holy Spirit occurs, we must ask: Does it produce Christians who sincerely love one another, regardless of denominational labels?” (Prince 2008:26-27)
- v. “The fruit of loving concern for the unreached: ... A genuine move of the Holy Spirit must release a multitude of new labourers into the harvest fields.” (Prince 2008:27)

The Holy Spirit, says McDermott, brings a change from within the believer. “The Spirit imparts his holiness and a new spiritual sense... produces a new principle of life, or a new nature, in the saint.” (McDermott 1995:88-89) Edwards calls this a new knowing:

“The mind is enlightened with new thoughts, or new light is shed on old thoughts.” (McDermott 1995:121) The revelation that the Holy Spirit brings, says McDermott, causes us to see God, the world and ourselves in a new light.

“True spiritual experience,” McDermott asserts, “is transforming.” (1995:159) Not merely is it transforming, McDermott goes on to explain, but it brings about a specific change – a greater Christ-likeness – for the intention of the Holy Spirit is always to transform the true believer into an increasing Christ-likeness. In this regard, Johnson sees a correlation between revelation and spiritual transformation. “The degree to which we perceive the face of God,” he observes, “corresponds directly to the degree of our yieldedness to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit into the image of Christ.” (Johnson 2007:3-4) The more we discern God’s self-revelation, the more freely we will yield to the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. In sharing his personal testimony of receiving increasing revelations of God, Fife agrees with Johnson and McDermott: “Through intimate communion,” he tells, “God was moving me toward total commitment and singleness of heart... If I was going to walk with Him, I must turn away from the world’s allure and distractions.” (Fife 2001:73)

McDermott, expounding on Edwards’ insights, gives us the following signs of what such transformation will bring about as fruit in the Christian:

- i. *A divine and supernatural source*, which is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in every true believer. The Holy Spirit, says McDermott, brings a change from within the believer. “The Spirit imparts his holiness and a new spiritual sense... produces a new principle of life, or a new nature, in the saint.” (McDermott 1995:88-89) Through the power of the Holy Spirit, a believer will be able to overcome sin in his/her life, which otherwise will be impossible. While many

people might be touched and influenced by the Holy Spirit, McDermott holds that only true believers (the authentically spiritual) have the Holy Spirit living within them permanently.

- ii. *Attraction to God and His ways for their own sake*: “Nature does everything for its own gain and interest,” wrote Thomas a Kempis (cited in Creasy 2007:118), “... [but grace] asks for no reward other than God alone.” The sinful nature thinks only of itself. It is self-absorbed. In contrast to this, “true spirituality is not rooted in self-interest,” McDermott 1995:99) but seeks God because it comprehends His supremacy to every other pursuit.
- iii. *Seeing the beauty of holiness*: McDermott, with Edwards, believes that the truly spiritual person desires holiness in the likeness of God. He points to various seemingly powerful leaders who might have a notion of God, but who did not make holiness a priority, and therefore did not resemble Christ.
- iv. *A new knowing*: “The mind is enlightened with new thoughts, or new light is shed on old thoughts.” (McDermott 1995:121) The revelation that the Holy Spirit brings, says McDermott, causes us to see God, the world and ourselves in a new light.
- v. *Deep-seated conviction*: The truly spiritual have a solid faith in the truth of the Christian message. McDermott grants that periodic drought of the soul and difficult circumstances may cause people to relook at their faith, but they will come out on the other side as stronger than before.
- vi. *Humility*: Christian humility, McDermott explains, is to know ourselves for who we truly are in relation to the almighty Creator God. Where such humility is, there is true spirituality.

- vii. *A change of nature*: “True spiritual experience,” McDermott asserts, “is transforming.” (1995:159) This serves as another certain sign of true spirituality, because only God can change ones inner nature.
- viii. *A Christ-like spirit*: This sign flows from the previous, as the intention of the Holy Spirit is to transform the true believer into an increasing Christ-likeness.
- ix. *Fear of God*: Christianity without the fear of God, says McDermott, leads people to believe that “Christ is the saviour of their sins, but not the One who saved them from their sins.” (1995:177) The truly spiritual will know the fear of God which leads them to repent from sin, knowing that God hates it and graciously saved them from it.
- x. *Balance*: By this balance, McDermott means a faith that continues in both bad and good times, that is shown in love for both God and neighbours, and which shows both a steadfast assurance of salvation and the eagerness to “work out” that salvation “with trembling and fear”, as the apostle Paul said in Philippians 2:12
- xi. *Hunger for God*: “False spirituality... is content with what it has,” says McDermott, while “true spirituality hungers for more and more of God.” (1995:196) This point he illustrates poignantly with several examples of life-long zealous Christians who continued to hunger for more of God even in old age.
- xii. *Christian practice*: The truly spiritual, McDermott argues, “will be committed to the Lordship of Jesus Christ over every part of their lives.” (1995:203) They will live as Christ instructs in order to be found in His likeness.

In conclusion to this final test, we should remind ourselves of the reason why God reveals Himself. As discussed earlier in this thesis, God desires a personal

relationship with us (see “God’s desire for revealing Himself” - page 3). Any revelation of God should bring about some fruit in us which enables that personal relationship with God to mature. Edwards’ tests above all point to that truth.

CONCLUSION:

Thomas Torrance, as quoted in Thiemann, captures the essence of the researcher’s pursuit in this thesis: “In divine revelation,” Torrance says, “we have to do with a Word of God which is what it is as Word of God in its own reality independent of our recognition of it, and we have to do with a Truth of God which is what it is as Truth of God before we come to know it to be true. That means that in all our response to God’s self-revelation... we must seek to understand and interpret it in accordance with its intrinsic requirements and under the constraint of the truth which bears upon our minds in and through it.” (Thiemann 1985:33)

God is busy revealing Himself to us through multiple mediums, for the purpose of developing and maturing a personal love relationship with every human being. We are meant to be receptors of that revelation and are therefore responsible for correctly discerning it. Scripture gives us these clear discernment guidelines for this all-important task:

- A true self-revelation of God will glorify Jesus Christ by acknowledging the dual nature of His being as well as His supremacy in every respect. Such a revelation will evoke love for God – a love which drives out fear, stirs faith and produces brotherly love.
- A true self-revelation of God will resonate with Scripture and with the believer’s spirit. It will also resonate with the believer’s spiritual community, and in particular the

overseers of that community, the believer's disciplers and with those with the gift of discernment.

- Should a revelation of God be a foretelling (concerning future events), such a revelation will be confirmed when God himself brings it to fulfilment. It must also be confirmed by the evidence of Christ-like fruit in both the revelation bearer (e.g. the prophet) and the outcome of the message.

The ultimate purpose of this checklist is for the believer to grow in discerning the voice of the indwelling Holy Spirit. After some time of using this checklist for discernment, the believer should recognize a shift of dependence, moving away from the checklist, increasingly towards the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This is a process of maturing in relationship with God, which, as we saw, is the ultimate purpose of God's self-revelation.

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