

RETHINKING ACCOMMODATION IN REVELATION

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The doctrine of accommodation in God's revelation to man has had a long and venerable history, from the ancient church to the present.¹ On one level, it is a simple idea. But a closer inspection reveals mysteries and intractable depths.

I. *The Definition of Accommodation*

Let us begin with the simple level. A. N. S. Lane summarizes the idea of accommodation by saying, "God speaks to us in a form that is suited to the capacity of the hearer."² God speaks to human beings in human languages, and in a manner that is intelligible to them. This suitability has been called *condescension* or *accommodation*.³ It is a simple and obvious idea, in the sense that it is an obvious feature of Scripture and of the earlier oral communications from God to man that are recorded in Scripture (Gen 3:9-13; 12:1-3; 15:1; etc.).

This kind of accommodation can be defined in at least two ways. In the narrower sense, it denotes the ways that God reveals *himself*.⁴ That is, we focus not on all instances of revelation, but those in which God himself is the subject-matter being communicated. God is infinite and incomprehensible, but he makes himself known to human beings. As a result, they truly know him, but in accord with the limitations of their finiteness. Thus we may say that his revelation of himself and his character is "accommodated" to the noetic abilities of

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¹ John Henry Blunt, ed., "Accommodation," *Dictionary of Doctrinal and Historical Theology* (London: Rivingtons, 1871), 4; A. N. S. Lane, "Accommodation," *New Dictionary of Theology* (ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J. I. Packer; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988), 3; John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982); Hoon Lee, "Accommodation: Orthodox, Socinian, and Contemporary," *WTJ* 75 (2013): 335-48.

² Lane, "Accommodation." The word *accommodation* is also sometimes used to describe progressive revelation: God's communication to his people at any one time in history suits the historical circumstances and the redemptive epoch in which the communication occurs. Earlier communication may lack the detail and specificity that God intends to provide later. The progress is from truth to deeper truth, not from error to truth. See Blunt, "Accommodation," 4-5.

³ Lane, "Accommodation."

⁴ According to L. M. Sweet and G. W. Bromiley, accommodation is "the principle that God adapts His *self-revelation* to man" (Sweet and Bromiley, "Accommodation," in *ISBE* 1:24, italics mine).

human beings. For example, when Scripture says that God is king, the word king is intelligible partly because we know about human kings. God is not a king on the same level, but by analogy to human kings. The use of analogy functions in making scriptural teaching accessible to its readers, who know about human kings.

In a broader sense, “accommodation” denotes all the ways in which God produces revelation or communication to human beings in ways that suit their capacity.⁵ In this sense, not only what God says directly about *himself* but what he says about anything at all is “accommodated” to the capacity of his hearers.

This kind of suitability or “accommodation” surely makes sense. Theological discussions of accommodation may use the analogy of “a father addressing a small child or a teacher with a young pupil.”⁶ In an ordinary human situation, a wise human being adjusts his speech to fit his hearers. Likewise God, who is all wise, beyond any human wisdom, suits his speech to his hearers. In addition, subsequent to the fall of mankind into sin, God’s communication takes into account the sinful condition of mankind, and comes in a manner suited to their condition.⁷

II. *Anthropomorphism*

Biblical interpreters have appealed to the narrow sense of accommodation to explain features about biblical descriptions of God. For example, they may say that God describes himself according to human capacity when the Bible speaks of God’s arm or his eyes or his being angry or grieved. These descriptions are “anthropomorphisms.” Modern discussions of accommodation sometimes quote Calvin:

The Anthropomorphites also, who dreamed of a corporeal God, because mouth, ears, eyes, hands, and feet are often ascribed to him in Scripture, are easily refuted. For who is so devoid of intellect as not to understand that God, in so speaking, *lisps with us as nurses are wont to do with little children?* Such modes of expression, therefore, do not so much express what kind of a being God is, as *accommodate* the knowledge of him to our feebleness. In doing so, he must of course *stoop* far below his proper height.⁸

⁵ Lane, “Accommodation”; likewise Wick Broomall says, “[it] allows a writer, for purposes of simplification, to adjust his language to the limitations of his readers without compromising the truth in the process” (Broomall, “Accommodation,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* [ed. Walter A. Elwell; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984], 9).

⁶ Lane, “Accommodation.” Also Rudolf Hofmann, “Accommodation,” *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 1:22-23.

⁷ On the additional complications due to sin, see Sweet and Bromiley, “Accommodation,” 26-27.

⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (trans. Henry Beveridge; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 1.13.1, italics mine.

III. *A Variant View*

Is there more than one concept of accommodation? Up until the Enlightenment, the classical idea of accommodation took care not to deny the full truthfulness of Scripture.⁹ “Accommodation” did *not* mean that God tolerated a process in which human writers of Scripture would include in their writings erroneous conceptions of their time, in order to serve a higher theological purpose. Richard Muller summarizes:

The Reformers and their scholastic followers all recognized that God must in some way condescend or accommodate himself to human ways of knowing in order to reveal himself. This *accommodatio* occurs specifically in the use of human words and concepts for the communication of the law and the gospel, but it in no way implies the loss of truth or the lessening of scriptural authority. The *accommodatio* or *condescensio* refers to the manner or mode of revelation, the gift of the wisdom of infinite God in finite form, not to the quality of the revelation or to the matter revealed.¹⁰

Muller goes on to note that a counter-proposal involving accommodation that included error rose later in historical criticism.¹¹ It is with us to this day, and has penetrated ostensibly evangelical circles.¹² For our purposes, I want to concentrate on the classical doctrine. We cannot include a full treatment of the heterodox idea of accommodation to error.

IV. *Doctrinal Basis*

At its core, the doctrine of accommodation seems to be little more than an expression of the implications of the Creator-creature distinction for the nature of revelation. God is the infinite Creator, and we are not. On the basis of biblical teaching, we make a distinction between what he knows and what we know. And we infer that his communication to us will take into account who we are as creatures. The doctrine guards against overestimating our knowledge and trying to treat our knowledge as if it were the ultimate standard into which God is required to fit.

In addition to the Creator-creature distinction, the Bible teaches that man is made in the image of God, and that even human beings in rebellion continue to know him (Rom 1:19-21). These affirmations guard against an opposite

⁹ However, gnostics and Socinians put forward an idea of accommodation that included error (John M’Clintock and James Strong, *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* [10 vols.; New York: Harper, 1874], 1:46-47).

¹⁰ Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 19.

¹¹ Ibid. Also Hofmann, “Accommodation,” 1:23-24.

¹² E.g., Kenton L. Sparks, *God’s Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008); Kenton L. Sparks, *Sacred Word, Broken Word: Biblical Authority and the Dark Side of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

danger, namely, that we would *underestimate* the instruction given by Scripture and general revelation, and move in the antibiblical direction of saying that God is unknown or unknowable.¹³

So we might choose to leave it at that, and to say that the doctrine of accommodation is pretty straightforward and obvious. It is, if we confine ourselves to an introductory discussion. But if we look at the details, we find mysteries. And we find potential perils, because as sinners we may be tempted to rush in too quickly on the basis of the assumption that we have understood all that there is to understand.

V. *Potential Perils in Assuming an Understanding of Accommodation*

1. *A First Peril: False Transcendence*

One peril arises from the temptation to practice a false transcendence. Such temptation can enter even after someone has affirmed the transcendence of God using the Creator-creature distinction. The peril can be illustrated by starting from common human illustrations of accommodation, such as a father with a young child, or a teacher with a young pupil. We as observers can watch the father or the teacher, and we understand what is going on. We appreciate the ways in which the father or the teacher knows more, and knows more deeply. We observe with appreciation all that he is holding back in order to communicate in a simple fashion to the youngster.

So someone—let us call her Donna—imagines God doing the same thing. And indeed, there is an analogy. But the analogy is only partial. Donna cannot actually become an observer of God, on his own level, in the same way that she can become an observer of a human father. But she can try to imagine it, and then fall into the temptation of trying to figure out just what God is leaving out, compressing, and simplifying in the process of speaking to “child-like” human beings. Donna’s speculation about what God is really doing may then function as a more ultimate authority than Scripture. Scripture only has the qualified authority of being for the child-like. And Donna?—Donna has become godlike.

Something similar to Donna’s approach actually arose historically in the case of gnosticism. The gnostics claimed that they had secret teachings for those who were “spiritual.” By contrast, the overt teachings in the writings of the NT were at a lower level, suited to the capacity of ordinary Christians. The gnostics were saying in effect that the biblical writings were “accommodated” in a way that contrasted with the gnostics’ allegedly “deeper” knowledge.

This route taken by Donna and by the gnostics illustrates the peril of false transcendence. Donna tries to transcend our human limitations in order to watch God over his shoulder, so to speak, and thereby to know the ways in which

¹³ John M. Frame warns against both dangers in *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1987), 13-40.

she can and cannot receive Scripture at full value. This move of Donna's can well result in a transition from "accommodation" in the classical sense to the modern historical-critical sense of "accommodation" of errors within Scripture. Even if it does not, at least not immediately, there has been a fateful transition to a new seat of authority. The new authority is Donna's personal vision of how God practices father-like condescension. That vision trumps the authority of Scripture itself. And so, by means of her personal vision, Donna has become her own ultimate master. She may still verbally confess that Scripture is inerrant, but internally the ultimate authority has shifted. In like manner, the gnostics shifted authority toward their secret knowledge and secret writings.

2. *The Peril of False Immanence*

We have described Donna's approach as an instance of false transcendence. But simultaneously it involves a false understanding of God's immanence.¹⁴ According to the biblical teaching about God, God's immanence implies in the sphere of epistemology that he makes himself known to us, both in general revelation and in Scripture. As a substitute for this doctrine of immanence, Donna and the gnostics have their own claims to special knowledge. Donna's personal vision of the nature of God and the gnostics' claims to secret knowledge function as immanent authorities. Human ideas here function as a false source of insight. These key ideas claim to function as immanent and accessible knowledge concerning what God is "really" like or is "really" doing behind the veil offered by Scripture.

We can also fall into another form of false immanence. Let us say that a particular person—Joe—acknowledges in a basic way that Scripture is ultimate for all human understanding of God. He knows that he cannot "get behind" Scripture in the way that Donna imagines. Joe can still distort the idea of immanence by interpreting the accommodated character of Scripture as if it implied that he can *master* scriptural revelation. In taking this route, he is still admitting, on the basis of the Creator-creature distinction, that he cannot master God. But he thinks that (in principle) he can master Scripture, precisely because it is accommodated to us and therefore falls within the sphere of human control. He reasons that, unlike God himself, Scripture as accommodated language must be completely subject to human ideas of rationality. This move still maintains that God is unmasterable and infinite. But Joe may infer that his idea of God, given through Scripture, is masterable, since it belongs to him and to humanity. Then the "god" about which Joe is talking is finite, and he is worshiping an idol of his own conception.

¹⁴ John Frame's square on transcendence and immanence is valuable here in distinguishing between Christian and non-Christian views of transcendence and immanence (see the figure in *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 14). Even those of us who have become Christians through the work of the Holy Spirit are tempted by remaining sinfulness to fall back into various compromises with non-Christian views.

Thus we must hold together two sides: God in communicating to us suits his speech to our capacity (immanence); but simultaneously it is God who speaks, with divine authority and power (transcendence). We do not master his communication to us—or any part of it, since he is present in everything he says.

3. *Perils in Underestimating Divine Power*

The language describing accommodation is not perfectly precise. So the door remains open for misusing it in still other directions. One such direction involves underestimating divine capabilities.

Consider again the analogies involving a human father with his child or a teacher with his young pupil. These situations involve adjustments on the part of the father or the teacher, depending on the particular case.

In the case of a father with his child, the child is who he is, whether the father likes it or not. The father cannot sovereignly control who the child is, nor what his capacities are. The father may feel frustrated by the child's limited capacity. He may feel frustrated by not being able to say more. He may be frustrated because, even after effort, he fails to communicate some idea that is important to him. He does the best he can, but he is limited by circumstances outside his control.

If we put too much stock in this illustration, the temptation arises to drag the same connotations into our picture of God. We infer that God is like a human father, and so he is hemmed in, against his will, by the circumstances and the limits of human capacities. But that is not correct. God is not limited like a human father, because he creates all the "circumstances," according to the doctrine of creation. Sin violates God's order, to be sure, but it is an intruder.¹⁵ In the original situation of creation, man as a creature cannot "frustrate" God's desire to communicate, because God created man and is completely in charge.

God did not create man in isolation from a later purpose to communicate. It is not as if he created man first, and then, as an afterthought, asked himself whether it might not be good to establish communication, and on what terms communication might be possible. Rather, God created man already having in mind the purposes of communication. Consequently, there can be no "frustration" on God's part due to what human beings are. By contrast, a human being might make a bicycle, and then be frustrated that it is not stronger or faster than it is. God is not frustrated, because he is God. He does not have to "adjust" to a situation outside his control, or to human capacities that he did not specify. Precisely because God is the absolute Creator, human finiteness offers no resistance, no "problem" for communication. Contrary to the thinking into which we are prone to fall, the distinction between infinite and finite minds and cognitive capacities is not a "problem" for God. It is not something that

¹⁵ On "accommodation" in a situation of sin, see Sweet and Bromiley, "Accommodation," 1:26-27.

he must puzzle over in order to “adapt” his communication to unfortunate, uncontrollable limitations.

Thus, the words *accommodation* and *adaptation* are not altogether happy. Both can suggest that God is accommodating or adapting to a situation that he cannot control, more or less the way we as human beings adapt to our circumstances or accommodate ourselves to a situation beyond our control. So how else could we describe what God does? More guardedly, we might describe God as communicating in a way *sui*ted to or *fit*ting for his hearers. But even with these new expressions, it is possible to import the idea that God must mold himself or his word into shape, so to speak, in order to “fit in” to circumstances outside his control. This kind of concession undermines the authority of God’s word, because it implies that God is only partly responsible for what he says, and that part of the responsibility goes to allegedly autonomous circumstances that constrain the limits of what he is able to say.

4. *Peril Concerning Improper Inference of Defects*

In addition, the analogy with a human father suggests a certain kind of defect in the communication. The child is meant to grow into an adult, and communication between two adults is richer. In comparison with adult communication, communication between father and child is limited. Is it “defective”? Some people might say so. But there is a time and place for everything. It is not defective if we have a robust view of family life, and of the positive role of child rearing and those early opportunities for communication. Communication early in the life of a child may still be completely true and robustly edifying. Communicative adequacy and success are not to be judged by some artificial standards of perfection, but ultimately by divine design and conformity to divine standards. Divine standards positively approve the kind of communication where a father takes into account his child’s present capacity.

But now suppose that the child is in an accident that causes permanent brain damage. The child never reaches mental adulthood during this life. Might we say that the communication between father and child is now impaired? It is in a sense “defective” in a way that the father is powerless to remedy.

How might these situations relate to the situation with God? Over time human beings are meant to grow, both as individuals and as a race. But they never outgrow humanity in order to become God. We can appreciate a growth through progressive revelation, and an individual’s growth in spiritual knowledge as he continues to study Scripture over a period of time. But we continue to be human, not God. According to the analogy, we never outgrow “childhood.” Is this a defect? Only if measured against the human sinful desire to be God. Our knowledge at the consummation will still be fully human. And that is OK.

5. *Perils Concerning Quick Dismissal or Underestimate of Meaning That Looks Accommodated*

Another kind of peril involves an underestimate of the mystery of Scripture in its details. Consider the concept of accommodation in the narrow sense, where it deals with how God reveals himself, that is, his own character. This kind of accommodation, it is said, explains anthropomorphic language about God. But does it? A closer look shows that there are continuing mysteries.

Consider an example. Exodus 15:6 says, "Your right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy." The stock explanation using accommodation would say that this description of God is an accommodation to human capacity, through anthropomorphism. Yes, it is an anthropomorphism. But does this verse really have much to do with the concept of accommodation? If instead we were to reckon with the immediate context, we could observe that Exod 15:6 is part of a poetic song. The song is full of metaphors and figures of speech. The Lord does not have a physical body, with a physical right hand. Consequently, it is clear that the expression is a metaphor, in keeping with the context. It means that the Lord acts to shatter the enemy as a human being might shatter a thing with his right hand.

Similar truths *could* have been expressed in other ways, without the use of vivid metaphors. For example, as an alternative we could say, "The Lord exercises his power to defeat the enemy utterly." That way of saying it is not colorful, not poetic, not rhetorically engaging. But it says some of the same things that the poetic expression does. Thus, the Lord could have spoken in an alternative way without using vivid anthropomorphisms. But he did not. Why not? The doctrine of accommodation, by itself, says only that God addresses human beings according to their capacity. Both metaphorical and nonmetaphorical forms of expression meet this criterion. Indeed, anything that is intelligible human language meets the criterion! Accommodation says only that Scripture is intelligible. It does not explain why the Lord in one text chooses one particular kind of intelligible speech in contrast to many other alternatives. Thus, accommodation does not really explain anthropomorphism or any of the particulars. If we use it as an explanation where it is not appropriate, we run the danger of overlooking the particulars. Our appeal to accommodation may become a recipe for glossing over the particulars and implying that they are not significant.

One peril arising in this connection is the temptation unconsciously to "discount" and devalue figurative language. We start thinking that figurative language is not "the real thing," but only an ornament, due to accommodation. So the "unaccommodated" truth will be a truth stripped of ornamentation. If we take this route in our minds, we label metaphor and figurative language as non-serious. We substitute our own ideas of what should have been said for what God actually said, perhaps because we are embarrassed by what he said, or because we think it is just for theological children and not for us. Simultaneously, we fall victim to false transcendence, by imagining that we know the unaccommodated

truth. The remedy, as usual, is to submit to what God said, rather than be embarrassed by it. He knows what he is saying. He is utterly comfortable with metaphors, even though human sin tempts us to misunderstand them.

6. *Perils of Overestimating Our Control Over Language and Thought*

Another peril concerns the temptation to overestimate the depth of what we know, or underestimate remaining mysteries. We say to ourselves, “I know what a right hand is. It is a physical hand, on the right side of the body, with four fingers and a thumb. God does not have a right hand. Therefore, Exod 15:6 is an accommodation.”

Do we really know what a right hand is? The description I just gave is partial, because it focuses wholly on the shape, position, and physical constitution of the hand. Do we think that is all? Then we are ignoring the functions of the right hand. We do things with our hands. We touch, we grab, we gesture. We are ignoring also the potential for using the right hand as a metaphor for something.

Why do we as human beings have right hands? Within a biblical framework, the answer surely includes observing that God made us that way. He did out of his bounty. For example, Sue has a right hand because God gave her one. And why did he do it? Partly, at least, so that she could praise him for her right hand. Partly so that she could do things with it. Her power to do things imitates God’s original power. So it is an aspect of the image of God.

God is the original, the Creator who is all-powerful. Sue has power derivative from and imitative of God’s power. Her hands are expressions of that imitation. We may take the next step and say that the original for Sue’s right hand is God’s power to make, to shape, and to protect. If so, Sue’s right hand is metaphorical. It is a figure within creation for God’s power. God’s power is the original “right hand.”

In addition, Sue’s right hand is not only an image of God’s power. It embodies God’s power. God is present to empower Sue whenever she moves her hand. So when Sue moves her hand, we observe not only Sue’s power but God’s power, right there in her right hand. Without his sustaining power, Sue could do nothing.

If we then say that Exod 15:6 is *merely* “accommodation,” in an attempt to explain away a metaphor, are we not also engaged in explaining away depth of meaning in the significance of Sue’s right hand? And does it not display some overweening and dangerous arrogance, which tempts us to think that we have already grasped all that is important when we focus exclusively on a hand as a physically structured object, and when we in our minds ignore the presence of God filling the heaven and the earth and therefore also Sue’s hand?

Consider another example. The doctrine of accommodation can be used to say that “God (of course) is not really angry; the Bible’s statements about God’s anger are instances of accommodation.”

This analysis, like the analysis of God’s right hand, exposes temptations to minimizing. To begin with, instead of saying that God is not angry, one could

propose that God's anger is analogous to human anger, rather than being on the same level. So the word "angry" would be used metaphorically or figuratively. But we could also attempt the same kind of reversal as we observed with God's right hand. Where does the human ability to get angry come from? It comes from the Creator, who made us in his image. There can, of course, be sinful human anger, but that is a perversion and sinful twisting of righteous anger, which ought to engage us when we see injustice, and which stirs us up to pray and work and fight against injustice. Where did we get these abilities? From God, who has the archetypal ability, because he is the God of justice. God's character is fully just, and God is powerful in acting for justice. His being is engaged, as it were, in its depths. It is not just that he has a proposition in his mind, the proposition "This is unjust." God's commitment in evaluating and judging injustice is the original anger. Our anger is the shadowy imitation. So now which is the "real" anger and which is only "metaphorical" anger?

As with the right hand, so here—our anger is not only imitative of God's anger, but, when it is righteous, involves God's work in us. We have fellowship with God, and our anger is an expression of the Holy Spirit's work in us. God is expressing *his* anger in ours (though we must be careful not to deify ourselves or excuse cases of unrighteous anger). So there is no such thing as "merely human" anger. It is always also a testimony to the character of God. As I heard J. I. Packer say once, it is not that God is anthropomorphic, but that man is theomorphic—made in the image of God. Even in the case of unrighteous anger and unbelieving anger, people do not escape the God who made them. They are twisting the image of God, not escaping it. So what is "anger"? We do not really know much about what we are saying, until we realize that knowledge of anger is bound up with knowledge of God, which travels out into unfathomable mystery.

7. The Peril of Treating the World as Nonmysterious

A related peril arises from the decision (understandable in one respect) to focus on accommodation with respect only to descriptions of God, and not to descriptions of anything else. This distinctive focus can easily tempt us to infer that our knowledge of the world—of right hands, anger, eyes, fire, wind, human love—is nonmysterious. We evaporate the mystery of the presence of God in the world and the testimony of the world to God.

So let us consider the broader use of the word *accommodation*, where the word applies not only to God's descriptions of himself, but to all of Scripture. All of Scripture comes to us in human languages, through human authors, and originates within the context of human circumstances in history. What God says suits these contexts. To use the traditional term, all of Scripture is "accommodated."

As before, the same peril arises of thinking of accommodation as a kind of human adaptation to circumstances beyond the individual's control. We then introduce ideas that are not appropriate to God, given his comprehensive control, from creation onwards.

8. *The Peril of Treating Some Scripture as “More” Accommodated*

If all of Scripture is “accommodated,” we have to include the literal statements as well as the figurative ones. Anthropomorphic language about God is no more and no less “accommodated” than the affirmation that God is “immortal, invisible” (1 Tim 1:17) or the affirmation that “Erastus remained at Corinth” (2 Tim 4:20). But a single general principle of accommodation that explains everything is in danger of explaining nothing in particular. In practice, we run the danger of considering some things in Scripture as “accommodated,” and others as not. But then we are in danger of producing a canon within the canon, and also producing a false transcendence with respect to what allegedly can be treated in practice as if it were unaccommodated.

9. *Prioritizing Reason, General Revelation, and Other Extrascriptural Sources*

The language of accommodation, when applied to all of Scripture, opens the door to still another peril. If Scripture is accommodated, perhaps something outside Scripture is not. Human reason will not serve as an allegedly unaccommodated source, because it is surely related to finite human capacity. And yet people have been tempted to consider human reason as a window onto the divine. According to this view, reason is virtually a divine spark within us, and therefore identical to divine reason. Then reason becomes lord over Scripture, as took place in deism.

Or, if this route is rejected, people may still plausibly think that God’s word governing creation (Ps 33:9; Heb 1:3) is unaccommodated. It is not addressed to us, so it need not have the restrictions involved in communicating to human beings. It is untrammelled and unlimited. Therefore, people may be tempted to treat it as a source allegedly superior to Scripture. Given the impressive triumphs of modern science, the danger is real and growing.

But, theologically speaking, the general principle of accommodation applies to God’s speech governing creation in a way analogous to what we have said concerning speech addressed to human beings. The speech of God with respect to creation calls for response on the part of the created things that obey God’s commands. So, by analogy with God’s speech to human beings, we may infer that God’s commands suit or fit the created things to which they are addressed. Since we ourselves are not these created things, we know little about how such accommodation would work. In the end, the details are highly mysterious. We are in a worse position to understand these words of God, partly because we are not one of the immediate hearers (God is not immediately addressing us in these cases), partly because we do not have access to these words in verbal form. Scientists can only infer and guess at and approximate what God says, and these guesses constitute what scientists think about the “laws of nature.”

In this respect, scientific thinking about the laws of nature is thrice accommodated. God’s speech concerning creation suits creation. That speech includes

the first step in accommodation, namely, accommodation to the created things being addressed. Second, creation becomes a source of information to scientists. It “reveals” clues about how things work. This information from creation, though nonverbal in character, suits the capacities of scientists. That suitability is a second accommodation. Third, the scientific interpretations undertaken by the scientists suit their capacities. Their own reflections constitute a third accommodation, an accommodation to their thoughts and predispositions. Thus the products of human science, in the form of theories, hypotheses, and summaries of “facts,” are thrice accommodated. The same goes, *mutandis mutatis*, for historical investigation.

A thrice accommodated human project offers us a view through a dark glass. Neither science nor historical investigation can become a superior source from which we build a stable, solid platform, on the basis of which we may sift the alleged failings of Scripture due to its accommodated character. The reason should be plain. It is a case of “Physician, heal yourself.” The proposed platform could only be built if we first “healed” the effects of triple accommodation on science and the study of history.

What this path eventually reveals is that a sound view of accommodation ought never to become an excuse for seeking a superior viewpoint outside a scriptural foundation. The person who seeks a superior viewpoint has tacitly abandoned, somewhere in the process, the conviction that Scripture is actually God’s speech, accommodated or not.

10. *The Peril of Leaving Out God as Recipient*

Finally, simplistic thinking about accommodation runs the danger of neglecting a full reckoning with covenantal revelation. The implications of covenant need some explanation. We may begin with a human treaty (or “covenant”) between two parties. The treaty is written not for the sake of one party alone, but for both. Both parties make binding commitments to the treaty (e.g., Gen 31:44-54). When God makes his covenants with human beings, the covenants address and bind the human beings. But God is the second party. He binds himself, as it were, to his own words (cf. Heb 6:13). He hears what he says. That this is not fanciful is seen by the deposit of the documents of the Mosaic covenant in the Most Holy Place, in and beside the ark, in the presence of God (Deut 10:5; 31:24-26). Their location symbolically expresses the fact that God is aware of their contents and will faithfully fulfill the commitments that he has made as one party of the covenant. This placing of covenantal words in the presence of God comes to full realization when God addresses God in John 17, in words that are also accessible to us.¹⁶

John 17 is a very special case. But even in its special character, it can illustrate by analogy what is true of all Scripture. All of Scripture is covenantal in a broad

¹⁶ See Vern S. Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1999), 19-25.

sense. In it God addresses us, but he also addresses himself as the second party. The Holy Spirit stands with us, indwelling us, as we receive the Scripture. And that implies, I think, that the Spirit is hearer as well as speaker.

Thus, the usual reasoning about accommodation has a potential flaw. The usual reasoning can suggest the assumption that the Scripture has us who are human beings as the *only* hearers. If we are the only hearers, Scripture is “accommodated” to us, but not to God. That is false. Like the treaty, Scripture speaks both to God and to us. Or, to put it more elaborately, God is speaking to God, in the mystery of the Trinity, and to us as well. If so, what it means to God is beyond calculation. And therefore Scripture itself is beyond calculation.¹⁷ Its accommodation to us is an additional feature, not a subtraction from the fullness of divine meaning.

It is said concerning the incarnation of Christ, “Remaining what he was, he became what he was not.” Remaining God, Christ took on human nature, which he did not have before. This pattern concerns him who is the eternal Word and now the incarnate Word. By analogy, the word of God, remaining what it was according to the divine plan from all eternity, became what it was not when God said, “Let there be light,” and called light into being. It became an utterance going forth at a specific time in the history of the world. Likewise, the word of God, remaining the divine word that it was according to the divine plan understood from the foundation of the world in the co-inherence of the persons of the Trinity, became what it was not when God caused it to be written in an autographic text as an addition to the canon. Every such text suits the time and place and circumstances and human intermediaries who are present as contexts in which it newly comes. God’s speech is always coherent with the contexts that he himself specifies by his speech governing the universe (Heb 1:3). That is the real meaning of accommodation.

Since we are considering the matter deeply, let us observe that the Son communicates to the Father in John 17 in the context of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The communion between two persons of the Trinity always *suits* the context of the third person as well as the context of each person who is giving and receiving love. The archetype for “accommodation” or contextual fit is the Trinity.

Do you understand it? No. It is incomprehensible. Those who would make it comprehensible undertake to destroy God.

11. *Consequences*

The attempt to destroy God cannot succeed. Neither can the attempt to rationalize accommodation (essentially, to rationalize the Creator-creature distinction). To rationalize accommodation would mean to accommodate the doctrine of accommodation to the capacity of human autonomous rationality.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Such an attempt has consequences. God does not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain. The attempt to destroy God turns back against itself, and may damage the image of God, the one who makes the attempt.

Some kinds of postmodernism illustrate the process. Some postmodernists reject supernatural revelation because they think they can see that supernatural revelation cannot actually be received by a finite human being within a finite language and a finite culture around him. They are in effect accommodationists, for whom accommodation means the inevitable absorption and dissolution of any alleged revelation within the sea of finite language and culture. As a consequence, they think, any alleged revelation, once “accommodated” to human finiteness, inherits some of the errors and failings of its environment.

Such false views have consequences. The same false reasoning can be applied to science. When the postmodernist theory of accommodation is applied to science, the triple accommodation in science leads to the conclusion that science is a social construct whose function is to maintain the power and prestige of scientists. And if the reasoning goes this far, it can then attack the foundations of social science and the sociology of knowledge as well as natural science. This attack finally undermines postmodernism itself, because postmodernism builds on modern social scientific insights about language and culture. The postmodernist victim may travel out into an epistemic void with only the will to power left at the core of his being—raw desire for autonomy.

VI. *Conclusion*

Rightly understood, accommodation is an expression of the Creator-creature distinction. But sin tempts us in many ways to distort the meaning of accommodation in favor of false transcendence and false immanence. We must be on our guard, and avoid thinking that the concept of accommodation dissolves the fundamental mysteries in divine communication and divine covenants. Instead, it reasserts them.