General and Special Revelation
How God Makes Himself Known

Definitions:

**General Revelation:**
- “The knowledge of God available to and perceivable by all persons at all times and in all places.” – Dr. John Clark
- “General revelation is refers to God’s revelation in nature, as opposed to His revelation in Scripture.” Norman L. Geisler, p. 50
- “It is communicated through the media of natural phenomena occurring in nature or the course of history; it is addressed to all intelligent creatures generally and is accessible to all; it has for its object the supplying of the natural need of the man and the persuasion of the soul to seek after the true God.” Henry Thiessen, p. 7

This includes:
- Creation
- Providence
- Human Activities

**Special Revelation:**
- “The knowledge of God granted to certain persons at specific times and in specific places.” – Clark
- “…Those acts of God whereby he makes himself and his truth known at special times and to specific peoples. Although…the revelation is not necessarily intended for that time and people only.” Thiessen, p. 10

- Canonical Writings (read or spoken)
- Exposition of the Word
- Old Testament Prophecy
- Special Revelation and the Canon are closed, there is no more.

Questions to consider as we move on to look at each type of revelation a little closer in

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• What can be known of God through general revelation apart from special revelation? Or in other words, without using the Bible, what can we know about God?

• Is general revelation the foundation for special revelation, or vice-versa?

• Which form of revelation is the proper starting place for Christian Theology?

The Reformers on revelation:

John Calvin is known for referring to scripture as the “spectacles” through which the otherwise unintelligible content of general revelation becomes intelligible.

Likewise, Martin Luther said that if one finds God in Christ, he/she may find Him everywhere. However, if one does not find God in Christ he/she will find Him nowhere!

**General Revelation**

**Physical Nature**

• Creation/nature speaks, but it tells two stories

• Creation declares the glory of God
  – Psalm 19:1-4
  – Romans 1:20-21

• Creation also speaks of pain and evil
  – Gen. 3:17-19
  – Romans 8:19-22

“Consider that while a beautiful sunset or the majestic beauty of a mountain range might stir up feelings of wonder toward God, what of hurricanes that kill hundreds of thousands of people as we have seen in recent history? With respect to general revelation as mediated through nature, we can certainly say this much: Creation speaks, as it were. Yet it speaks from both sides of its mouth, declaring at one and the same time the glory of God and the tragedy of fallenness. **Creation sings, but it also groans.**” - John Clark
Without the “spectacles” of scripture (special revelation) there is no way to make sense of these two stories. We can see that God is incredibly creative, yet we also see wrath and destruction and evil—this is the issue one faces without the Bible, is God good? Is he evil?

Is it any wonder that idolatrous cultures seek ways of appeasing the gods? Clearly these people have witnessed this dual story and without special revelation the results are predictably dire.

**Human Nature**

- The innate sense of the divine renders people inherently religious *and* inherently idolatrous!
  - Romans 1:18-25
- “God created human beings in His image and likeness (Gen. 1:27); consequently, something about God can be learned from studying human beings.” – Geisler, p. 51
  - This means the fields of sociology and psychology are a form of general revelation.

**Human History**

- “History has been called *His*-story. It is the footprints of God in the sands of time….So a proper understanding of history informs us about the plan and purpose of God.” Geisler, p. 52
  - Acts 17:26; Daniel 4:17

**Human Arts**

- Go has created a beautiful world and many of the Psalms attest to this. It is also true that God has created beings who “appreciate beauty…Like Him, they can also make beautiful things.”
- “God chooses to endow humans with special creative gifts that reveal something of His marvelous nature.” – Geisler, p. 52).
- This includes music, “Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” (Eph. 5:19).

**Six Implications of General Revelation** – Millard J. Erickson, p. 198-199

1. “There is a common ground or a point of contact between the believer and the nonbeliever…all persons have a knowledge of God. Although it may be
suppressed.”

2. It is possible to know some divine truth apart from the Bible.

3. “God is just in condemning those who have never heard the gospel in the full and formal sense. No one is completely without opportunity.”

4. General revelation explains “the worldwide phenomenon of religion and religions. All persons are religious, because all have a type of knowledge of God.”

5. There is “harmony between” general revelation and the gospel because both are revealed by God.

6. “Genuine knowledge and genuine morality in unbelieving (as well as believing) humans are not their own accomplishments. Truth arrived at apart from special revelation is still God’s truth.”

**Special Revelation: God Speaks**

Truly the most amazing fact that special revelation illuminates is that God is a god who speaks. - Clark

- False gods, idols, can be seen but neither speak nor act.
- By contrast, the God of the Bible both speaks and acts yet is not seen.
- The prevailing characteristic that set the God of Israel apart from the gentile gods is that He speaks.
- The people of God were called out and set apart by God through his address, “An address that brings dignity and responsibility.” - Clark

**The Incarnate Word**

- Jesus is the Word of God incarnate and therefore the “final and greatest of God’s revelation” (John 1:1; Rev. 19:13; Heb. 1:1-2) – Clark
- Jesus is the object of our study, the Bible is a means to that end, “If you want to behold the child, then you must go to the manger.” - Martin Luther
- “…among the members of the Trinity it is especially God the Son who in his person as well as in his words has the role of communicating the character of God to us and of expressing the will of God for us.” – Grudem, p. 47

Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God, and He will not fully reveal His father to creation

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until the next age.

The Written Word – What were the very first written words of Scripture?

- “Special revelation contributes uniquely to Christian theology, for the Bible along is infallible and inerrant. Further, the Bible is the only source of both God’s revelation as Redeemer and His plan of salvation. Thus, Scripture is normative for salvation.” – Geisler, p. 53
- “Because the Bible is God-breathed (2 Tim. 3:16) and written by men carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21), the Bible is entirely reliable and accurate in its portrayal of Jesus Christ.” Paul Enns, p. 161
- Though the incarnate Word is superior, “all that is known of Christ is through the Scriptures; therefore, it can be said that special revelation is restricted to the Scriptures.” Enns, p. 160
  - What about Charismatics and Pentecostals?

Other Examples of Special Revelation

- Prophecy
- The Words of Christ not recorded in the Bible
- Theophonies
- God’s verbal speech

On Knowing God

“If we are to truly know God, it is necessary for God to reveal himself to us. Even as God has revealed himself to us, God is and ever remains incomprehensible. That is to say knowledge of God should never be reduced to “head” knowledge but instead we see that:

- In Scripture, “the knowledge of God” is the fullness of a faith-relationship that brings salvation, and generates love, hope, obedience, and joy.
- It pertains to every dimension of our person, intellectual, volitional, emotional, and moral/ethical dimensions. - Clark

God is always and ever the Lord of all, including his self-disclosure. He gives himself to us, but never gives himself over to us. In other words, we cannot “discover” God, nor can we ever domesticate God......God is truly known in Jesus Christ, but not fully known in Jesus Christ. In other words, we have fully accurate, non-contradictory knowledge of
God, but we do not, nor will we ever, have exhaustive knowledge of God. - Clark

- This knowledge relationship is reciprocal. We know God as ours because He knows us as His.
- John 10:14, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.”
- Galatians 4:9, “But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?”
- 2 Timothy 2:19, “But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: ‘The Lord knows those who are his.’”

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Table adapted from Geisler, p. 53

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