

Week One: Thinking about the Bible: Divine Revelation and the Scriptures

Overview: An Introduction to the Doctrine of Divine Revelation

- 1) It is common, but highly problematic, to divide Divine Revelation into two discrete categories: General (providing information about God, but not leading to salvation) and Special (providing distinctive Christian truths that lead to salvation). Special Revelation is considered by many to now be contained in the Holy Bible.
- 2) Understanding the inadequacies of both General Revelation and Special Revelation clarifies for us what Divine Revelation is.
- 3) To advocate for a view that God encounters humans through created means (Sacramental Revelation) with the intent of revealing himself and his Truth and calling us by name into a genuine relationship of knowing.
- 4) To acknowledge that the Incarnation is the climax and key to understanding Divine Revelation.

Key Terms

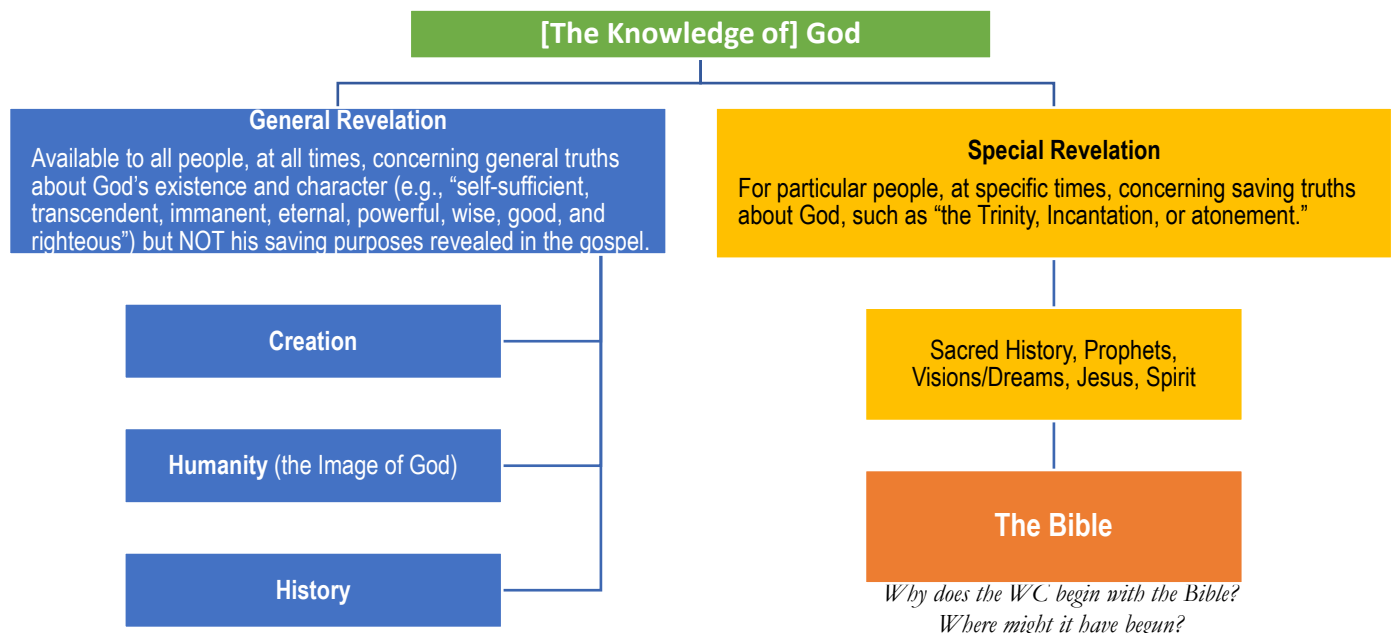
1. General Revelation (and Natural Theology)
2. Special Revelation
3. Sacramental Revelation (The Sacramental Principle)
4. Objective Knowledge (knowing information about an object; *I-It*) contrasted with Subjective Knowledge (knowing someone in relationship; *I-Thou*)

Keep Track of Your Questions

Part I: A Typical Framework for Understanding Divine Revelation

The Westminster Confession (1646), summaries Reform (Calvinist)/Evangelical Theology

1.1. Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as **to leave men inexcusable** (Rom. 2:14,15; Rom. 1:19,20; Ps. 19:1,2,3; Rom. 1:32; Rom. 2:1); **yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of His will, which is necessary unto salvation** (1 Cor. 1:21; 1 Cor. 2:13,14): therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and **in divers manners**, to reveal Himself, and to declare that His will unto His Church (Heb. 1:1); and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, **to commit the same wholly unto writing** (Prov. 22:19,20, 21; Luke 1:3,4; Rom. 15:4; Matt. 4:4,7,10; Isa. 8:19,20); which maketh the Holy Scripture to be **most necessary** (2 Tim. 3:15; 2 Pet. 1:19); those **former ways of God's revealing His will unto His people being now ceased** (Heb. 1:1,2).



The Bible certainly makes no attempt to prove the existence of God. This gives rise to the belief that before Special Revelation there is General Revelation giving all people some knowledge about God. The *Imago Dei* suggests that all humans have a real potential for relationship with God. There is something within us that recognises the voice of God as a voice other than the voices in our head.

- **Creation.** God can be seen in Creation (Job 38:1-39:30, Psalm 19, Romans 1:18–2:15) and in the Providential Rule of Creation (Psalm 47:7-8, Acts 17:26).
- **Humanity.** Immanuel Kant (18thC, German philosopher) insisted that the person who wishes to find God must look not only to the 'starry heavens above,' but also to 'the moral universe within,' e.g., Rom 2:11-16.
- **History.** E.g., Exodus, Conquest, Exile. W. Pannenberg (1968; German Theologian). "God's attributes are actually seen in, and not simply inferred from, his actions in history... Historical events do not merely promise or contain or become revelation, but actually are revelation."

Challenges to the General/Special Divine Revelation Framework

- 1) How does this framing of Divine Revelation shape our answers to those who do not have access to the truth of God revealed by Special Revelation? For example,
 - A “lost” Amazon tribe?
 - An unchurched Aussie youth?
 - A person with a profoundly disability?
- 2) How does this framing of Divine Revelation shape our answers to those who claim to have encountered God directly?
 - A person who becomes a Christian because Jesus encounters them in a dream?
 - A person who believes God has given them a prophetic word for the church?
- 3) Does this framing of Divine Revelation make Jesus an historical figure, someone we can know about from facts about in the Bible, rather than a living Lord who encounters us with an ever-present call to “follow me”?
- 4) What might be considered the truths revealed by Special Revelation that a person must know about in order to be saved; hat the Westminster Confession calls “that knowledge of God, and of His will, which is necessary unto salvation”?
- 5) Does this framing of Divine Revelation prioritise “knowledge of” God over “knowing” God?

All Revelation has Content

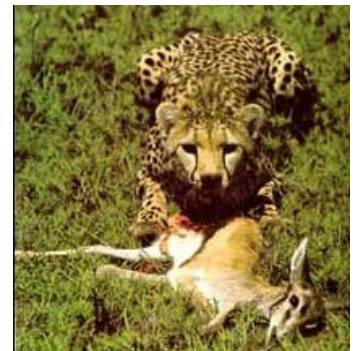
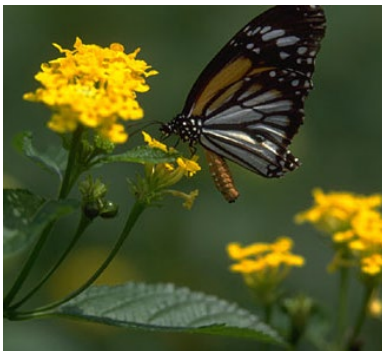
- 1) In my view, the purpose of all Divine Revelation is a transformative encounter with the living God. Introducing a distinction between General and Special Revelation leads to a tendency to characterise revelation – both General and Special – as informational rather than relational *and* informational.
- 2) I am in agreement, therefore, with W. Temple’s (19thC, Archbishop of Canterbury) famous dictum, “What is offered to man’s apprehension in any specific Revelation is not truth concerning God but the living God himself.”
- 3) However, this is critiqued by L. Morris (20thC, Australian Evangelical), because
 - a) ...if when we come to the Bible we find no ‘truth concerning God’ what do we find? Fine words about “the living God Himself” cannot conceal the fact that we are left with our own experience of God (or that of the Bible writers)... When we read the Bible rightly, we may have an encounter with God. But on this view it is the encounter, not the Bible that is important... It is our own personal attitude that is important, indeed decisive.
 - b) Morris approves of H. Meynell’s view, “The contention that revelation is primarily of a person, and not of propositions, is not to the point; since *that* God is revealed as a person and *what* kind of person it is that God is revealed to be, and *how* he is so revealed, can be expressed only in propositions.” [*better would be* “only in stories.”]
 - c) However, Morris seems to be aware that this is overstated.

We have rejected the idea that the essence of revelation is encounter, but encounter is important nevertheless. The significant thing is that men be brought face to face with God... **The Bible is but the means to that end.** It is not to be revered for itself or venerated as a religious object produced by a divine process so that men may accord it due respect. It is no more than a means. It is the means by whereby men may learn of God and of themselves and of the way they can come into right relationship with God. It is the means whereby they may realise their lost state and find salvation in Christ.
- 4) An expanded version of Temple’s dictum that takes into account Morris’s critique might be, “What is offered to a person’s apprehension in any specific Revelation is not merely truth concerning God nor a formless and fleeting encounter with God but the living God himself who speaks (makes himself known) to us in the encounter.”

- 5) What is revealed when we encounter God is both relational (subjective; *I-Thou*) and propositional/informational (objective; *I-It*). Bernard Ramm (20thC, Baptist) is right: ‘A wordless revelation in mysticism and a merely human word in religious experience cannot yield a *logia tou theou*. [=God’s word to us] Theology is possible only as a word comes to us from beyond ourselves.’
- 6) An encounter with God is Revelation because it contains **both** relational knowledge **and** information knowledge. However, this is not two types of revelation; they are inseparable aspects of the same encounter. In God’s encounter of us he discloses himself to us as a loving father and calls us into a relationship of union (*theosis*). In this relationship, he reveals his name and his glory through story, word, and deed.
- 7) D. Bloesch (20thC, Evangelical) writes,
I have sought to retain the conceptual character of revelation even while subordinating it to personal self-disclosure. As I see it, revelation is God’s self-communication through his selected instrumentality, especially the inspired witness of his prophets and apostles. **This act of self-communication entails not only the unveiling of his gracious and at the same time awesome presence but also the imparting of the knowledge of his will and purpose for humankind.** This knowledge is conceptual as well as existential and can be formulated but never possessed or mastered in propositions.

Can General Revelation lead to Salvation without Special Revelation?

- 1) The core of **Natural Theology** (a Roman Catholic doctrine proposed by Thomas Aquinas, 13thC) is the idea that it is possible, (1) without a prior commitment of faith to the beliefs of Christianity, and (2) without relying on any special authority, such as an institution (the church) or a document (the Bible), to come to a genuine knowledge of God on the basis of reason alone. Vatican I (1870), “God can certainly be known from created things by the natural light of human reason.” Reason here refers to the human capacity to discover, understand, interpret, and evaluate the truth.



- 2) However, even although God declared his Creation to be “good” God also accepts that the Creation we currently experience is groaning in suffering. How could we discern between an original Creation and the now fallen Creation when identifying God’s “first book”? Even if God’s “first book” was uncorrupted, the sinfulness of humanity would prohibit us from interpreting it clearly.

Is Special Revelation found only in Scripture?

- 1) Revelation “refers to the divine self-disclosure, the purpose of which is, by intervention in history and communication in language, the calling of men into fellowship with God... While Scripture undoubtedly alludes to a general revelation of God in the created order, its predominant emphasis is upon special revelation. Remedial redemptive revelation enjoys centrality in the Bible. **It is soteric, restorative and therapeutic**” (C. Pinnock, 20thC, Canadian). [Healing, saving, relationships.]
- 2) C. F. H. Henry (20thC, Evangelical) defines Special Revelation broadly as “redemptive revelation conveyed by wondrous acts and words... [which] is crowned by the [historical!]? incarnation of the living Word and the inscripturation of the spoken word.”

- 3) M. Erickson (20thC, Evangelical) argues that Special Revelation must include the distinctive knowledge of salvation detailed in the Bible. “Note that the objective of special revelation was relational. The primary purpose of this revelation was not to enlarge the general scope of knowledge. The knowledge *about* was for the purpose of knowledge *of*.” But Erickson seems to collapse *knowing* into *knowledge about* and so it leads to this doubtful claim: “The primary result of special revelation is knowledge of God. By this we mean knowledge not only of the person of God, but also of what he has done, of his creation, of the nature and situation of humans, of the relationship between God and human. It should be noted that this is real, objective, rational information communicated from God to humanity.” [Is Jesus the TRUTH or does the Bible contain truths about Jesus?]
- 4) The Bible itself gives no indication that God has ceased to speak to his people. The closing of the biblical canon does not necessitate the confining of the divine voice to Scripture. Indeed, the giving of the Spirit to all people would seem to guarantee the ongoing hearing of God (Acts 2).
- 5) This seems to be a minority view in Evangelical circles although it is accepted in non-Western contexts and in Pentecostalism.
 - a) Wayne Grudem (20thC, Reformed Professor) suggests, “God’s words as spoken through human lips ceased to be given when the New Testament canon was completed.” He considers modern prophecy to be a verbal report by a human of a revelation given to the person by God, “telling something that God has spontaneously brought to mind.”
 - b) The Charismatic theologian J. R. Williams speaks of “subordinate revelation” as “in addition to the special revelation that is completed with the apostolic witness, God reveals Himself to those who are in the Christian community.” The purpose of this “subordinate revelation” includes an enlarged revelation of the Son (Eph 1:17) and the edification of the Church (1 Cor 14:26). This “subordinate revelation” adds nothing new to the fully declared revelation of God in Scripture.
 - c) God still speaks today. I understand this to be an expression of Special Revelation. I distinguish this from the particular revelation of Scripture by identifying Scripture as *normative* (or, formative) revelation, i.e., revelation that is applicable to us all, in all times, and which determines who we are as a people. When God speaks to a church or an individual, as he did in biblical times, I identify this as *personal* revelation.

No Revelation is “Timeless” or “Supra-Cultural”

- 1) The language of God must be culturally specific in order to communicate. Does this mean that the revelation of God is culturally limited and needs to be re-formed in each culture?
- 2) The revelation of God cannot be de-cultured, i.e., stripped of cultural specificity. For every word has meaning only in its cultural context.
- 3) The information gained from Revelation must be trans-cultured, shifted from one culture to another so that it communicates the same message. But this must be done sensitively and not as a means to “correct” it for the Scriptures are not merely the one culture’s speculations about God, they are a means of God’s self-disclosure.

Part II: Reframing our Understanding of Divine Revelation

- 1) **God must take the initiative in revealing himself. We cannot discover God.** Because God is prior to Space and Time there is nothing in our experience of the universe that allows us to extract from it an understanding of (or, even just a partial understanding of) who God is. Extraction is discovery, not revelation.
- 2) L. Morris argues that while God can use creation as a means of revelation, this does not mean that nature contains revelation that a person can discover for themselves. “The concept of General Revelation is open to the objection that, taken at its face value, it seems to imply that there is revelation running through the universe that is open to apprehension always and by all men in all places. **It is doubtful whether the term ‘revelation’ is properly to be used in this way.** For this reason, many prefer to speak of nothing more than the general possibility of revelation. The thought is that in nature and in man there is always the possibility of some revelation of God, but that revelation becomes actual only as God brings it home to some individual. **The thought of the divine initiative is to be preserved. Revelation, by its very definition does not mean something that is open to all men at any time. It is disclosure. It is God’s being pleased to disclose himself.** We may agree that He can do this and on occasion has done this through nature without the corollary that any man may become aware of the revelation whenever he chooses.”
- 3) God’s revelation is given in human languages and categories of thought and action. However, we must not impose our limits upon God. Nor should we seek to define God in terms of humanity and turn theology into anthropology.
- 4) **Revelation that does not reveal is not revelation.** Potential revelation is not revelation, it merely holds out that something might become revelation. Whatever means God uses, the means are not revelation nor do they contain revelation waiting to be discovered. Revelation is only revelation when the living God encounters us.
 - a) *Contra.* J. Calvin, (16thC Reformer, French). “God has given us an objective, valid, rational revelation of himself in nature, history, and human personality. Regardless of whether anyone actually observes it, understands it, and believes it, even though it may well have been disturbed by the fall, it is nonetheless present.”
 - b) **Knowing someone requires an encounter.** God is not an object to be known; God is a subject to be encountered. Knowing about a person is never the same as knowing a person. We cannot know God by learning “information” about God. However, every encounter with a person increases what we know about the person and deepens our relationship with that person. We can learn information about God that can be shared with others.
 - c) There is a close relationship between our understanding of revelation and our view of faith. If revelation is informative, then faith is viewed as believing certain truths. If revelation is understood as an introduction to a person, then faith must be an act of personal trust and allegiance.
- 5) **God creates humans in his image in a desire for relationship.** Revelation is always with a purpose – to know and be known. That is, the intent of God’s revelation is our reconciliation (salvation).
 - a) *Contra.* The Westminster Confession (and many Evangelicals within the Reformed tradition) believe the purpose of General Revelation is to provide justification for God damning the majority of humanity rather than offering the possibility of a redemptive encounter with God.
 - b) *With.* Neoorthodoxy – K. Barth (20thC, Swiss) believes “revelation is redemptive in nature. To know God, to have correct information about him, is to be related to him is a salvific experience. Barth said, ‘How can [it be] maintained that a real knowledge of the true God, however imperfect it may be (and what knowledge of God is not imperfect?), does not bring salvation?’”

God is always present in his Revelation.

- 1) God reveals through encounter, therefore, what God reveals is himself. God meets us in revelation is more accurate than God teaches us in revelation.
- 2) Creation must be seen as part of God's gracious gifts (grace = God sharing himself) and not as a box into which his gracious gifts are placed. This suggests that a Deistic view of God and creation must be replaced by an appreciation of the immanence of God.
- 3) The Holy Bible is the word of God to us only when we encounter God. However, it differs from the "book of Creation" in that God has committed himself to be the Living Word who speaks whenever the written word is heard.

Revelation Is Not either Personal or Propositional; It Is Both/And.

- 1) Truth is objective – that is, truth exists prior to humans as subjects encountering it. It is not our truth.
- 2) Truth is subjective – that is, truth is involving. It is never "so what."
- 3) Truth is encounter – that is, truth is only known *in relationship*.
 - a) This is why humans are created in the image of God for only relationally can the truth of God be known. If we were just machines, we could receive propositions but could not truly relate.
 - b) Truth is relational and so can only be verified in encounter.
 - c) Jesus said, "I am the truth." Such an identification is meaningless outside of encounter.

Part III: Sacramental Revelation

- 1) In Christian theology and liturgy, a Sacrament is a guaranteed means of grace [an encounter with God]. God always present himself to us in Baptism and in Holy Communion. Distinctively, Sacraments contain a means by which God presents himself to our senses that is a part of God's creation, e.g., water, bread, wine. If we do not meet God in receiving the bread and the wine, it is not because he did not turn up but because we did not turn up. This might be described as the principle of the Sacraments.
- 2) Sacramental Revelation builds on this principle to argue that God encounters us, his creatures, through (or by means of) his creation. There is no aspect of Creation that the Creator God cannot use as a means to encounter his creatures. However, it is up to God to choose his moments.
- 3) General and Special Revelation both suggest that God uses means to encounter us, e.g., sunsets and Scripture. These means are both essential to the revelatory experience and yet distinct, that is, the means are not the revelation. **The means of revelation are not like an aqueduct that conveys something other than it; rather they are like a hug that conveys a message because of what it is.** Sacramental Revelation recognizes that God MAY speak to us through the sunset or the newspaper or a sermon, but that God is ALWAYS speaking to us through Scripture.
 - a) The fallenness of creation is no impediment to God using creation as a means for the revelation of himself because Creation is not the Revelation, the living God is.
 - b) Morris recognises that "God takes a given situation in this natural universe and makes it the means whereby someone is lead into an appreciation of truth [understood in the wider sense of relational truth]. In this sense revelation is always 'special', though it may make use of what is generally available."
- 4) There are some "means" that God has promised himself to. The Church Sacraments are an example of this. I would argue that the Holy Bible is also a promised means of encountering God. The Bible is God's living word in the very personal sense that he is always to be encountered there. Scripture is a *living word*, a *God-breathed word*, not a letter from the past containing a word locked in the past.
 - a) The Bible is a means of God speaking to us, not just a record of his speaking to others. Scripture is said to be "God-breathed" (2 Tim 3:16). As such it is "living and active" (Heb 3:16).
- 5) God's revelation is both informative and relational. However, they must not be seen as two types of revelation. **They are inseparable aspects of the same encounter.** In God's encounter of us he discloses information about himself. In God's revelation of information about himself, he draws us into a personal encounter.
- 6) In my view, "General Revelation" reveals nothing unless God speaks through it, which is what makes it revelation. Carl Henry (20thC, Evangelical) correctly concludes, "Despite the distinction of general and special revelation, **God's revelation is nonetheless a unity, and it must not be artificially sundered.**" This leads to my preference to abandon the unhelpful classification of General and Special Revelation in favour of speaking about a single classification that I call Sacramental Revelation. Maintaining the distinction can act as a corrective against one strand of the revelatory spiral being overlooked. I choose to speak of sacramental revelation, normative (or formative) revelation, and personal revelation.

Part IV: The Incarnation of the Word of God

- 1) Undoubtedly, the primary/central/climatic of God's revelation is the Incarnation (Heb 1:1-4, Col 1:15, John 1:1-18)! It is from this that we derive the nature of revelation as God-initiated and personal. It is also from this that we can identify the purpose of revelation as redemptive: God reveals *in order to save*.
 - a) The Incarnation suggests that the language of revelation is first that of personal encounter and only secondly that of propositions/information.
 - b) The Incarnation confirms God as taking the initiative in revelation and confirms that the self-disclosure of God is primary through personal relationship. Our God is a seeking God. And what God seeks is relationship. Creation is a consequence of God's desire to seek relationship (Eph 1:4, "he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world").
 - c) Jesus is the "Word of God" (Rev 19:13, cf. John 1:1). Jesus is thus the centre point from which interpretation starts.
- 2) The revelation of God through Jesus is immediate, decisive, and complete. (The role of Scripture is thus, according to Bloesch, to point to Jesus.) **Which comes first, the Scriptures or Jesus? This is an important hermeneutical question that I believe must be answered in favour of Jesus – we read in a spiral outwards from Jesus.** We must also consider what impact the living Jesus (or the Spirit of Truth) might have upon our understanding of the canonical Jesus.
- 3) Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. The Incarnation is central to God's revelatory acts and is not merely a subset of Special Revelation that is later *enscriptured*.
 - a) For Barth, Jesus Christ is God's Word. The gospel is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is God's revelation. When Barth identified divine revelation with Jesus Christ, he was not referring to Jesus' teachings or example. He was referring to the person of Jesus Christ in time and eternity. **To know Jesus Christ (with or without knowing his human name) is to know God, and one cannot know God without knowing Jesus Christ (with or without knowing his human name). Barth did not say that it is impossible to know God without knowing about the Jewish Messiah, who was born in Palestine and died there in about A.D. 30. He was and is the Lord, but his human life on earth does not exhaust his divine-human reality.** Barth's view of divine revelation is that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God's perfect and complete self-expression, and whatever other authentic revelations of God there may be centre around him as promise, hope, and memory.
- 4) The climax/centre/ foundation of Special Revelation is the Incarnation. This leads to the following description of the nature of Special Revelation: it is (1) Personal, (2) Condescending, (3) Symbolic (including, Analogical), (4) Rational/ Verbal/ Propositional, (5) Immediate, (6) God initiated, (7) Communal, and (8) Transforming.

Personal: "A personal God presents himself to persons"

- 1) God reveals himself by name. "The primary symbols that describe God in the Bible are not ciphers pointing beyond themselves to imageless transcendence but names by which Transcendence discloses its innermost being to us. A name in the Bible reveals the character and personality of the subject... God must name himself, and he has done so in Holy Scripture" (Bloesch).
- 2) "God is not anonymous. He has a name. He has made himself a name. He has made it known as his holy name" (Barth).
- 3) God enters into a personal covenant with his people, revealing himself through relationships.

Symbolic

- 1) "The Bible's language about God and his relationship to humankind is for the most part symbolic ... A symbol in this context indicates any imaginative description that points beyond itself to a

reality that somehow eludes immediate perception and conceptual mastery. I include in this category such forms of speech as analogy and metaphor. An analogy refers to a partial resemblance between things fundamentally distinct, whereas metaphor signifies a word or phrase ordinarily used of one thing that is applied to another” (Bloesch).

- 2) Bloesch contends that “when we change the language about God we are basically moving into another religion. To resymbolize is to redeify, it is to fashion a new God more in accord with our cultural context and experience.” (E.g., Free Masons’s Divine Architect.)

Rational/Verbal/Propositional

- 1) The revelation of God contains objective content. He reveals himself and this revelation, climaxed in the Incarnation, judges both our experiences and our articulation of our encounters with God.
- 2) Analogical: “God draws upon those elements in humanity’s universe of knowledge that can serve as a likeness of or partially convey the truth in the divine realm” (Erickson).
 - a) God speaks to us in words that have meaning in our experience but to the extent they express God’s experience (incomprehensible to us in any language) we must recognise them as distinct from our experiences, e.g., love, suffering.
 - b) Because there are degrees in analogy God must speak in multiple images not all of which have equal value.

Immediate/Encounter

- 1) It is always God who meets us. We must not confuse the means of revelation with the Revealer himself.
- 2) It is my understanding that this is true for each person. God’s self-revelation is not just a body of knowledge that the individual must mine themselves. It is God’s personal address to each individual. That is, revelation is always an immediate encounter with God; knowing about God and knowing God are *coincidental*.

God Initiated

- 1) Revelation is never to be confused with a human “breakthrough” into truth. It is always God who reveals himself, never humans who discover God.

Communal

- 1) (Normative) Revelation is given to God’s people; it is not the personal property of any single person or any single group. We must hear God as a community.
- 2) What does our services of community worship reveal about our implicit understanding of revelation?

Transforming

- 1) “Meaning in the perspective of biblical faith is not simply cognitive but transformative. It is not simply a perception of the truth but an infusion of power” (Bloesch).

Conclusion

- 1) God reveals God's-self through encounter, through deed, and through word. The Creator God uses various means to reveal himself (sacrament principle) to his creatures; most clearly, he reveals himself through Incarnation. The resurrected Jesus is ever present.
- 2) God encounters all persons with the intent of reconciliation. Some of these encounters are surprising and personal, but some are promised as sacramental revelation to all people, including Holy Scripture.
- 3) Revelation refers to the making known of what was previously unknown. It is usually used in a context in which that which is revealed is either a surprise or would be, apart from the revelation, unknowable. A person may discover something for themselves; but someone else must reveal something to them.
- 4) Revelation of a person is not knowing *about* but knowing. God must reveal God's-self to us, not merely truths about himself.
- 5) In Christian theology Divine Revelation refers to God's self-disclosure, including the disclosure of his will. Revelation is always at the initiative of God; he is the Revealer. *The purpose of God's revelation is salvific*: he reveals himself in order to bring us into relationship with himself. In fact, without God's self-revelation no one could come to know God.

Appendix: Dictionary Definitions and Dictionary Article

Grenz, Guretzki, & Nordling. *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms.* (InterVarsity, 1999)

Revelation. Refers both to the process by which God discloses the divine nature and the mystery of the divine will and purpose to human beings, and to the corpus of truth disclosed. Some theologians maintain that revelation consists of both God's activity in salvation history through word and deed, culminating in Jesus (who mediates and fulfills God's self-revelation) and the ongoing activity of God to move people to yield to, accept and personally appropriate that reality. General revelation maintains that God's existence and particular attributes can be ascertained through an innate sense of God's reality and conscience as well as through observation of the universe and history. Special revelation refers to the more specific divine self-disclosure to and through certain persons that brings about human salvation.

General Revelation. A term used to declare that God reveals something about the divine nature through the created order. This self-revealing of God through creation is called general because it only gives "general" or "indirect" information about God, including the fact of God's existence and that God is powerful. This is in contrast to special revelation, which is more "specific" and "direct," and includes the appearance of the living Word (Jesus Christ himself) and the written Word of God (the Scriptures), revealing a holy, loving and just God who graciously provides forgiveness of sin. General revelation is likewise "general" in that it is available to all humankind, in contrast to the divine self-disclosure that God revealed to certain persons.

Natural Theology. Natural theology maintains that humans can attain particular knowledge about God through human reason by observing the created order as one locus of divine revelation.

Special Revelation. God's divine self-revelation evidenced specifically in salvation history and culminating in the incarnation as understood through Scripture. Although the Bible seemingly affirms both *general and special revelation, only special revelation can disclose completely our sinful predicament, as well as God's promise of salvation and its fulfillment in Christ.

C. H. Pinnock in Ferguson, S. B., & Packer, J. *New Dictionary of Theology* (InterVarsity, 1988).

Revelation refers to the disclosure or unveiling of something. In that sense, reality is constantly revealing itself to probing minds as they seek to comprehend it. We approach the world as those who expect the hidden to be revealed, and the unknown to become known. According to the Bible, God himself has satisfied man's quest for intelligibility by revealing himself, his divine power and his will for mankind, so that we might come to know him.

Two species of revelation

Ps. 19 calls our attention to the two varieties of divine revelation. On the one hand, 'the heavens are telling the glory of God' in such a way that it is impossible for anyone not to know it. And on the other hand, there is a testimony granted to Israel which conveys more specific information about the gift and the demands of God. We call the first 'general' revelation because it is universally available, and the second 'special' revelation because it is a particular disclosure about how mankind can find favour with God—a disclosure given at first to particular people chosen by God but intended in the end for the whole human race. Although there are differences between general and special revelation in terms of their completeness and orientation, we should not draw the contrast too sharply. After all, there is only one God whose Logos is spreading the knowledge of the Lord everywhere. The two species of revelation stand together in a complementary relationship. We should not forget that God is the source of revelation in both cases, and that the two types of revelation work together to the same goal. The creational light 'that enlightens every man' orients us toward the Word become flesh (Jn. 1:9, 14). General revelation alerts us to the reality of God, while special revelation urgently summons us to make peace with God. The two species belong to the one over-arching unity of divine revelation.

General revelation

God is a mystery, and some in modern times have supposed that he is unknowable by man. Kant developed an epistemological theory in which God could not be an object of human knowledge. For some this spells simple atheism, but for others it has led to a denial of general revelation. Karl Barth, for example, has denied the reality of revelation outside of Jesus Christ. But this is not a scriptural position. Even though he is transcendent, God 'has never left himself without witness' (Acts 14:17). No-one can honestly say that he does not know what the term 'God' refers to. The Bible tells us that God's eternal power and deity can be clearly perceived in the things God made (Rom. 1:20). It also informs us that God is sovereign over human history and that often we are able to trace God's hand in events. In particular the reality of God is detected in human nature, for example, in the moral realm. This moral impulse which characterizes all human beings points to the moral God who brought us into existence (Rom. 2:1–16). God's existence is also attested in man's religious nature, in that people everywhere have always believed in a reality higher than themselves. Barth was right to worry about the bad uses to which general revelation was put in liberal theology, but that cannot be an excuse for denying a dimension of the actual revelation of God.

One can list several points of real value which reside in general revelation. First, it means that there is common ground between believer and unbeliever. Everyone already has a certain knowledge of God which can serve as a starting point in an evangelistic discussion. Some of the truth is already known, whether welcome or not (see Christianity and other Religions). Second, it means that we can be hopeful about discovering God's truth outside the sphere of special revelation in the wider world. This might even be true amidst the rubble of man's religious strivings. God has placed truth throughout the whole extent of his creation, and it is there to be uncovered.

If there indeed is an objective general revelation, does this mean that natural theology is possible and justified? The majority opinion in the history of apologetics has answered affirmatively. Men such as Thomas Aquinas and Jonathan Edwards have tried to show by an appeal to certain features of the world that theism is a rational belief, indeed the only belief which can make sense of things. Some Protestants have been more cautious, worrying that this exercise might be making assumptions about the integrity of human reason which should not be made. Nevertheless, given the objective reality of general revelation, together with the practical need to establish common ground, it is likely that natural theology has a future. If God is the creator, one would expect the world to reveal its maker. The Bible itself confirms this expectation; therefore, Christians are likely to continue to explain how this is so to those they want to convert.

If we posit a basic unity between general and special revelation, does it not follow that both possess saving potential and that a sinner might turn to God and trust God in the context of general revelation alone if he were limited to it? Many Evangelicals are very wary about giving an affirmative answer to this question, because to do so would seem to imply that salvation is possible anywhere, with or without the knowledge of Christ. I think it may be possible to answer affirmatively in a way that would allay such fears. God's grace is meant for the whole human race, and Christ has provided for the salvation of all in his universal atonement (1 Jn. 2:2). Surely we may assume, with support from Scripture in the form of what one might call the Melchizedek factor, that the person who turned to God in the light of whatever revelation he had would become eligible, as it were, for the fuller revelation and the salvation implied in it. We do not need to suppose that a person can enjoy Christ's salvation without Christ, but only that a person who turns to God for mercy on the basis of only general revelation will surely receive it.

Special revelation

An obvious limitation of general revelation is that while it calls attention to a moral and religious defect in us, it does not highlight a solution for it. A person might cast himself upon God for mercy on the basis of general revelation, but not be assured that there is mercy available for him. One is led to hope for and anticipate additional revelation which would address the painful tension between our moral and

religious obligation and our moral and religious shortcomings. One would hope against hope that the God who made the world would have done or said something to alleviate this desperate situation.

None of this remains hypothetical for those who recognize that special revelation which culminates in the incarnation. The Word has become flesh; the divine person has joined to himself our human potential for selfhood, thus surpassing the gulf that separates us. Furthermore, in this incarnation the problem of our moral guilt was effectively solved by a sacrifice which satisfies God's moral law and provides for our moral regeneration. Thus at the heart and centre of special revelation is a divinely initiated solution to the universal moral and religious predicament of man which takes the form of the incarnation of the Son of God. As Jesus told Philip, 'He who has seen me has seen the Father' (Jn. 14:9).

Stepping back from the mountain peak of special revelation, let us reflect on the features of that revelation in a more general way. The creation witness does not involve verbal revelation, and leaves us to figure out from the outside what is going on. There is a certain amount that we can learn from observing a person's behaviour and appearance, but this does not begin to compare with what we can know if the person involved is willing to open himself up to us. When it comes to self-directing persons as distinct from inert objects, revelation can only proceed if the willingness to share one's inner thoughts is present. If we are really to get to know God, it is absolutely necessary that God should reveal to us who he is. Otherwise, we would be left largely in the dark. This is why the Bible stresses so enthusiastically the self-revelation of God.

This revelation is personal. God reveals himself by telling us his name. He enters into covenant with us, and gives himself to be known by us. God himself, and not just universal truths about God, is what is revealed. Further, in revelation God stoops to make himself known in ways we can grasp and understand. He comes to us in categories of thought and action which make sense to us.

Of particular significance in addition to the incarnation are two modes of special revelation: revelation in historical events, and revelation in divine speech. First, the narrative line of the biblical gospel is structured around a recital of the works God has performed in human history. The mighty deeds of the Lord are repeatedly praised. He brought his people Israel out of the land of bondage, and he sent his Son to accomplish an even greater redemption. It is not enough to think of the deeds of God as ordinary events, construed in a religiously insightful way by people with faith. Nor is it enough to say that God presents himself to us personally through events, as if to minimize the deeds themselves as revelation. In the resurrection, for example, God did something outside ourselves and our experiences. In this miracle, God gave an objective witness to all mankind, in validating Christ's own claim to be God's anointed (Acts 17:31; Rom. 1:4). Jesus was attested by signs and wonders, and although put to death by evil men he was raised up by God and set at his right hand as Lord (Acts 2:22–36). The Christian proclamation rests, then, on solid historical reality when it calls people to consider its claim to revelation.

Second, and of equal importance, there is a verbal component to special revelation. God gave his law through Moses, and speaks to us through Jesus Christ, along with the apostles and prophets. Divine speech as well as divine action plays a crucial role in revelation. As the writer to the Hebrews says, 'In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son' (Heb. 1:1–2). God's acts by themselves, while meaningful, would be relatively mute, unless accompanied by verbal commentary giving insight into the character and purposes of God. God not only raises the crucified Christ from the dead, but also explains to us the redemptive significance of that action, as when Paul writes: 'Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures' (1 Cor. 15:3). Jesus was not merely another Jewish martyr dying for his faith, but the divinely appointed substitute of us all putting away our sins. The divinely given interpretation of the cross is practically as important to us as the cross itself, at least as far as our being able to appropriate its benefits intelligibly is concerned. In the biblical account, the divine speech is every bit as central to revelation as the divine action. Revelation is to be found both in God's deeds and in God's words.

If it is true that special revelation conveys propositional truth and verbal communication from God, then it is natural to expect the deposit of truth to be settled into written form. It would be very surprising if this were not so, given the verbal character of revelation, not to mention the linguistic

nature of human beings themselves. It is more than reasonable to expect that divine revelation would find expression in written form. Only written documents are capable of preserving the insights communicated in revelation over time and making them available to the people who come later. Again, none of this remains hypothetical because we find in the Bible a claim concerning enscripturated revelation which answers to this need.

Praying to the God who Speaks:

prayers inspired by the study of Theology.



Dr Stephen Spence
Christies Beach Baptist Church
Congregational Pastor

The Self-Revealing God

Word of God; Light in Our Darkness.

Lost, uncertain, we stumble towards the sound of your call.

But distracted and disorientated by the Siren call of our personal dreams and desires, we again find ourselves lost.

Speak louder; shine brighter, we pray.

Our ears are blocked by our self-interest.

Our eyes are dimmed by our self-obsession.

Speak to us, Word of God, not from the general works of your hand but from the special words of your heart.

Shine for us, Light of the World, illuminating for us your face and not just your works.

Speak louder; shine brighter, we pray.

Our ears are blocked by our love of our comforts.

Our eyes are dimmed by our endless pursuit of self-gratification.

Speak clearly to us your name. Reveal to us your person.

Illuminate for us your Way. Speak to us your Truth. Grant us a share in your Life.

Then give to us the courage to see, to hear, and to be.

Speak to us in the words of Jesus, the Word.

Shine bright for us in the deeds of Jesus, Light of the World.

Call us to yourself in the challenge of Jesus, Lord of Life.

Amen

A Prayer Informed by Sacramental [General] Revelation

Creator God, I hear you call my name...

From the deep depths of space where out of darkness light shines

In the unnoticed rhythm of each breath that I take

I hear you call my name, and I know that I am not alone.

Creator God, I hear you call my name...

From the sparkling colours of a rainbow that spans my horizon

In the cacophony of sounds that greet each fresh dawn

I hear you call my name, and I know that living has meaning.

Creator God, I hear you call my name...

From out of the tears of grief that flow from unwanted loss

In the joy of celebration that surrounds a longed for birth

I hear you call my name, and I know that I am loved.

Creator God, I hear you call my name.

And as I turn towards your voice

I hear you tell me your Name

And a new relationship begins.

Amen.

The Gift of Scripture

Lord of the Church, Lord of my life.

How can we serve you if we do not know your will?

How can we know your will if you will not speak to us?

Lord of the Church, Lord of my life, we give you our thanks for your word to us.

Through your word you speak words of life to your church.

Through your word you speak words of challenge to my life.

Lord of the Church, Lord of my life, we confess that at times your word and your will are not clear to us.

Sometimes we know it is our fault. There are none as deaf as those who will not hear.

But sometimes we want to hear your word to us, and yet we can't.

We get confused – hearing static, seeing dimly.

Lord of the Church, Lord of my life, we pray that you will grant us humility.

...a humility that will not claim to know with more certainty than we can honestly have.

...a humility that will not seek to twist your words into our answers.

...a humility that will allow others to speak your revelation to us, even when they are Samaritans.

...a humility that will keep us listening and watching for your Spirit's contemporary speaking and doing.

Lord of the Church, Lord of my life, we give you thanks for Word, Spirit, and Church.

We commit ourselves to the reading of your word

in the midst of the community of your people

with our ears open to all that you are doing in us and around us.

Lord of the Church, Lord of my life, we know that you resist the proud and give grace to the humble.

Grant us the grace to see and hear.

Grant us the courage to obey.

Amen.

A Prayer in Response to the Provision of Holy Scripture

Living Word of God, you speak words of life to us.

Words spoken by your prophets have become our light.

Words spoken by your apostles have challenged our ways.

Words spoken by your unnamed servants have revealed your face to us.

Words of the past have become words of our present as you breathed your life into them.

So we are without excuse.

We ask, where is our God? Your words reveal your presence in our midst.

We ask, what does the Lord will? Your words reveal your ways to us.

We are without excuse.

We commit ourselves again to read your word...

Not in order to discover the past.

Not in order to become a master of the content.

We commit ourselves again to read your word

in order that we might meet with the living God and, thus, be changed.

You speak words of life to us, Living Word of God.

Amen.

The Divinity of Jesus: God's Self-Revelation

The Bible identifies God uniquely as Creator of “all things” and, therefore, as Ruler of “all things.” There is an absolute line of division between God and “all things.” This is why only God can be worshipped.

Surprisingly, then, the New Testament (NT), reflecting the early church's experience of Jesus, identifies Jesus on the God-side of that uncrossable line! Humans, spirits, and angels, are all on the created side of the line; but not Jesus. Jesus is Creator of “all things,” he is Ruler of “all things,” and, therefore, he is worshipped.

Yet this shared identity of the Father and the Son never led the early Christians or the historical Church to the belief that there were two gods. There is only one God, with one story (i.e., with one identity), who is revealed as Father by the Son. (see Trinity)

On the basis of this shared identity of God, the NT concludes that Jesus is the ultimate and the unique revealer of God. Jesus is not merely one who teaches us about God. Jesus is the one who reveals God to us. To know Jesus is to know God.

Prayer to the Divine Jesus

My God Jesus,

in you we have met our Maker and our Lord so we need search for meaning and truth nowhere else.

In you we have found the One who called us by name, our search is over, we have found our God. In you is the life that is the light for all people.

We were formed by you and for you.

We thank you that even in your glory – far beyond our world or our understanding – you loved us enough to become Immanuel, God with us. And not just for a moment; you remain Immanuel, the One who will never leave us nor forsake us.

We are humbled by the demonstration of your grace for you were prepared to do for us what we could not do for ourselves.

Thank you for the cross.

Thank you for your willingness to be both our High Priest and our perfect sacrifice.

Guide us. Form us.

Lord Jesus, we hear your call and we obey.

Amen.