

GENERAL REVELATION

“that which is evident within us”

Key question

Is there a common ground where we can talk with confidence to a non-Christian about the things of God? What does such a common ground consist of?

Key text

Romans 1:19-20

“that which is known about God, is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse”

Key Definition

General Revelation

General revelation is the self-disclosure of God through His creation to every person throughout all of history and time. Information about God’s power and justice not His mercy and grace are featured.

Introduction

“We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” The Declaration of Independence

1. **Religious faith is a universal human experience.**

- a. This does not mean that everyone embraces a formal religion. Atheists, naturalists, and hedonists may distance themselves from Christianity, Judaism, Islam, etc. but they none-the-less display signs of religious faith in that they start with faith assumptions about ultimate reality and authority.
- b. The notion of a secular society (devoid of “religious” faith assumptions) is a modern ideal that does not and has never existed.
 1. **Paganism** (the worship of false gods) is a more accurate description of popular American culture. The modern gods of self, material goods, the American dream, etc. function as objects of worship in our culture.
 2. The notion of a **secular society** that is not committed to any one image or mythical worldview is a farce. We cannot avoid starting with a faith commitment in something.

The question is not faith versus reason but rather faith in which presuppositions. Usually, what is taken for granted as a working myth is modern naturalism as defined by popular science. This is a world that consists of space, time, energy, and matter only.

2. Paul in his ministry at Lystra and Athens reveals important truths about the value and limitations of world religions.

Acts 14 “¹⁵ Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you in order that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them. ¹⁶ And in the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; ¹⁷ and **yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.**”

- a. The Biblical God is connected to all creation because He is the Creator.
- b. God has been quite permissive throughout history.
- c. For those who had eyes to see and ears to hear there was evidence of His presence in – the provisions of nature and in the human capacity for appreciation.

Acts 17 “²² And Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. ²³ For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, ‘TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.’ What therefore you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; ²⁵ neither is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all life and breath and all things; ²⁶ and He made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined {their} appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation, ²⁷ that they should seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; ²⁸ for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His offspring.’ ²⁹ Being then the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. ³⁰ Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent, ³¹ because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.”

- a. This passage raises questions about the relationship of world religions to Christianity.
 1. All religions are an expression of the human quest for transcendent meaning in the face of death and suffering.
 2. While all religions can represent some aspects of the truth, they each fail to see the big story as it is revealed in the Bible.
- b. What makes Christianity unique?
 1. **Historical basis** – Along with Judaism, Christianity is based not so much on a philosophy of life as an event in history. This means that Christianity is open to verification or refutation.
 2. **Jesus, the incarnation of God** – This is verified by the resurrection.
 3. **Salvation from sin by grace through faith** – This stands in contrast to universalism and moral merit.

c. The Divine Pyramid as understood in Greco-Roman religion.



d. Paul’s posture as an evangelist in a pagan setting was characterized by:

1. He assumed that there was a common ground for talking about eternal truths.
2. He recognized an honest longing in the hearts of his audience and appealed to it.
3. He was rational in his approach, appealing to history and logic.
4. He saw expressions of truth in there religious culture.

3. Psalm 19:1-3 tells us there is public knowledge about God for those who have ears to hear.

Psalm 19 “1 The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. 2 Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. 3 There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard.”

- a. The revelation of God in the creation is not through words but through an intuitive sense.
- b. What is revealed? - God’s glory (presence) and His work (creation).

4. Religions of the world bear witness to a wide and deep sense of God’s presence and authority. This does not mean that everyone embraces a formal religion. Atheists, naturalists, and hedonists may distance themselves from Christianity, Judaism, Islam, etc. but they none-the-less display signs of religious faith.

How do the various religions of the world compare in numbers of adherents world-wide?

Christians (2.1 billion)	33%
Muslims (1.5 billion)	21%
Atheists (1.1 billion)	16%
Hindus (900 million)	14%
Buddhists	(376 million) 6%
Sikhs (23 million)	
Jews (14 million)	0.22%
Other (21 million)	

5. Three great world views contrasted (Radix Vo. 2 #2 April 2001 by Steven B. Cowan pp19)

Topic	Naturalism	Pantheism	Christian Theism
God	No God	Everything is God or a part of God	God exists and is distinct from His creation
Ultimate Reality	Materialism; All that exists is the physical, material universe.	Idealism; All that exists is spirit; physical world is illusion	Dualism; a real physical universe exists that is created by God
Knowledge	Scientism; the only source of knowledge is the scientific method	Mysticism; the only source of knowledge is mystical experience	Revelation is a source of knowledge as well as reason and science.
Human Beings	Result of random process of evolution; purely physical beings	Inherently divine; physical aspect result of illusion	Created in God's image; spiritual and physical beings
Ethics	Relativism; no objective moral values	Relativism; no objective moral values	Objective moral values revealed by God
Man's plight	Ignorance and Superstition	Illusion and Reincarnation	Sin; alienated from God
Solution	Education and Technology	Meditation and detachment from physical world	Salvation by God's grace through faith in Christ's atonement

A. **General revelation is available to all people rendering every person responsible before God.**

1. General revelation is the self-disclosure of God through His creation to every person throughout all of history and time. Only information about God's power and justice are provided. God's mercy and grace are not featured through general revelation.
2. **The revelation of God can be divided into two parts.**
 - a. **GENERAL** - available to all creation at all times.
 1. **Cosmos** - material world - **Rom.1:19-20** "that which is known about God, is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so the they are without excuse" (Ps.8:1-3, 19:1-3, Isa.40:12-14,26, Acts 14:15-17)
 2. **Conscience** - intuitive sense - **Rom.2:14-16** "For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their

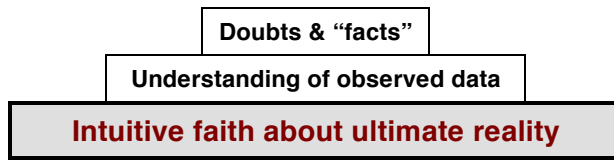
conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them,”

3. **Culture** - human history - **Acts 13:17** “and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.”(Acts 17:26-28)
4. **Corruption** - the curse of death - **Rom.1:18** “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men”
- b. **SPECIAL** - available to select individuals at special times.
 1. **Words of revelation** - **Heb.1:1-2** “God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son,”
 2. **Acts of God** - **I Cor.15:1-8** The physical form of the resurrected Christ was seen by many in space and time.
3. **The endowments of humanity enable us to experience, examine, and explain God’s revelation.**
 - a. **PHYSICAL SENSES** - **I Jn.1:1-2** “What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld and our hands handled, concerning the Word of Life - and the life was manifested, and we have seen and bear witness and proclaim to you that eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us -”
 - b. **MENTAL SENSES** - **Rom.1:19-20** (the ability to reason) Paul’s argument in I Cor.14 is that unless something can address the mind it will not edify the community. Personal spiritual experience can edify the individual but not the community.
 - c. **SPIRITUAL SENSES** - **I Cor.2:12** “Now we have received, not the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God.”
4. **We should not be surprised at the common moral impulses that are present in nearly all humans.**
 - a. **COMMON MORAL SENSE** - **Rom.2:14-15** (a common moral sense) “. . .they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them.”

NOTE: “Mankind’s moral sense is not a strong beacon light, radiating outward to illuminate in sharp outline all that it touches. It is, rather, a small candle flame, casting vague and multiple shadows, flickering and sputtering in the strong winds of power and passion, greed and ideology. But brought close to the heart and cupped in one’s hands, it dispels the darkness and warms the soul.” James Q Wilson

There are certain moral issues that have very broad if not universal endorsement.

 1. Care for family members is present in one form or another in all known societies.
 2. Incest is forbidden in all societies.
 3. A sense of social concern - empathy, fairness, and self sacrifice for others is common.
 4. A sense of shame, guilt, alienation, need for atonement is wide spread.
 - b. **THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY** – Innate moral character is encouraged in the context of a biological bond between parent and child.
5. **Our intuitive (faith) sense gives meaning to the information gathered by our other senses.**
 - a. Faith precedes doubt in that doubt must be based on a reality that is assumed by faith.
 - b. Faith assumptions are at the core of all knowledge.



6. Interpreting the Bible involves both objective and subjective factors in the natural sphere (apart from the supernatural work of the Spirit).

OBJECTIVE FACTORS	SUBJECTIVE FACTORS
An analysis of data from an impersonal perspective.	A synthesis of personal experience, taste, and temperament.
Public Facts Logic Head Left Brain Inductive	Personal Feelings Values Heart Right Brain Deductive
“Come let us reason together.”	“The love of God constrains us.”
“The head is the doorkeeper of the heart”	“The heart is the parent of the head.”
“Make sense”	“Show up”
Presuppositions - <i>our assumptions</i> Suppositions - <i>our observations</i>	Predispositions - <i>our temperament</i> Dispositions - <i>our mood at the moment</i>

B. Natural Theology should be understood by Christians because it is a common ground for discussion of life issues between believers and non-believers.

1. The core of natural theology is the idea that it is possible, without a prior commitment of faith to the beliefs of Christianity, and without relying upon 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.
2. Thomas Aquinas taught that all truth belongs to one of two realms:
 - a. The lower realm of **nature** known through reason.
 - b. The higher realm of **grace** known through faith.
3. Natural theologians tend to be Arminian or even Pelagian rather than Calvinistic or Augustin-ian. That is to say, they put emphasis for salvation, on human choice not divine choice.
4. Classic arguments for the existence of God presuppose natural theology.
 - a. **Cosmological** argument - There is need for a first cause.
 - b. **Teleological** argument - There is order and purpose in nature that speaks of intelligent design.
 - c. **Anthropological** argument - All people possess a moral impulse that goes beyond the practical and immediate needs of man.
 - d. **Congruity** argument - The existence of God best explains all phenomena.
 - e. **Ontological** argument - The fact that we can imagine a supreme being requires that such a being exists. This argument is adopted from a Platonic framework, in which the ideal is

more real than the physical. (This argument, in its 20th century form, appeals to the nearly universal sense of a supreme power.)

5. Karl Barth (neo-orthodoxy) rejected natural theology.
 - a. He believed that God was transcendent to the world of man.
 - b. He believed that all divine revelation was in the person of Christ and was person to person not station to station.
 - c. He believed that the Bible was a human witness to revelatory encounters.
6. Calvin & Luther’s views suggest that general revelation is objective but man is blinded by sin and limited in his ability to put it together so as to know God and be made right with Him. **Rom.10:14** “How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?”
7. God is revealed THROUGH nature but not IN nature, IN SPITE OF nature, AS nature or OUTSIDE OF nature.
8. In summary there are three basic understandings of general revelation.

Aquinas, Thomas (Roman Catholic)	Luther, Calvin (the best view)	Kuyper, Barth, Van Til
Enough knowledge is mediated by general revelation.	Partial knowledge is mediated by general revelation.	No knowledge is mediated by general revelation.
General revelation is enough to lead us to salvation.	Special revelation gives us knowledge unto salvation.	Without special revelation we know nothing of the truth.
The fall did not damage our reasoning ability.	The fall damaged our reasoning ability but did not destroy it.	The fall destroyed all of our ability to come to truth.

C. **Common sense suggests that a moral standard exists.** (a summary of ch.7 in *“I don’t have enough faith to be an atheist.”*)

1. The Moral Law is undeniable in that even radical relativists hold to certain absolutes – “There are no absolutes.” is an absolute. Human rights, free speech, self-respect, etc. are absolutes that are commonly embraced by relativists.
2. Our Reactions to “right from wrong” reveal Moral Laws. We need moral standards to live in social situations. Moral law is not so much revealed in what we do to each other as by how we react to what is done.
3. Human rights demand moral law. When the Nazi war criminals were brought to trial in Nuremberg, they were convicted of violating basic human rights as defined by the Moral Law.
4. Justice and Injustice are meaningless without moral law. The moral status of the Holocaust is not just a matter of opinion.
5. Moral differences could not be measured apart from moral law. The moment you say that one set of moral ideas can be better than another, you are, in fact, measuring them both by a standard, saying that one of them conforms to that standard more nearly than the other.
6. There is no knowledge of Right or Wrong apart from moral law. To criticize Christians for claiming to “have the truth” is to claim to know a truth.

7. Political and social dissent, assume that a moral standard exists. The civil rights movement, the child protection act, etc. all assume a moral standard.
8. We need not make excuses for violating moral laws that don't exist.

Note that a number of important distinctions might help us understand the difference between radical relativism and reasonable relativism.

- a. Absolute Morals vs. Changing Behavior. Sociologists observe changing behavior norms but this does not disprove the existence of unchanging moral values.
- b. Absolute Morals vs. Changing Perceptions of the Facts. "All city people are rude." may not be true but rudeness remains a reality.
- c. Absolute Morals vs. Applying them to Particular Situations. When we try to answer the challenge of the popular class room problem (designed to illustrate relative values) of who to throw overboard among 5 shipmates in order to save the ship we may say something about relativism on a secondary level but the very dilemma suggests an absolute – the ship is worth saving.
- d. Absolute Morals vs. Relative Cultural applications. An application of a principle in one culture (greeting with a kiss) may be inappropriate in another.
- e. Absolute Morals vs. Moral disagreements. The fact that we do not agree on certain moral issues does not remove them.
- f. Absolute Morals vs. Relative Means. Both Liberals and Conservatives may agree that they want liberty and justice for all but may have very different understandings of how to achieve it.

Darwinism (dysteleological evolution) does not have an explanation for moral values.

- a. Materialism offers no basis of morality.
- b. Morality cannot be merely an instinct in that we have competing instincts and humans are often moved to do things that do not further our self-interest.
- c. On what basis can we assume that "survival" is a core value without making it a moral principle?
- d. Does not the "survival" instinct suggest a deeper purpose?
- e. The fact that moral law is discovered over a period of time does not demand that the moral law was created (evolved) over a period of time.

- D. **Christians should speak with confidence to non-believers knowing that general revelation reveals the basics of life to all people.**

The Point

Christians and non-Christians share a common ground of understanding some of the most basic truths of life and death, which enable the gospel to be proclaimed and understood.

1. It justifies the wrath of God against those who openly and knowingly rebel against Him.
2. It helps explain the common themes among the many different world religions.

(S.H Kellogg in *A Handbook of Comparative Religions* notes the following universal characteristics among religions.)

- a. There exists a power (or powers) superior to man, on which he is dependent, and which decisively influences his destiny. Man is necessarily related to this higher power.
 - b. Because of man's relation to this supreme power, certain things are obligatory on him, and other things must be avoided at peril of suffering. Although often denied, some vague sense of responsibility for one's actions remains among all peoples.
 - c. The feeling, that between man and the supreme power something is wrong, is expressed in all religions. All religions more or less distinctly express or appeal to man's sense of sin.
 - d. Again, more or less distinctly, religions assume that there is for man a state of being after death, and that the consequences of wrongdoing or right doing in this present life will follow a man after death.
3. It renders humanity without excuse in its attitude toward God.

General revelation reveals:

- | | |
|---|--|
| • God's existence - Ps.19:1, Rom.1:19 | • God's eternity - Ps.93:2 |
| • God's eternity - Acts 17:24 | • God's greatness - Ps.8:3-4 |
| • God is Creator - Acts 14:15 | • God's majesty - Ps.29:4 |
| • God is Sustainer - Acts 14:16, 17:25 | • God's power - Ps.29:4, Rom.1:20 |
| • God's universal Lordship - Acts 17:24 | • God's wisdom - Ps.104:24 |
| • God is self-sufficient - Acts 17:25 | • God's goodness - Matt.5:45, Acts 14:17 |
| • God's transcendence - Acts 17:24 | • God's intelligence - Acts 17:29 |
| • God's immanence - Acts 17:26-27 | • God's living existence - Acts 17:28 |
| • God's moral standard - Rom.2:15 | • God's righteousness - Rom.1:32 |
| • God should be worshiped - Acts 14:15, 17:23 | • God's living existence - Acts |
| • God has a sovereign will - Acts 17:26 | • God will judge evil - Rom.2:15-16 |

4. It provides a common ground to communicate the message of the gospel.
5. It provides the basis of the American constitution and civil legislation.



6. It finds a witness in a universal moral sense.
 - a. Common sense virtues make up our hopes and aspirations for others and ourselves.
 1. Life is better than death.
 2. Health is better than sickness.
 3. Liberty is better than slavery.
 4. Prosperity is better than poverty.
 5. Happiness is better than suffering.
 6. Education is better than ignorance.

- 7. Justice is better than injustice.
- b. The fact that people are outraged at any deed as evil is a witness to a common moral sense and God’s image within all humans.
- 7. It provided the rational for the scientific method.
 - a. The historic origin of modern science grew out of two presuppositions:
 - 1. Nature (creation) is the work of an orderly creator and is therefore predictable and internally consistent.
 - 2. Human beings are sufficiently detached or removed from nature to be able to discover genuine truths about its operations. Man, the observer is not entirely immersed in nature the observed.
 - 3. These presuppositions were grounded not in pantheistic Eastern worldviews but in Western Judeo-Christian philosophy.
 - a. Nature is sustained by the power of the Creator.
 - b. Man is made in God’s image and while sharing a body that is closely linked to nature, he is none-the-less is distinct in spirit.
 - c. Human hope and progress have been inspired by the challenge to “have dominion” over creation and to overcome the effects of the fall.
 - b. There are two contrasting kinds of wisdom - (not science vs. Scripture) but (open vs. closed). Wisdom that is not open to the spiritual, supernatural dimension of life will not only be limited but misguided on many counts.

GOD CREATES	GOD SPEAKS
The Natural World	The Bible
Scientific method	Spirit-guided hermeneutics
Scientific descriptions	Theological descriptions
<i>Mechanism</i> <i>Probability</i> <i>What?</i> <i>I- It</i> <i>Evolution</i> <i>chance</i> <i>Body</i> <i>Brain</i> <i>Animal</i> <i>Temporal</i> <i>Physical</i>	<i>Meaning</i> <i>Purpose</i> <i>Why?</i> <i>I - Thou</i> <i>Creation</i> <i>Providence</i> <i>Soul</i> <i>Mind</i> <i>Human being</i> <i>Eternal</i> <i>Spiritual</i>

- c. How can we be objective if as naturalists we have rejected the very basis upon which to believe in objectivity? And if we cannot in fact be truly objective, then who is to say what is science or, for that matter, anything else?
- d. When a person limits the search for truth to empirical observations of the creation (with no regard for transcendent authority - God) they will despair of finding meaning and truth.
- e. Man’s origin and relationship to the cosmos is an important issue in Biblical revelation. Note: The Bible is not concerned so much with explaining the mechanism of human development as the meaning and relationships of man.
- f. Modern scientific discoveries bear witness to the existence of God.
 - 1. Naturalistic (evolutionary) theories of origins are problematic.

- a. **Einstein's theory of relativity** suggested a time bound cosmos, which meant that theories of evolution could not count on an infinite amount of time to facilitate the process.
 - b. The advent of the **electron microscope** forced us to recognize the complexity of the cell, suggesting that the building blocks of life are far more complex than can be accounted for through a process as simple as Darwin's theory.
 - c. **"Information theory"** in science suggest "informed structure" for DNA and proteins. This has set scientists looking for a causal mechanism beyond known natural sources.
 - d. **Genetic studies** suggest that human beings come from one original couple.
"We are finding that humans have very, very shallow genetic roots which go back very recently to one ancestor. That indicates that there was an origin in a specific location on the globe and then it spread out from there." Michael Hammer, University of Arizona writing in *Nature*.
2. See the notes on science and evolution (#311)

Response

Head

I am to understand that:

All humans share some basic understanding of God, spiritual reality, and need for redemption.

Heart

I am to believe that:

I can talk to people from different cultures and circumstances and expect to be understood.

Hands

I am to behave by:

Being bold in sharing my faith.

Pastoral advice

How should general revelation effect our faith?

1. General revelation should give us a respect for the remnants of God's image in all humans thus encouraging our sensitivity and love for all people.
2. We should expect there to be a "common ground" intellectually and spiritually from which we can talk about the claims of the Biblical message with non believers.

3. General revelation defines the limits of legitimate public moral policy in a pluralistic American republic. It instructs us as to how to argue in the public square of culture.
4. General revelation helps us answer the perplexing question of the fairness of a God who judges those who do not believe and who have not heard the gospel message.

Questions that you should be able to answer.

1. Specific facts you should know.

- a. What is general revelation?
- b. According to Romans 1-2 how can a person know about God before hearing the gospel and coming to faith in Christ?
- c. Explain four classical arguments for the existence of God.
- d. What is significant about Paul's speech in Acts 17?

2. Issues that you should be able to discuss.

- a. How has "natural law" played a role in American Constitutional government?
- b. How does general revelation relate to modern science?
- c. How are we to explain the common characteristics in world religions?

3. Questions you should wrestle with.

- a. What can be assumed about a non-believer's ability to understand when sharing the gospel with them?
- b. How much can a person be held responsible for on the basis of general revelation alone?
- c. Can a person be condemned on the basis of general revelation when a person cannot believe apart from special revelation?