

What We Believe: Knowing and Loving our Doctrines

Adult Sunday Studies 2023-24

2 | Knowledge of God & Apologetics

How Could the Finite ever Know the Infinite?

Revelation - from the biblical terms 'to uncover', 'to strip away'. What do those definitions alone tell us about revelation?

*Romans 1.18-23 - "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness **suppress the truth**. 19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his **eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived**, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are **without excuse**. 21 For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools, 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things."*

Westminster (WCF) 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 unexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation. **Therefore** it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his church; 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: which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased."

See Rom 2:14-15; Rom 1:19-20; Ps 19:1-4; Rom 1:32-2:1; John 17:3; 1 Cor 1:21; 1 Cor 2:13-14; Heb 1:1-2; Luke 1:3-4; Rom 15:4; Matt 4:4,7,10; Isa 8:20; 2 Tim 3:15; 2 Pet 1:19; John 20:31; 1 Cor 14:37; 1 John 5:13; 1 Cor 10:11; Heb 1:1-2; Heb 2:2-4

Notice how there are already a number of issues at stake - creation, original sin, salvation, and continuing revelation. But we have to start somewhere, and will come to those in due time!

Belgic Confession 2 - The Means by Which We Know God - "We know him by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe, since that universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God: his eternal power and his divinity, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20. All these things are enough to convict men and to leave them without excuse. Second, he makes himself known to us more openly by his holy and divine Word, as much as we need in this life, for his glory and for the salvation of his own."

Unpacking General or Common Revelation

1. **What is it?** How God reveals Himself through nature or natural reason.
2. **Who has it?** Everyone!
 1. "Men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him... He has engraved unmistakable marks of his glory, so clear and so prominent that even unlettered and stupid folk cannot plead the excuse of ignorance." - John Calvin
3. **What does it get right?**
 1. Certain general aspects about God
 2. Penultimate knowledge and wisdom across all disciplines
 3. ***Why should this matter? Surprised by common ground!***
 1. No person, viewpoint, society is so utterly evil that it is pure evil. There is always hope for redemption, a glimmer of goodness, or worthy desire in the darkest of evils.
4. **What does it get wrong?**
 1. Revelation of God in nature is "slight, obscured, mingled with error, and besides is not valued highly... The world is a concealment as well as a revelation of God (Rom. 1.20-3)." - Herman Bavinck
 2. Insufficient in itself for salvation

3. Condemns us - Because of sin, general revelation at its best can only condemn us. See Rom. 1.32a, 2.1, 2.12, 2.15-6. Note the similarities with the power of the law, that it reveals our need for a Savior.
4. ***Why should this matter? Not surprised by sin!***
 1. We should not be surprised at the depths of sin! Everyone apart from God is always starting from a fundamentally wrong position.
5. **Where do we see general and special revelation differentiated in Scripture?**
 1. Common Grace is God's preservation of the world, whereas Special Grace is God's saving revelation to Israel and the Church.
 1. Everyone is always governed by and aware of God's general revelation, but a special line emerges, from Seth to Noah, and then from Abraham to Israel, to which God reveals Himself in a redemptive fashion.
 2. After the Fall, our condition is "one in which wrath and grace, punishment and blessing, judgment and long-suffering are mingled with each other.... God is continually manifesting His wrath and yet, by reason of His own good pleasure, is always again revealing His grace also." - Bavinck
 2. They're both grace, but "The great difference between this *speaking* on God's part in the general revelation and that in His special revelation is that in the first **God leaves it to man to find out** His thoughts in the works of His hands, and that in the second He **Himself gives direct expression** to those thoughts and in this form offers them to the mind of man." - Bavinck
6. **Finding both common and uncommon ground**
 1. A Christian can be both a sympathetic insider at times as well as a critical outsider, depending on the context and beliefs. The task of apologetics is discerning when and how to be either sympathetic or critical in the right moment, critically analyzing what are the assumptions that either Christianity affirms or challenges.
 2. "When we enter a culture, we should be looking for two kinds of beliefs. The first are what I call 'A' beliefs, which are beliefs people already hold that, because of God's common grace, roughly correspond to some parts of biblical teaching...However, we will also find 'B' beliefs—what may be

called 'defeater' beliefs—beliefs of the culture that lead listeners to find some Christian doctrines implausible or overtly offensive....In Manhattan, what the Bible says about turning the other cheek is welcome (an 'A' belief), but what it says about sexuality is resisted (a 'B' belief). In the Middle East, we see the opposite—turning the other cheek seems unjust and impractical, but biblical prohibitions on sexuality make sense." - Tim Keller

7. **What are some of the dangers of either underestimating or overestimating common grace?**

How ought this to impact our prayer, character, and community?

Remember, the Church is the evangelist most fully, which is still definitely relevant in apologetics.