

Systematic Theology for the Local Church
#11—Bibliology—Part II¹
God Has Spoken to Everyone: General Revelation
 Paul Karleen
 May 27, 2007

For the studies in Bibliology: Become familiar with Sections 6-12 in House's *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine*. Read all of Packer's *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*. Packer's book was written against the background of the debate over Fundamentalism in the late 20th century. However, his presentation of the systems of authority (reason, tradition and Scripture) is timeless. Also, read Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, ch. 1, "The Fact of Divine Revelation," ch. 2, "The Inspired Nature of Holy Scripture," ch. 3, "The Attributes of Holy Scripture," and ch. 5, "The Bible as the $\Pi\omicron\upsilon$ $\Sigma\tau\omega$ for Knowledge and Personal Significance," which deals with the Bible as the basis for life. I encourage you also to listen to some of S. Lewis Johnson's studies in systematic theology available online. We have asked that you listen to at least five of these. With each of my studies I will be providing a running compilation of key definitions. I encourage you to keep up to date on these. Memorizing one or two sentences a week is all it will take and this will turn out to be invaluable in the long run.

I encourage you to bring House's book on Sundays and Wednesdays, since we will refer to it during the studies. It is also valuable to have your notebook with the set of definitions so you can look up any terms that you are unfamiliar with. Please remember that you have what may be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to study systematic theology. This is important not because I am teaching it but because you are getting an orderly presentation with valuable tools available to you. You will get very little from this series if you do not become involved to the best of your ability.

In one of his Lessons in Systematic Theology available online, S. Lewis Johnson, Jr. underscores the value of studying systematic theology². Without systematic theology we cannot have a balanced view of what the Bible teaches. He gives the example of many Christians who come to know Christ and become excited about prophecy. All too often, however, they major in that doctrine and become unbalanced. On the other hand, in many churches prophecy is discounted and people get only devotional messages. And so it goes. Because of the lack of specific study of systematic theology, as we are doing, or because of the lack of balanced teaching that continually has systematic theology behind it, Christians become unbalanced and are unable to understand and live out the full counsel of the Word of God. Systematic theology is essential and practical.

The background problem: the knowability of God

So as we move systematically through theology we come to the question of the knowability of God. If God is infinite and we are finite, then there's a problem. We do not have a capacity that enables us to identify things that we would like to know about God and then approach Him and examine them. Also, His holiness and our sinfulness prevent us from approaching Him. How can we know anything about Him? Even Adam faced this problem. When God made Him, he was sinless, but still a creature. He could not know anything about God unless God told him.

¹ Copyright 2007 by Paul S. Karleen. Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright© 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

² S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., "Canst Thou by Searching Find Out God?, or the Knowability of God" Online audio Lessons in Systematic Theology, available at http://www.believerschapeldallas.org/tapes/slj-69_systematic-theology/part-1.htm.

If we are to know anything about Him, it must come from His initiation of communication about Himself. He will have to tell us what He wants us to know. Thankfully, God has taken the initiative to tell us about Himself and how to be related to Him. What He has told us is *revelation*. Here is a definition:

Revelation is the information about Himself given by God to human beings.*

It might help you to take the word revelation as equivalent to ‘disclosure’ or ‘communication.’ God has disclosed Himself or communicated Himself to human beings.

One of the values of seeing God as the initiator in disclosing Himself is that we put a higher valuation on what we know about Him. After all, He could have left us in our sinful condition with no knowledge whatsoever about why we are here and the fact that He exists. It also helps us to see that God reaches out to sinful creatures with no interest in Him. In fact, left on our own we pervert and ignore what He does show us. It is pure grace that He would reach out to us.

There are two different avenues through which God has carried out revelatory activity. S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., says, “God has written His book of revelation in two volumes. The first volume is *general revelation*, and the second is *special revelation*.”³ We will consider general revelation today.

General revelation is information that is available to every human being without exception and derives its name from the fact that it is so widespread. We will see, however, that because it is available to all, and yet no one comes to God through it by himself, it is limited in content and effectiveness. Here is a definition of *general revelation*:

General revelation is God’s disclosure of Himself, available directly to everyone, given through means other than dreams, visions, direct words and Christ Himself.*

Conservative theologians generally see four channels for general revelation: nature, human makeup, conscience and history. Here is Wayne House’s definition and description of *general revelation*⁴:

General revelation is God’s communication of himself to all persons at all times and in all places. It refers to God’s self-manifestation through nature, history, and the inner being (consciousness) of the human person.

This helps us to see that general revelation is given to all human beings indiscriminately. This means that even without the Bible all human beings have an innate understanding of the existence of God and knowledge of some of His characteristics.

Channels of general revelation

1. Revelation in nature

The key passages that present this are Ps. 19:1-6 and Rom. 1:18-32. Here is the Psalms passage:

- 1 The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
- 2 Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.
- 3 There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard.

³ S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., “Revelation, or Has Man a Word from God?” Online audio Lessons in Systematic Theology, available at http://www.believerschapeldallas.org/tapes/slj-69_systematic-theology/part-1.htm.

⁴ H. Wayne House, *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 21.

4 Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.

In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun,

5 which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion, like a champion rejoicing to run his course.

6 It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is hidden from its heat.

The channel of disclosure here is the world of nature, specifically the sky and the features that each day brings, especially the sun—its course, power and heat. The psalmist tells us that the display is a form of “knowledge” and tells us specifically what we should learn from the heavens: 1) God’s glory and 2) God’s creatorship (“the work of his hands”). Notice also the universality of the message: it goes out to everyone. Thus, all human beings can tell that God is a glorious creator. If He is this, then He must exist. This psalm implicitly teaches the existence of God!

Romans 1 gives a different description of the revelation in nature:

18 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, 19 since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 20 For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

24 Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. 25 They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

26 Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. 27 In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

28 Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. 29 They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, 30 slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; 31 they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. 32 Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

Here the revelation comes from the creation in general (“what has been made”). From this human beings know that there is an eternal creator who is deity (“his eternal power and deity”). As in Ps. 19, this information has been given to everyone and is also clear to everyone. The result is a “knowledge of God” (v. 28) and the understanding that some things are wrong and that some things deserve death (probably physical here; v. 32—“they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death”). The “decree” probably refers to information that comes from Scripture—something beyond general revelation; we cannot identify any “righteous decree” in nature. All human beings also know that God should receive worship and thanks (v. 21) because He is glorious and eternal (v. 23).

As important as this passage is in telling what all human beings do know, it is valuable also for showing the depravity of the human heart as seen in universal rejection of this revelation. Paul appears to be saying that this is a conscious act (v. 25—“exchanged the truth of God for a lie”) and constituted a rejection of their

knowledge about God (v.28—“they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God”). The revelation Paul describes here was designed to offer human beings information that would help them to appreciate God more. Yet they reject the information and take the central avenue of revelation (God’s creatorship) and twist it and ascribe honor to what God created in nature. This includes the worship of the human body. God’s disclosure of Himself in nature is an act of grace that is met with rejection and perversion.

Revelation in nature also provides us with information about God as powerful, purposeful and creative. This is stressed in Isa. 40:26, where we are told that we can perceive His “great power and mighty strength” from the “starry host”:

25 “To whom will you compare me?
Or who is my equal?” says the Holy One.
26 Lift your eyes and look to the heavens:
Who created all these?
He who brings out the starry host one by one,
and calls them each by name.
Because of his great power and mighty strength,
not one of them is missing.

2. Revelation in human makeup

We do not even need to go beyond ourselves to gain some information about God. Acts 17:24-28 is part of Paul’s speech in Athens:

²⁴ “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. ²⁵ And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. ²⁶ From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. ²⁷ God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸ ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’

Although this passage teaches several things about creation, for our purposes we should see that it shows that our existence is drawn from His existence and that we are therefore like Him in some way. In addition, our living in groups in various places on the earth should suggest to us that someone has put us here for a reason. God wants us to learn from this to reach out to Him. We should conclude that things such as our intelligence and rational, moral and spiritual capacities are not accidental but give us a connection with God, because He is intelligent and rational and is a moral and spiritual being just as we are. The presence of these qualities in human beings forms in our natures an implicit argument for God’s existence.

3. Revelation in the conscience

God has also given us all a certain measure of ability to discern right from wrong, a conscience. We might not be able to identify this capacity specifically on our own, but Rom. 2:14-16 points out that we have consciences, a capacity implanted by God that gives us some ability to differentiate among moral and spiritual alternatives.

¹² All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. ¹³ For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. ¹⁴ (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not

have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law,¹⁵ since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.)¹⁶ This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.

Here in v. 15 we learn that the basic requirements of the law are internal to all human beings. The result is that we can know in many situations when we are doing something right or wrong. In fact, the existence of the conscience with this capacity shows that there *is* such a thing as right and wrong. Again, as with revelation in our makeup, this forms an implicit argument for God's existence, since this moral sense is common to every human being. As such, this also forms an argument against evolution. Evolutionists cannot identify any source for this capacity—and they have a hard time denying its existence! It is embarrassing to them.

4. Revelation in the events of history

Verse 28 of the Acts 17 passage points to God's controlling hand in human history. Isn't this exemplified in the final defeat of Hitler, in the fall of powerful nations that have persecuted Israel (Assyria, the Babylonians, the Persians)? Habakkuk 1 specifically says that God would bring the Babylonians against Judah!

In another vein, Mt. 5:45 reminds us that God exercises continual care over humanity and indeed the whole universe—that He allows and even supports life for those who are in rebellion against Him, as well as those who love Him—and tells us that He is long-suffering and loves His creation: “He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”

Colossians 1:17 adds another detail, that the Lord Jesus Christ is holding the universe together: “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” Of course, we cannot discern this from looking at nature. But we should be able to sense that there is someone behind life who does good things for us (although, admittedly, we are still faced with the problem of evil and catastrophes in nature).

Purpose and limitations

As we have already said, general revelation is designed by God to lead people to inquire further into spiritual realities but is a point of condemnation, when rejected (Rom. 1:18-20). It constitutes information universally available to all human beings, and through it everyone has a consciousness of God. But while the Holy Spirit in some cases uses general revelation when He is moving a person to come to Christ, the existence of sin prevents us from seeking God through general revelation on our own.. Having a consciousness of God and moving toward God are not the same thing. Romans 3:10-11 are inescapable:

10 As it is written: “There is no one righteous, not even one;
11 there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.

General revelation, like the Law, establishes proof that we are sinners in rebellion against God. Even though God has graciously revealed information about Himself through several channels, no one can or will come to salvation through it.

It is important, then, to realize that these disclosures available to everyone have their limitations. They are circumscribed in their content and their effect. They can only tell of God's existence, personality (in limited ways), power, purposefulness and moral character. They do not disclose His own righteousness or moral attributes. While they can give us impetus to look further for more about God as the Spirit works and they

certainly put us in a position where we are responsible to God, they do not and cannot tell us what we need to know to overcome our sin problem. So, for example, while Romans 1:19-20 teaches that even the knowledge gained from creation concerning God's power and deity are enough to obligate us to Him as a superior to us, they do not tell us how to solve our sin problem. Similarly, while our consciences tell us we are doing wrong, they do not tell us how to fix that problem. God's provision of information for this comes in special revelation, the focus of the next study.

Study questions

1. Be able to define *revelation* and *general revelation*. Review definitions given in previous studies.
2. Make a list or chart of the contributions of the key passages to the doctrine of general revelation. What do they tell us and what do they not tell us (what are the limitations)?
3. What do you learn from your own conscience?

Running compilation of key definitions

1. Systematic theology
Systematic theology is the organized presentation of all that the Bible teaches about God and His works.
2. Exegesis
Exegesis is the actual practice of studying or interpreting a document or other message to determine its meaning.
3. Context
Context in a document or utterance is the surroundings of a portion of a word, a word, or a group of words.
4. Bibliology
Bibliology is the doctrinal study of the nature of the Bible.
5. Biblical authority
Biblical authority is the quality inherent in Scripture by virtue of which human beings are completely answerable to its content.
6. Revelation
Revelation is the information about Himself given by God to human beings.
7. General revelation
General revelation is God's disclosure of Himself, available directly to everyone, given through means other than dreams, visions, direct words and Christ Himself.