

General Revelation and Special Revelation

God must reveal himself for us to know him. God has revealed himself as Creator through his works of creation and providence but has especially revealed himself as Redeemer through Scripture and its Spirit-inspired testimony to the saving work of Jesus Christ. Also: Bibliology; Doctrine of the Bible.

GENERAL REVELATION

GOD'S REALITY IS KNOWN TO ALL

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

PSALM 19:1

God's world is not a shield hiding the Creator's power and majesty. From the natural order it is evident that a mighty and majestic Creator is there. Paul says this in Romans 1:19–21, and in Acts 17:28 he calls a Greek poet as witness that humans are divinely created. Paul also affirms that the goodness of this Creator becomes evident from kindly providences (Acts 14:17; cf. Rom. 2:4), and that some at least of the demands of his holy law are known to every human conscience (Rom. 2:14–15), along with the uncomfortable certainty of eventual retributive judgment (Rom. 1:32). These evident certainties constitute the content of general revelation.

General revelation is so called because everyone receives it, just by virtue of being alive in God's world. This has been so from the start of human history. God actively discloses these aspects of himself to all human beings, so that in every case failure to thank and serve the Creator in righteousness is sin against knowledge, and denials of having received this knowledge should not be taken seriously. God's universal revelation of his power, praiseworthiness, and moral claim is the basis of Paul's indictment of the whole human race as sinful and guilty before God for failing to serve him as we should (Rom. 1:18–3:19).

God has now supplemented general revelation with the further revelation of himself as Savior of sinners through Jesus Christ. This revelation, given in history and embodied in Scripture, and opening the door of salvation to the lost, is usually called special or specific revelation. It includes explicit verbal statement of all that general revelation tells us about God, and teaches us to recognize that revelation in the natural order, in the events of history, and in the makeup of human beings, so that we learn to see the entire world as, in Calvin's phrase, a theatre of the glory of God.

J. I. Packer, Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1993), 9–10.

[Dt 29:29](#)

“The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.

[Ro 1:19–20](#)

because 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...

[2 Ti 3:16–17](#)

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

[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, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.

General Revelation

General revelation is God’s testimony to his character and works given to all human beings indiscriminately through the created order.

General revelation is the belief that flows naturally from the idea that mankind was made in the image and likeness of God and that the human mind is therefore capable of seeing him at work in the order of the universe. These factors allow people to draw certain conclusions about him that follow from such observations.

The Bible lends credence to the belief that general revelation is both real and accurate as far as it goes. It tells us that we can contemplate the stars and see in them the laws of the universe (Ps 19). We can examine the minds and consciences of others, which bear witness to the existence of a superior and highly moral reality to which we are all beholden and from which we have fallen away (Rom 2:14–15). Honest people will condemn themselves for moral failure and will try to put themselves in step with the spirit of the universe, whatever that may be.

Christians have adopted a number of different theories about the validity of general revelation. Some have claimed that it is broad enough to allow for the development of “natural theology,” true beliefs about God based on contemplating the nature of the world apart from Scripture. Natural theology can be found in different forms in almost every culture, and some people believe it is possible that those who cling to it might be saved by adhering to the light that has been given to them, partial and inadequate though that light is.

Others have claimed that general revelation is a preparation for the gospel more than anything else. It has no saving power in and of itself (Rom 1:20), but must be supplemented and corrected by a clearer and more direct (verbal) revelation from God (see “Special Revelation”). The contemplation of nature may prepare the mind to accept the basic beliefs of Christianity—for example, that there is a sovereign God ruling over the universe (Rom 1:20), and that something has gone awry in human life and that harmony with our Creator must be restored. General revelation can point these things out but cannot solve the problems of sin and evil. At best, it can do no more than make the heart restless for a solution and therefore open to the message of the gospel that provides what they are looking for.

Some theologians, especially in the Reformed tradition, have denied the validity of general revelation altogether. Any similarity between what the Bible teaches and what seekers after truth have discovered is essentially accidental. They may have stumbled on the truth, but they cannot distinguish it from other “discoveries” which are erroneous, and therefore any natural theology derived from it must ultimately be false in the light of the truth specially revealed by God.

It is important to note that this debate about general revelation and natural theology does not so much concern what Christians may perceive in the providential ordering of the universe by faith—what some refer to as a “theology of nature”—but rather about what natural human reason is able to conclude by contemplating the created order unaided by the guiding principles of special revelation.

Passages

KEY VERSES

- Ps 19:1
- Ro 1:19–20

Recommended Resources

General Revelation (Berkouwer).

General Revelation (Demarest).

The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology (Manning, ed.).¹

¹ Gerald Bray, [“General Revelation,”](#) in *Lexham Survey of Theology*, ed. Mark Ward et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018).

Special Revelation

Special revelation is the teaching about God and his works that he has given to us through the prophets and apostles and which is now contained primarily or exclusively in the Bible.

Special revelation has been given by God to particular individuals whom he has chosen to speak to and to teach. Some of these people are known to us by name, but others are not. Likewise, some of them wrote the revelation down, but many did not, and we learn about them only through the witness of others. In those cases, we are dependent on the results of oral tradition.

There is some debate about how God communicated to those who lived before the time of Abraham (about 2000 BC), but we are told that at least some of them had a personal, communicative relationship with their Creator—Adam and Noah being prime examples of this. What is certain is that Abraham and his descendants did receive special divine revelation, but none of it was written down for at least 500 years. The entire book of Genesis falls into this category, along with the people recorded in it. Written revelation explicitly began with Moses, who gave God’s law to the people of Israel—but even then writing did not become the norm until much later. Joshua, the judges, and the early prophets like Elijah and Elisha do not appear to have written anything down, despite their great importance in the history of special revelation. We know about them and their words because of the histories written by others.

Whether the later prophets like Isaiah, Amos, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and others directly wrote the books that bear their names is often debated, but there can be no doubt that these works claim to be special revelation from God addressed to particular individuals who were charged with the task of preaching that revelation as God’s own word to his people.

In the New Testament, we have nothing from the pen of Jesus and are dependent on the witness of others for our knowledge of his words and deeds. The apostle Paul has left us letters of his own, as have Peter, Jude, and John. But whatever the differences in the details of their composition, the books that are now in our Bibles have a distinctive character as testimony to God’s saving acts in Jesus and have always been regarded by the church as a special divine revelation—these writings are inspired or “God-breathed” (2 Tim 3:16–17). The Bible is the ultimate source of Christian teaching and the primary basis and norm of our beliefs and practice; whatever cannot be found in them (or directly deduced from them, like the doctrine of the Trinity) is not recognized as a special revelation from God.

How do we know that the Bible is God’s special revelation? There is much evidence in the manuscript tradition and in church history that supports its credibility and accuracy. But theologians often say that ultimately the Bible is “self-authenticating,” which means that when we hear the Bible expounded and take it to heart, then our lives are transformed by the Spirit of God in ways that are true of no other source. It is ultimately because God is the one who is speaking and who authenticates both the speaking and the hearing that we as the community of faith continue to receive the Bible as God’s special revelation to his people.

Passages Key Verses

Ge 12:1–3; Ex 3:4–22; Is 6:1–5; Je 1:4–10; Eze 2:1–8; Hag 1:1; Mt 16:17; Lk 1:26–38; Ac 9:1–7; Re 1:1–3; 1 Co 2:12–13

Recommended Resources

God, Revelation and Authority (Henry).

The Revelation of God (Jensen).²

² Gerald Bray, "[Special Revelation](#)," in *Lexham Survey of Theology*, ed. Mark Ward et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018).