

General and Special Revelation

Written by Calvin Fox

Monday, 22 September 2008 15:11 - Last Updated Monday, 29 September 2008 22:35

I. General Revelation (non-verbal): God reveals himself, His mind and will, directly in and through His works-

In Creation- its origins and preservation. Nature is not God and not to be worshipped; rather Nature reveals qualities of God: power, beauty, design, the “laws” of science. All these witness to God

In Human Beings- they image God. They reveal characteristics of Him: Rationality, Creativity, Morality, Communality, Spirituality

In History- we can see evidence of God’s providence and sovereignty in the affairs of individuals, groups and nations

All of the above is General Revelation. All of it reveals the mind, will and character of God- therefore, all of it is rightfully called His Word. However, this revelation is incomplete!

II. Special Revelation (verbal): God reveals himself, His mind, will and character, directly through actual words. Written down and recorded, they became Holy Scripture, in six categories-

The Five Books of Moses (Torah)

The Decalogue (section of the Torah)

The Prophets

The Books of Wisdom, including the Psalms

The Apostolic Writings [The “New Testament”]

The Person of Jesus (known through the Apostolic Writings, primarily the sections called “Gospels”)

All of the above is Special Revelation. All of it reveals the mind, will and character of God- all of it is also rightly called His Word.

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The Spirit and the Word

To review: The Hebrew word translated “Word” (dabhar) is also translated as “act” or “deed”. The “Word of God” may be verbal or non-verbal. The Word of God is dynamic. Revelation is dynamic. It is both General and Special. It is error to limit Revelation to only the Special kind; it is further error to limit the Special kind to a human Book. It is further error to lock the dynamic revelation of God into the contents of the printed pages of that human book, to be learned through reading skills and reason alone. Many Christians talk as though it were. Careful exegesis is always necessary, absolutely, but it does not in itself unlock the Revelation of God that is in the Book. The verbal Revelation of God requires the teaching, illuminating operation of the Holy Spirit for it to be understood and applied (John 16:13-15; 1 Cor.2:9-14; 2 Cor.3:13-17; et al.). A good illustration of this are those occasions when his disciples read the Scripture and Jesus had to open their minds that they would understand what they read, eg- Luke 24:32, 45. The Scripture is not the Word (revelation) apart from the Spirit. It is because of this work of the Holy Spirit that I do not find contradictions or inconsistencies in the text itself [chronology, dates, names, omissions, repetitions, evidence of redactions, problems with authorship, etc] to be a serious problem. The same Spirit that assures me of the infallibility of the Bible’s content, assures me that such errors in the text do not change what the Bible is, the totally reliable and authoritative Word of God written.

Conversely, no one can claim revelation from the Spirit, apart from the Scripture. It seems very common or popular to claim immediate or direct verbal revelation from God (“God said to me”. “Learn to be quiet and listen for the voice of God speaking to you.”) Church groups, entire denominations, are making decisions based on what they say the Spirit has told them. In many cases, they claim to hear the Spirit saying things (such as “Bless same-sex unions”) that are clearly contrary to the Word of God in Scripture. That would mean God contradicts Himself. Impossible! Pressed to make a choice, they often go with the “Voice”. When we insist on the sufficiency of Scripture, we mean it does not need to be supplemented. General Revelation does not supplement Special Revelation. It is not of equal authority to Special Revelation, but subservient to it, always [See below]. The personal understanding the Spirit gives of Scripture to the Believer is, likewise, absolutely subservient to it. That means it will never contradict it. The Spirit can speak only what is faithful to what is already revealed. That will be the test for anything which people claim is from the Spirit.

Sola Scriptura

There are two serious problems with the paradigm of the Two Books which is so popular. First, it does not allow that both Books are revelation from God of God. The purpose of reading the Book of Nature about Creation, Human Beings and History is to learn about God. That is why He “wrote” the contents of that “Book”. Second, they also do not understand the relationship of the Books to each other. They are not to be read separately. The Book of General Revelation does not stand on its own. Knowledge of God from the Book of General Revelation is valid, but it is partial and not salvific; saving knowledge of God requires the Second Book, the Bible. All knowledge from General Revelation is misdirected, perverted or repressed and incomplete without the knowledge that comes from Special Revelation and the Spirit. These misunderstandings about the Two Books are shared by Christians who reject the two-Book

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paradigm of Revelation, insisting instead that there is only one Book, i.e. the Scripture. In practice, this is as fatal an epistemological error as the one they are rejecting. To really and truly know the mind, will and character of God we absolutely must read both Books.

What happens to the Formal Principle of the Reformation, Sola Scriptura? Against arguments that Church Dogma and Tradition are as authoritative as Scripture in matters of Faith and Church Practice, the Reformers insisted that Scripture alone was authoritative. They also meant that Scripture is sufficient for Evangelism, for growth in holiness and guidance in life. It does not need to be supplemented for these purposes. I agree. Sola Scriptura for Salvation remains a fundamental doctrine. Nevertheless, the Book of General Revelation is absolutely necessary for knowing how Creation works and how to fulfill the Cultural Mandate to God's Glory. It is also a bridge to communicating with non-Christians about a Biblical Worldview, God and the Gospel.

Both Books are revelation from God. God has a mind. He has exhaustive knowledge ("omniscience") He is not a dualist, nor is His Knowledge limited, divided or compartmentalized. The goal of all education is to learn what God knows [See the essay "Epistemology" on my website] Education, rightly understood, is seeking God's thoughts after Him, literally, seriously seeking the mind of Christ in all things. He is Lord of all. We see light in His Light. We understand when we have God's perspective, Divine viewpoint. This means Christians can legitimately use General Revelation to learn truths, e.g. about economics and politics. From General Revelation, using all our God-given human faculties, we can learn to use and appreciate the Environment, develop Sciences and the Arts- all in ways that glorify God. Everything that exists is grounded in Him. He is the Center, as well as the alpha and omega of all that is- not of only half of what is.

When anyone, Christian or non-Christian, seeks to divide reality into "Upper Story" and "Lower Story" ala Francis Schaeffer and knowledge into two (so-called Sacred and Secular) they are literally off-Center and wrong. Nothing is neutral or value-free. The attempts to support a-theistic and autonomous [from God] Education is truly abnormal from a Biblical Perspective. Christians reject, discredit or distain the Book of nature to their detriment and the displeasure of God, Creator and Redeemer of Heaven and Earth and all therein.

To review: General Revelation of God can and should be discovered in three areas: Creation, Humanity, History. The unregenerate, as well as the regenerate, are able to observe and study, use and enjoy the

- Design, beauty, power and the so-called "laws" of science that are in the Creation
- Rationality, Creativity, Morality, Communality, Spirituality that is found within themselves
- Causes and effects, connections, progress and regression, cycles and dialectics found in the affairs of individuals, groups and nations