

Theology 101 – An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine

General Revelation

I. God's Revelation

A. The Nature of Revelation

1. Definition of 'Revelation'

- a. Informally – Revelation is making something known that would otherwise be unknown
- b. Divine Revelation is the personal act of God whereby he makes himself known to mankind so that they can come into personal relationship with Him

2. Necessity of Revelation

- a. Because humans are finite and God is infinite, for man to know God, that knowledge must come from God's initiative to make himself known
- b. Without this self-disclosure by God, relationship with God would be impossible
- c. Sin has broken our relationship with God. Therefore, God must communicate his redemptive purposes and actions to man.

3. Types of Revelation

a. General

- 1) Revelation from the Creator to the Created
- 2) Revelation through creation, conscience, and providence
- 3) Revelation of God to all persons at all times and in all places – universal
- 4) General because it is universally available and because the content is not specific
- 5) The personal act of God by which he makes Himself known through His creation, providence, and conscience to humanity in general so that they might seek God.
- 6) General revelation is rooted in creation, is addressed to man as man, and more particularly to human reason, and finds its purpose in the realization of the end of his creation, to know God and thus enjoy communion with Him.
(Berkhof, p19)

b. Special

- 1) Revelation from the Redeemer to the Sinner
- 2) Revelation through Scripture, prophecy, angels, Jesus, the church...

- 3) God's particular communication and manifestations of himself to particular persons at particular times, now (only?) available through the Bible.
- 4) The personal act of God by which he makes Himself known by his redemptive work to many people so that they might come into relationship with Him.
- 5) Special revelation is rooted in the redemptive plan of God, is addressed to man as sinner, can be properly understood and appropriated only by faith, and serves the purpose of securing the end for which man was created in spite of the disturbance wrought by sin. (Berkhof, p19)

B. Views of General Revelation

1. Reformed (Presbyterian) Tradition

- a. God reveals himself in creation and conscience
- b. However, unsaved people are so blinded by sin that they are unwilling and unable to see God through His general revelation
- c. They view mankind as so depraved that all evidence of God is dismissed. The human heart is a constant idol factory.
- d. The only possible outcome is condemnation
- e. It is impossible to know God through general revelation
- f. Pros and cons of this view?
 - 1) The evidence must be weighed in order for it to be dismissed – if it is being 'weighed' then there is at least a theoretical possibility that some may seek God as a result
 - 2) If they seek God, is it not possible that they may find Him?
 - 3) Seems to ignore the possibility that God might use his general revelation to draw the elect to himself.

2. Evangelical (Baptist) Tradition

- a. God reveals himself in creation and conscience
- b. All see and know God but because of sin they suppress and distort that knowledge
- c. It is possible to know God through general revelation, but salvation requires special revelation
- d. The only possible outcome is rejection of the true God and condemnation
- e. Pros and cons to this view?
 - 1) Is it too fine a point to distinguish between an unwillingness to see and suppression of knowledge?

- 2) Is it fair to say that sin causes distortion instead of outright blindness? Are there degrees to the effects of sin?
3. To what extent can someone know God through general revelation alone?
 - a. This question is regarding the efficacy of general revelation
 - b. Is it possible to gain true undefiled knowledge of God through general revelation?
 - c. Nature has been distorted by sin and the curse – Gen. 3:16-19; Rom. 8:18-22
 - d. Our conscience can be weak and defiled – 1 Cor. 8:7-12; Titus 1:15
 - e. Our individual consciences can disagree – 1 Cor. 10:28-29
 - f. Our conscience can be seared – 1 Tim. 4:2
 - g. The cosmos may reveal that there is a god, but does it necessarily point to The God?
 - 1) The cosmological proof says: In the realm of our experience, everything that we know is caused by something else. There can't be an infinite series of causes, therefore there must be an uncaused cause (or unmoved mover). This is god.
 - 2) Orderliness in the universe (the teleological argument) points toward an orderly god.
 - 3) The universal moral order (anthropological argument) points toward god.
 - 4) The ontological argument says: God is the greatest of all conceivable beings. A being that does not exist cannot be the greatest of all conceivable beings. Therefore, god must exist.
4. Some things to think about as we turn to Scripture
 - a. How and where does God reveal himself?
 - b. What is man able to learn from God's general revelation?
 - c. What is God's purpose in general revelation?
 - d. Who is able to receive God's general revelation?
 - e. What is the result of general revelation once received?

C. Biblical Evidence

1. Creation/Nature
 - a. Ps 19:1-6 NAS – The heavens declare glory of God
 - b. Ps 104:24 – his creation reflects his wisdom
 - c. (we must remember that the Psalmist are believers, the psalms don't necessarily indicate how a non-believer would perceive general revelation in nature)

- d. Rom. 1:18-32
 - 1) His eternal power and divine nature have been seen.
 - 2) Wrath is a natural consequence of sin
 - 3) Even those who suppress the truth because of their wickedness cannot avoid the evidence of God's existence – 1:19-21
 - 4) Even without the special revelation of God's laws, unbelievers still have in their consciences some understanding of God's moral demands – 1:32

2. Providence/History

- a. God is moving in the course of history, controlling the destinies of nations
- b. Job 12:23 NAS
- c. Ps 47:7-8 (8-9)
- d. Ps 66:7
- e. Isa 10:5-13
- f. Dan 2:21
- g. Acts 14:17
- h. Acts 17:26
- i. Is this general revelation or just part of God's providence?
- j. How can we know that God is involved in history without special revelation?

3. Humanity/Conscience

- a. God's character revealed through the moral and spiritual qualities of mankind.
- b. The moral impulses that people feel, especially when those impulses are disadvantageous to ourselves, imply a moral authority greater than ourselves.
- c. Acts 14:11-18 – Rain, fruitful seasons, food produced from the earth, and gladness all bear witness to the Creator God of mercy, love and joy.
- d. 17:22-31
- e. Rom. 2:11-16
 - 1) Paul is asserting that God has left within the human moral fabric some witness of God's own requirements for man.
 - 2) What is the ultimate consequence of this inner moral witness?
 - 3) Consciences can be suppressed, seared, defiled, and in conflict (1 Cor. 8:7-12; Titus 1:15; 1 Cor. 10:28-29; 1 Tim. 4:2)
- f. God has standards of right and wrong – Rom. 2:15
- g. God should be worshipped – Acts 14:11-18; 17:23

- h. God's kindness – Mt. 5:45 w/Acts 14:17
 - i. God will judge evil – Rom. 2:15-16
 - j. An internal sense of eternity – Eccl. 3:11
 - k. God desires man to seek him – Acts 17:22-27
 - l. Paul implies that the Greeks understood that man was a creation of God as described by a Greek poet in Acts 17:28
4. In summation – God's glory (Ps. 19:1), divine nature (Rom. 1:20), and moral demands (Rom. 2:14-15) are to some extent known through general revelation.

D. Significance of General Revelation

1. Some use general revelation to support universalism
 - a. God has revealed himself to everyone universally
 - b. Because of that revelation all people are either explicitly or implicitly members of the church.
2. Others believe that God has revealed some of himself to all people, but not enough so that sinners can overcome their sin and respond.
 - a. Therefore, apart from God's special revelation, no one will respond.
 - b. However, they are nonetheless accountable for their failure and justly condemned.
3. Some observations (agree or disagree)
 - a. General revelation is real and universal in scope but not effectiveness
 - b. Sinners know God because God has made himself known to them
 - c. Sinners generally reject the true God and worship other gods
 - d. Sinners who reject God are left without excuse
 - e. General revelation explains the existence of false religions (Acts 14 and 17)
 - f. GR explains why there are elements of truth in false religions
 - g. GR explains universal condemnation of non-believers
 - h. GR explains the existence of truth in science, morality, law, philosophy, etc.
4. Is theology possible without special revelation?
 - a. 1 Pet. 2:2
 - b. Mt. 15:8-9
 - c. Mt. 22:23-29
 - d. Eph. 4:14
 - e. 1 Tim. 6:3
 - f. Tit. 1:9

5. Questions about salvation through General Revelation (GR)
 - a. With the one who rejects GR be condemned for that rejection?
 - 1) Yes - See Rom. 1:18-19
 - b. Will non-believers have an excuse that GR was insufficient?
 - 1) The problem isn't with GR, but our sin.
 - 2) GR is God's revelation and an act of grace and goodness
 - 3) People can "seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward Him and find Him."
Acts 17:27 and Rom. 1:19-20
 - c. What is the problem that leads to condemnation?
 - 1) Our own personal sin
 - 2) The problem is in us
 - d. Is GR sufficient to save sinners?
 - 1) GR doesn't speak directly about Jesus or atonement
 - 2) However, GR is a revelation of grace (Acts 14:17) to which people can respond (Acts 17:27)
 - e. Does anyone respond properly to GR?
 - 1) Rom. 2:1-10 indicates that a proper response to God's invitation will be rewarded with eternal life
 - 2) However, because glory, honor, (2:6-7) and good (2:10) are attributes of God and only attainable through regeneration – this requires a response to special revelation. Ps. 119:68; Luke 18:19; Mark 10:18; Rom. 7:18
 - 3) We know that eternal life -immortality – is only available through Jesus Christ – Jn. 14:6; Rom. 5:21; 6:22-23; 1 Tim. 1:16; 1 Jn. 5:10-12
 - f. Is GR sufficient to overcome human sin?
 - 1) By itself, no
 - 2) However, God may use GR to lead one to SR (Acts 17:27)
 - g. What is God's purpose in continuing GR?
 - 1) God is actively pursuing all people through GR and through His drawing
 - 2) Jn 6:44; 6:65; Jn 6:37; Acts 17:27
 - h. Can a sincere Buddhist be saved?
 - 1) People pursue their own gods in place of YHVH who keeps making himself known to them.
 - 2) They are dead in their sinful allegiance to other gods.

- 3) Ex. 20:3-6; Deut. 8:19; 13:1-13; 2 Kings 17:35-38; Acts 4:12; Rom. 10:9-18
- i. Can a person be saved apart from knowing Jesus?
 - 1) There is only one way to be saved, by grace through faith
 - 2) There are, however, many ways to Jesus.
 - 3) Biblical Theology of Salvation through Jesus
 - i. John 3:16-18
 - ii. Lk. 24:46-47
 - iii. Rom. 10:9-15
 - iv. Acts 4:12
 - v. Acts 26:14-18
 - vi. Rom. 1:16-20
 - vii. Heb. 11:6
 - viii. 2 Thess. 1:8-9
 - ix. Mt. 7:7 + Acts 17:27