

CHAPTER 2.

THE GOD WHO REVEALS HIMSELF

Jane lived in Smalltown, Nebraska. She appreciated the sense of community. Many people in town knew each other and helped each other out. Lately, though, life in Smalltown was not as harmonious as it could be. The local newspaper, *The Smalltown Gazette*, published several editorials criticizing the town's long-time mayor, Ed Johnson. The *Gazette* accused him of becoming callous and uncompassionate. It cited various examples of how the mayor had ignored the needs of the citizens and charged ahead in his own domineering way.

Never one to pay much attention to politics, Jane mostly ignored the gossip swirling around the mayor. At least, she did so until her friend Samantha came over one evening all in a fluster. Samantha owned the local flower shop in town and had spent the better part of two months trying to resolve a property tax issue with the town. Earlier that day Samantha had met the mayor walking on the street and had tried to ask him about her difficulty. Sadly, Mr. Johnson had brushed off Samantha's polite request with a brusque response: "Sorry, I'm busy. Please contact the town clerk." Apparently the *Gazette* was right, and Jane began to take a rather dim view of her local governing official.

That dim view brightened rather suddenly, though, when Jane went to the hospital to visit her ten-year-old niece, who was suffering from cancer. The hospital was a sixty-minute drive away in Largeville. Much to her surprise, as she was leaving the hospital she met Mayor Johnson in

the lobby. She greeted him and asked him what he was doing in the Largeville hospital. He said that he was visiting his wife, who was going through chemotherapy. Without further prompting he went on to explain that his wife was a very private individual and did not want the media to know about her sickness. Finding common ground in their concern about ailing loved ones, Jane and the mayor had a good long talk, in which he confided how stressful it was, trying on the one hand to be there for his wife, and yet on the other hand keeping up with all his regular duties in Smalltown. Shielding the matter from the media, out of respect for his wife's need for privacy, only made the situation more challenging. Once the mayor revealed what was all going on in his life, Jane realized the *Gazette* was most certainly wrong.

Obviously the anecdote above is fiction. But most of us can recall a real-life example of how we received a completely different impression of someone after we actually listened to him explain his own situation. Much the same is true about God. Many people have heard things about God, or gathered ideas about God by observing Christians. Some of those impressions may be correct; others, like the *Gazette* editorial, may be completely off the mark.

Thankfully, God does reveal who he really is. At the beginning of the book of Hebrews we read, "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world" (1:1-2). These words eloquently express the main theme of this chapter. God speaks, and he speaks to us. Many people speculate about God. But who is to say which person is right and which one is wrong? However, as the Holy Spirit makes clear in Hebrews, what really counts is not what we say about God but rather what he has said to us.

THE LIGHT OF NATURE

Some people know the Bible and believe what it says. Other people know about the Bible, but they reject what it says. Still others do not

know the Bible at all. Yet virtually everyone has some idea there is a God, or Higher Being, or Supreme Intelligence. Some people work hard intellectually to suppress this idea. In fact, some people work at it so hard that they manage to convince themselves that there is no God. If, however, they are honest enough to admit it, most people have an idea in their mind that there is such a thing as a divine being.

Where does that idea come from? Romans 1:18–20 speaks about this. For example, in verse 20 we read, “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.” Sometimes the general idea that God exists is called the seed of religion.

Closely related to this is the fact that all human beings also have a conscience. The conscience is that voice inside of us which says, “What you are planning to do is completely wrong!” Or, if our conscience is clear, that voice says, “Don’t worry about what other people say. You know that you’re doing this for the right reason.” Now, consciences are not always consistent. The inner voice says different things to different people at different times. Still, generally speaking, human beings know what it means to have their conscience speaking to them. In Romans 2:14–15 the apostle Paul also deals with how the conscience functions. There he describes its role in this way: “They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.”

The Canons of Dort have summarized the Bible’s teaching about the seed of religion and the conscience, using the phrase *the light of nature* to cover both aspects (3/4.4). You will notice that the Canons acknowledge that the light of nature exists, but they also indicate that it is not enough to give people a saving knowledge of God. In other words, the light of nature may give someone a notion about God, but it does not give salvation in Christ. This is in line with what the apostle Paul writes in Romans 1:20. The seed of religion does not lead people to salvation; instead, it leaves them “without excuse.”

Understanding the light of nature also helps us explain the remarkably good deeds that unbelievers will do, at times even putting Christians to shame. There are many examples of people who refuse to acknowledge Jesus Christ and yet donate large sums of money or spend countless hours volunteering to do arduous and thankless work. When confronted with these impressive humanitarian efforts, Christians sometimes wonder whether we perhaps overemphasize the effects of sin. Is the human race inherently good after all? No, it is not, but God does speak to us about the light of nature. He is also the one who explains the power of the conscience that leads people to help others. The light of nature does not, however, reveal the full truth of who God is, and it certainly does not guide people down the path of salvation.

PRAGMATIC THEOLOGY

If you speak to a theologian and ask him what he thinks about pragmatic theology, he may well raise his eyebrow and ask, “What exactly do you mean by pragmatic theology?” In fact, it is not an official technical term. It is simply a term that we will be using for lack of a better one.

Pragmatic theology starts with the practical situations of daily life. For example, Christians also become sick, sometimes seriously sick. Just like other people, they would like to become healthy again. There are those who therefore teach, in the name of Christ, that if a Christian believes firmly enough and prays earnestly enough, he will certainly be healed. This is preaching that appears to connect with people concretely in their daily struggles. Moreover, preachers may even point to a passage like James 5:15 to support such a teaching: “And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up.”

But there is one major problem with pragmatic theology. With this approach, God’s revelation tends to come at the end rather than at the beginning. For when we start with what God says to us, we quickly realize that it is not as simple as quoting James 5:15 and then announcing that you will be healed if you pray hard enough. The apostle Paul certainly believed in the Lord, and he prayed frequently and earnestly (1 Thess 1:2–3). The apostle also had some kind of illness or physical

handicap. He called it the thorn in his flesh (2 Cor 12:7). In prayer he pleaded with the Lord to take it away, but the Lord said, “No.” And he added, “My grace is sufficient for you” (2 Cor 12:8–9). Also the young preacher Timothy was a faithful servant of the Lord; however, he was frequently sick (1 Tim 5:23). The apostle Paul did not instruct him to pray more earnestly but to “no longer drink only water, but use a little wine.” The apostle Paul also left Trophimus, “who was ill, at Miletus” (2 Tim 4:20).

Therefore, as the above examples illustrate, it is vitally important that we *begin* with God’s own revelation, and that we begin by working from *all* of his revelation. Often people start with their own practical situation and then slowly work toward God’s revelation. But that is the wrong order. If we really want to know the truth about God and his ways, we need to start by listening first to what he himself says. Once we have listened to what he reveals, then we are in the right position to apply that to our daily lives.

WHY WE NEED REVELATION

Now that we have seen the importance of always starting with God’s revelation, it is also helpful to say a few words about the necessity of revelation. Revelation is necessary for two reasons: first, the greatness of God and, second, the sinfulness of man.

In the first place, we must not think of God as if he were merely an extraordinarily powerful and intelligent human being. That is a typically pagan idea. In fact, many pagan religions even have carved or cast images of their gods, which look like strong, beautiful, or intelligent human beings or animals. As the apostle Paul says, “Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things” (Rom 1:22–23).

By contrast, God is in a completely different category than we are. He is the Creator, we are creatures. He is divine, we are human. He is infinite, we are finite. He is eternal, we are temporal. As the LORD himself

says through the prophet Isaiah, “To whom then will you liken God? . . . It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers” (Isa 40:18, 22). This also means that God’s manner of thinking is far beyond what we can fathom with our comparatively miniscule minds. As the prophet Isaiah declares, “Who has measured the Spirit of the Lord, or what man shows him his counsel?” (Isa 40:13) And again, the LORD says, “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa 55:9).

Since God’s thoughts are so high and vast (Ps 139:17), we might be tempted to give up all hope that we could ever understand anything about him. Yet, thankfully, he has revealed himself to us. So our minds do not have to clamber up to him, for he has revealed himself to us in the Bible and, in doing so, he has come near to us (Rom 10:6–8). Furthermore, since God created human beings, he knows our limitations. Thus, when he reveals himself to us, he does it in such a way that we can understand what he is saying. This is also called God’s accommodation in revelation. Just as parents communicate to their young children at a level that they can understand, so also God speaks to us in a comprehensible manner.

In the second place, revelation is necessary because we are sinful. Our sinfulness has corrupted our hearts, so that by nature we are inclined to desire and do things that displease God (Col 3:5). However, our sinfulness has also corrupted our minds, so that by nature we do not think about God the way that we should. As the apostle Paul writes, “They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart” (Eph 4:18). In fact, it is very hard to distinguish between the sinfulness of our desires and the sinfulness of our minds. In the days of Noah the LORD closely connected both of them when he said, “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen 6:5).

If a young child is thinking about his parents in a false and foolish way, then his parents should do something about it. The parents should not think to themselves, “Let’s not worry about it. The child will figure it out and correct his own thinking in due time.” Of course not! They should teach their children to think correctly about their parents, or about anyone else for that matter. So it is with God, who is our Father in heaven. He reveals the truth and teaches us to think honourably and correctly about him and about ourselves. This does not mean that Christians turn off their brains, but it does mean that our thinking needs to be transformed (Eph 4:23; Col 3:10).

GENERAL AND SPECIAL REVELATION

To this point we have spoken mostly about God’s revelation in connection with the Bible. To be sure, that is the primary connection that must be made. However, as the Belgic Confession explains, there are, in fact, two ways in which God reveals himself. It is worthwhile quoting the entire second article.

We know him by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a most beautiful book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many letters leading us to perceive clearly the invisible things of God, namely, his eternal power and deity, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20. All these things are sufficient to convict men and leave them without excuse. Second, he makes himself more clearly and fully known to us by his holy and divine Word as far as is necessary for us in this life, to his glory and our salvation.

God’s revelation of himself through the “creation, preservation, and government of the universe” is often called general revelation. It is general in the sense that everyone in the world can look at the mountains, the stars, and the animals. It is also general in the sense that when people see how solid the mountains are, how numerous the stars, and how intricate and diverse the animals, they receive some general, but still blurry, perspective on the greatness and wisdom of the Creator.

For example, if someone looks inside a computer, with all of its tiny yet precise components, he might exclaim, “What smart minds must

have designed these computer chips!” In a similar way, when someone pauses to admire the complexity of the human brain, or the splendour of a flower, or the force of the ocean waves, he might think to himself, “What a wise God has made all of this! What a powerful God maintains all of this!” This is general revelation. As David once said, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork” (Ps 19:1–4).

It should not escape our attention that God designed general revelation to reveal something about himself: who he is and how powerful he is. The apostle Paul confirms this in Romans 1:20 when he writes, “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.” In other words, general revelation is also a very limited revelation. It tells us something about who God is and what he is like, but it does not give us answers to many of the questions that we may have. People ask, “How did this world come into existence? Why is there something rather than nothing? What is the meaning of life? Is there life after death? What is the solution to all the suffering in this world?” Those are all valid questions, but general revelation cannot answer them. To receive the answers to those questions and many more, we must turn to the other book—not the book of creation but the book of Scripture, God’s holy Word.

God’s special revelation comes to us in the Bible. The opening sentence of the book of Hebrews refers to this. It says that God spoke to his people of old through the prophets, that is, through the Old Testament, but now he has also spoken to us through his Son, that is, through the New Testament. As the Belgic Confession explains, when we compare God’s special and general revelation the first thing we notice is how much clearer the special revelation is. It is certainly true, as we read in Psalm 19, that the heavens declare the glory of God (v. 1), but it is also true that “the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes” (v. 8). For example, the tenth commandment is so very plain and straightforward: “You shall not covet.” You shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, or his house, or anything else that belongs to him. Someone could stare at

the stars for a long time, and someone else could carefully study how a human cell functions, but even after years of research they would not know that the LORD is displeased with coveting. Even the apostle Paul says, “For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet’” (Rom 7:7). Yet, in his special revelation God gives one short instruction, the tenth commandment, and the entire matter is crystal clear.

Not only does God’s special revelation make things so much more clear, we also learn much more than we ever could from studying creation. It is precisely in God’s Word that we learn how the universe was created (Gen 1–2; Heb 11:3), what the meaning of life is (Rom 14:7–8; Phil 1:21–24), what happens when we die (2 Cor 5:1–10), and what the solution is to all the misery in this world (Isa 65:17–25; Col 1:15–20). In fact, it is crucial to affirm that the knowledge of salvation is to be found only in God’s special revelation, the Bible. The gospel, which is found throughout the entire Scriptures (see LD 6, Q&A 19), is the “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom 1:16).

In his special revelation God provides us with everything we need to know in order to be saved. That does not mean God tells us everything we might like to know. We may have questions that God does not answer in his Word. Here is one example: if God is almighty, why didn’t he prevent Adam and Eve from falling into sin? It is an interesting question, but in the end the only answer we can give is this: God has not revealed the exact reason why he did not prevent the fall into sin. That is also why God’s servant Moses reminds us: “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law” (Deut 29:29). For our own spiritual well-being it is imperative that we do not speculate beyond what our God has clearly revealed.

It is also important that God’s revelation penetrates into the darkest recesses of our heart, rather than merely being a cherished aspect of the spiritual ambiance that surrounds Christians and their activities. What I mean is this: it is one thing to have the Bible in our pews, at our tables,

and on our nightstands, but it is another thing to have the truth of God's revelation fundamentally alter the way we think, desire, and act. In short, the Word of God must dwell in us richly (Col 3:16), not just rest on our furniture as an ornament.

A new Christian once commented about the benefits of going to a Bible study group. He observed, "The best evenings are the ones when people's heads are bobbing up and down." That may sound strange, but his further comment clears things up. He added, "If people spend the evening looking at each other and spouting off their opinions, it never goes very deep. But if people are looking down, digging into the Bibles, looking up again to make a comment, and then looking back in the Bible again, the study evening is so much more worthwhile." And that brings us full circle again. How will we ever come to know God rightly if we do not first listen to what God reveals about himself? If listening to her mayor helped Jane understand him better, listening to God's revelation will surely help us understand our Creator properly.

Suggested Readings: Psalm 19:1–6; Romans 1:18–25

QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. There are people in the world who live by this motto: "My conscience is my guide." Is the conscience a reliable guide? Using a concordance, find some key Scripture passages which speak about the conscience. Summarize what God reveals about the conscience in those passages.
2. What is pragmatic theology? Can you give examples from your life when, perhaps unintentionally, you have tried to fit God's Word into your own desires and your own agenda, rather than allowing God's Word to speak to you first? What are some things that Christians can do to make sure that they do not slip into the approach of pragmatic theology?
3. When we speak of the manner in which God reveals himself to us, what do we mean by accommodation? If God accommodates

himself to our capacities, why are there still parts of the Bible that are so hard to understand, such as the book of Revelation?

4. List two key difference between general and special revelation, and discuss the importance of recognizing those differences.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. There are many different religions in the world (e.g., Islam, Taoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism). Describe the connection between the great number of religions and the seed of religion. What similarities or common themes can you discover in all these other religions? How is Christianity different from all the other religions?
2. Missionaries speak of points of contact. When they bring the gospel, they look for things in the culture and practices of the people they are evangelizing that are similar to what the Bible teaches. Then they try to capitalize on that point of contact so that people will be drawn to the gospel through something that is already familiar to them. Could the conscience be a fruitful point of contact? For example, most people agree that murder is wrong. Does it help, as a starting point, to say that the Bible also forbids murder in the sixth commandment? Or does such a point of contact set our evangelistic effort off on the wrong foot?
3. God gave us his Word through prophets and apostles who lived a long time ago and who lived in a different country and culture. Some people therefore say that the Bible is not always relevant to our modern times and circumstances. How do we respond to those who think in this way? Hebrews 4:12 may be a helpful starting point.
4. Scientists spend a lot of time studying creation. Their studies have led some scientists to conclude that life on this earth has slowly evolved from one species to another over the course of many millions of years. The Bible gives a different account of how life began. In plain language it describes how God created everything in the span of six days. Is this a conflict between general revelation and special revelation? If not, how do we explain the difference between the conclusions of (many) scientists and Scripture?