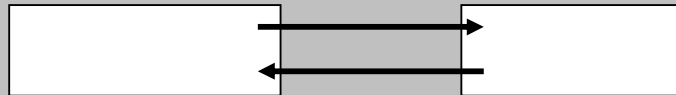


Discussion:

- ## Introduction

The Revelation of God – The Bible



- ## S Revelation

- Easily forgotten is the fact that Jesus himself and then later his apostles often turned to the scriptures to teach. They held Scripture with the highest regard.
- Like the Jews of his day, Jesus was absolute in seeing Scripture as the authoritative word of God (Mt 5:17-20). At the key points in Jesus ministry we see Jesus refer to Scripture – when tempted (Mt 4:1-11; Lk 4:1-13), in dispute with opponents (Mk 2:23-27 c.f. Ex 23:12), when explaining his mission (Lk 4:16-21, c.f. Is 61:1-2; Lk 22:7-37 c.f. v37 w. Is 53), and in backing up his teaching (Lk 4:25-27).
- Furthermore, Jesus corrected interpretations of Scripture showing how he had fulfilled them (Lk 6:1-11; Lk 24:25-27, 44-49) and he upheld tradition but not at the expense of God's Word (Mt 15:1-9/ Mk 7:6-13 c.f. Is 29:13).
- Many of the titles used and applied to Jesus were taken from the Old Testament scriptures – Christ (Messiah), Son of God, Shepherd and Jesus himself was the only one to use the title 'Son of Man' of himself referring to Daniel 7 (c.f. Mk 10:45).

G_____ Revelation

- God bears witness to himself in ways other than the Bible – this is called ‘general’ (or universal) revelation. This revelation is the revelation of God made to all people everywhere (c.f. Rom 1:19-20). The two main ways this is seen is in the world around us (nature) and in our human experience.

Exercise:

- This Psalm 19 describes the way one can ‘know’ God.
 - a. What kind of ‘speech’ is on display in verses 1-4?
 - b. What kind of ‘speech’ is on display in verses 7-11?

What is the difference?

The Natural World

Have you ever looked around and wondered about something incredible in the world?

Various attempts have been made to argue for the existence of God in the light of our natural world.

- The _____ **argument**. This argument comes from the perceived need that some higher being is required to account for the world (or ‘cosmos’) as we have it. It argues that the world we live in must have come from somewhere/one – an ultimate cause. This first cause being ‘God’.
- The _____ **argument**. This argument came from the idea that everything has to have a purpose or end (telos). It argues that the world we live in is planned and that things arise because of a plan or purpose. The planner behind this is ‘God’.
- The _____ **argument**. This argument aims to examine the being or nature of God and concludes that, by definition, he must exist. It argues that nothing greater can exist than ‘God’.

- The _____ **argument**. This argues that there is an innate sense of good and evil and the existence of our moral values indicate that there must be an ultimate moral being. 'God' is the divine law-giver.

This summary of these arguments are drastically simplified and do not fully represent the force of the arguments but are sufficient for our purposes.

Even though brief, these 'proofs' fall very short of sufficiently arguing for the existence of God – at least the existence of God as the Bible outlines.¹ Why? - because of inherent contradictions. It is possible to see elements of the world that appear designed, yet there are other elements that seem unplanned (or planned by something/one that is incompetent). Further those seemingly unplanned things in a different context appear to make perfect sense!

None of the 'proofs' can be regarded as having 'worked' in the sense of creating universal conviction. In fact, some have argued that the 'God' of any 'proof' is not necessarily the God revealed in Scripture and as each argument relies on human reason it will be inherently corrupt simply because humanity is sinful. The question of God's existence and nature is not simply a question to rationally solve (we considered an element of this in the last unit).

Exercise:

- What can *General Revelation* tell you about God? Are there any limits?
- What can *Special Revelation* tell you about God? Are there any limits?

General vs. Special Revelation

a) *Proof and evidence.*

b) *God's witness to himself*

Act 14:15-18; 17:24-28

¹ Interestingly Richard Dawkins in his book '*The God Delusion*' rejects the Cosmological and Teleological arguments as a way of attempting to say that God does not exist at all! (Sydney: Random House, 2006), 77-79.

Romans 1:18-20

c) *Human rejection of God's witness*

d) *General revelation and the gospel-way of knowing God.*

e) *Understanding general revelation through the scriptures.*

Psalm 19

f) *General revelation as an aid to knowing God*

- *General revelation* alerts us to the possibility of God, although it does not lead us to a saving faith in God.

Reflection:

- In what sense may conscience be a guide to our knowledge of God?

Human Experience

- Many are not concerned with 'proof's' of God's existence because for them knowledge of God happens experientially and they could no more deny God than deny their own selves.
- Given that God has chosen to most clearly reveal himself to us in his Son becoming human, then it is appropriate that our experience of human existence enables us to respond to him. God has come to us in language, customs, and physical form and we should not bypass those in coming to know him. It is through our knowledge of what it is to be human that we can understand Jesus and it is by his Spirit that our way to know God becomes clearer. That said, God does not place our 'experience', above his revealed word as the way he makes himself known.
- 'Spiritual awareness' is another matter. There are some 'experiences' that may lead a person to being very much more aware of a biblical idea – such as death, meaningless of life, the wonder of birth, judgment, sin etc. These inner convictions as addressed by the Word, can be helpful provided they are not read beyond the Word of God. Practicing 'religion' for the sake of *tradition* or *experience* is an example of taking this notion too far because it idolizes the practice rather than the reason. Repenting because of a feeling of guilt for something that the Bible calls sin may be an example of where the human experience is appropriate. The 'experience' has value if its importance arises from the revelation of God.

The value of General Revelation

Despite the limitations noted about *General Revelation* it is worth saying:

- *General Revelation* _____. The sense of moral obligation where good and evil are somewhat distinguished is a gift which operates by God's grace to stabilize our society.²
- _____ – _____. Even though humanity is fallen and guilty before God, God has not left himself without testimony. He has ensured that his witness is still there to see despite the rejection of his word.³

General Revelation does not replace the further and fuller revelation which is necessary if we are to know God – that is knowing God in his (Special) Word.

² B. Milne, *Know the Truth - a handbook of Christian belief* (Leicester: IVP, 1998), 34

³ B. Milne, *Know the Truth*, 35.

Other Religions

Reflection:

- Is there any sense in which God is known in other world religions?
-
- Secular thought has pushed for 'tolerance' between religions with the underlying assumption that all religions are the same or lead to the same place. This is called _____. This thought fails to understand the difference between truth and falsehood.⁴
 - Similar is the secular idea of _____. This is the idea that all religions are of equal value and that there is no one universal or objective truth – all points of view have their own 'truth'.
 - It is indeed important for Christians to be tolerant and respectful of other religions and to what they teach. There is truth or beauty or nobility at points in other religions, yet like all products of human culture there is both truth and error. Christians need not, and should not, accept what another religion teaches particularly if it contradicts what the Bible teaches.
 - Return to what has been said about a gospel-way of knowing God, unless Christ as he is revealed in the Bible is the starting point for our consideration of other teachings it is hard to not relativize what each religion teaches. The Scriptures reveal that Jesus Christ is the Son and Word of God (Jn 1:1-3:18), he is unique in status, revelatory power and in his capacity to bring people to God (1 Tim 2:5-6; 1 Peter 3:18). Jesus made exclusive claims about himself being the only way to the Father (Jn 14:6). Further the Bible speaks of humanity inability to save itself by any means which includes good works (Eph 2:1-10), philosophy (Rom 1:18-31) or even religion (Acts 17:22-34). The apostles teaching constantly called hearers out of their existing religions/faith to a new faith in Jesus Christ (c.f. Eph 2:12-13).

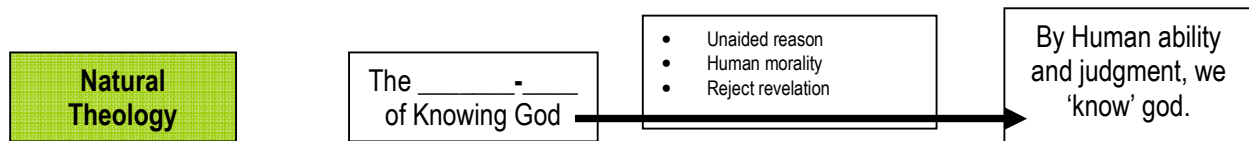
Natural Theology

- *Natural Theology* is the name given to the study of God without the help of _____ – that is, what can be determined about God using regular natural observations. If it were possible to take the _____ God out of the equation and rely simply on human discovery (about God!) then we would be operating in the realm of natural theology.
- It was a famous series of lectures named 'The Gifford Lectures' established in Scotland in 1888 which first promoted this kind of study.⁵
- Why is this form of study attractive?

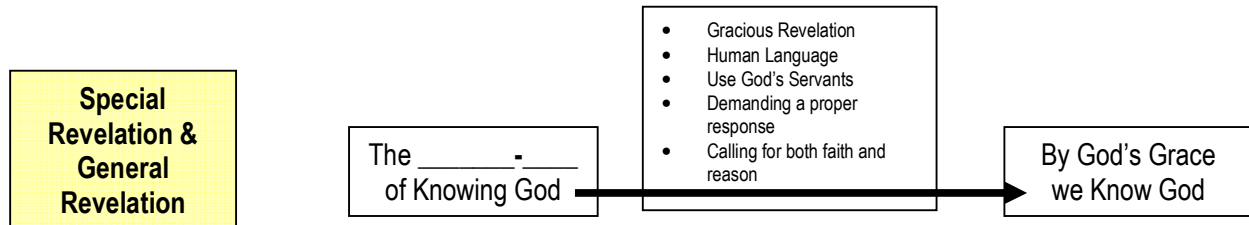
⁴ For a good easy-to-read book that unpacks the myth that is Pluralism read J. Dickson's *A Spectator's Guide to World Religions - an introduction to the big five* (South Sydney: Blue Bottle Books, 2004).

⁵ Established in honour of Adam Lord Gifford to to "promote and diffuse the study of natural theology in the widest sense of the term – in other words, the knowledge of God." The first series of lectures were given by Friedrich Max Müller - 1888: *Natural Religion* vol. 1 & 2; 1890: *Physical Religion*; 1891: *Anthropological Religion*; 1892: *Theosophy or Psychological Religion*.

- Given this type of study is dependant on observation, experiment, reason and reflection it is not surprising that conclusions are often drawn from the created world. It is at this point that *natural theology* is often confused with *general revelation*.
- *Natural Theology* approaches the study of knowing God in the opposite way to the gospel-way of knowing God. Natural theology starts and stops in human ability and judgment and as this comes from already sinful human beings it is doomed to failure.



- Whereas the gospel-way of knowing God takes into account God's grace in revealing himself and it also accounts for humanities inability to know him by self means.



Reflection:

- What are the implications of general revelation for:
 - a) evangelism,
 - b) a Christian view of culture,
 - c) Christian apologetics.

Conclusion

- The term ‘revelation’ means the disclosure of that which was previously unknown and in this unit we have introduced both *Special* and *General Revelation*.
- It is by God’s grace that he allows us to know him and ‘*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*’ (Rom 1:20) we can be thankful for his General Revelation.
- The limit however is that this *General Revelation* serves not to be salvific but only to condemn the sinner and establish his guilt-worthiness before God.
- Next week we turn to *Special Revelation*.

Application:

- How do you know God?

Is it because of the ways he has chosen to reveal himself, or is it because you built up a picture of God that removes the gospel from being central to your understanding?

What needs to change or continue about the way you know God?

For next Week:

- Read the *Moore Distance* Doctrine 1 - Unit 3 Notes

References (for possible further reading)

- Demarest, B.A., ‘General Revelation’ in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Edited by: W.A. Elwell. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1984. 944-45.
- Van Engen, J., ‘Natural Theology’ in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Edited by: W.A. Elwell. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1984. 752-53.