

Lecture 3 – What is Revelation?

“How great is God—beyond our understanding! The number of his years is past finding out.” Job 36:26

Key Terms

Revelation, *revelatio*, *apocalypsis*, *sensus divinitatis*, *vestigia*, *semen religionis*

Objectives

- *Compare and contrast the nature and function of general revelation and special revelation.
- *Discuss the nature and function of revelation, especially as it impacts our life and ministry.
- *Describe Calvin’s view of natural religion.

What is Revelation?

I. What is Revelation?

A. General revelation and particular/special revelation

II. The Need for Revelation

A. God is transcendent. There is a Creator-creation distinction.

1. He is the incomparable One.
2. He is the incomprehensible One.
3. Is He then the hidden God, the *deus absconditus*?
4. Are we bound to agnosticism?

B. God has revealed Himself.

1. God is to be praised for His work of revelation.
2. God the Father is the Revealer (Matt. 11:25). Yet the Son reveals the Father (v. 27), and the Spirit also reveals the Father (Luke 10:21).
3. God (both the Father and the Son) is sovereign in revelation.
4. Revelation is personal. Its content is the knowledge of God (Matt. 11:27).
5. Revelation is necessary for human beings to know God (v. 25).
6. Joy is a proper response.

III. General Revelation: Revelation through Creation

The knowledge of God the Creator

A. God’s revelation of Himself within the material universe

1. As the sky and sun bear witness of their Creator, we may say that God has revealed Himself in creation even though the revelation is wordless or inaudible.
2. The creation revelation reveals God’s existence, glory (*kabod*: reputation, or even presence), and the fact that He is the Creator (Ps. 19:2).
3. This revelation is continuous (v. 2-3, 5).
4. This revelation is worldwide in scope and universal in extent (v. 5-6).

B. Creational revelation in theological context.

1. The traces of God
 - a. Augustine’s notion of *vestigia*
2. God has made us such that we are receptive to that revelation.
 - a. The ‘seed of religion’ (*semen religionis*). Man is a worshipping creature.
 - b. The ‘awareness of deity’ (*sensus divinitatis*). The knowledge that God exists and that we are morally accountable to Him.

“There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God

himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty. Ever renewing its memory, he repeatedly sheds fresh drops.” Institutes 1.3.1

“...this conviction, namely, that there is some God, is naturally inborn in all, and is fixed deep within, as it were in the very marrow...From this we conclude that it is not a doctrine that must be learned in school, but one of which each of us is master from his mother’s womb and which nature itself permits no one to forget, although many strive with every nerve to this end.” Institutes 1.3.3

3. Our response to creational revelation: man cannot be neutral regarding God.

IV. General Revelation: Revelation through Providence

A. Acts 14:14-18

1. The regularity of the order of creation testifies to God’s existence, His status as Creator, and His benevolence (v. 15, 17).
2. This revelation is continuous, occurring season after season. Thus God’s revelation of His kingship is not limited to the origination of the universe.
3. This revelation has occurred whenever crops and fruit have grown.
4. Those who recognize God’s goodness and benevolence should also recognize that God is not like mortal human beings and thus He cannot be adequately imaged in idols made of wood or stone (v. 15).

B. Acts 17:26-29

1. Humankind is made from one common stock (v. 26).
2. God has fixed the seasons and the boundaries of the nations (v. 26).
3. The objective is that man should seek God (v. 27).

V. General Revelation: Revelation through Moral Consciousness

A. Psalm 19:7-11

1. v. 1-6
2. v. 7-11

B. Paul’s discussion of the moral law written on the heart in Romans 1:32 and 2:12-16

1. The Gentiles have the requirements of the law written on their hearts. God has revealed His moral demands within the human constitution (2:14-15).
2. The Gentiles do by nature the things of the law. The requirements of the law affect behavior. Even though they do not have the law of Moses, the law written on their hearts causes them to be a law to themselves (2:14-15).
3. Man’s sense of moral order, of right and wrong, is an expression of God’s moral norms. Man knows even without a written law that certain actions are wrong and incur God’s judgment (1:32).
4. God’s law reveals His holiness, justice, and works of judgment (1:32).
5. This revelation of divine law is known by all people (cf. 1:19-21). It is universal.
6. This universal revelation of God’s moral law is suppressed and perverted so that people have a tendency to apply the moral requirements in judgment of others while excusing themselves for the same sins (2:1-3).

VI. The Question of Natural Religion

A. Calvin’s position

1. Romans 1:20

B. Karl Barth’s emphatic NO

1. Rejected creational or general revelation

C. A response to Barth

1. Barth has confused knowledge and revelation.

D. Are there positive effects of creation? Romans 1:18-25

The results of God's persistent creational revelation:

1. Evidences of God's presence, power, and kingly sovereignty impinge upon all men.
2. Accountability to God
3. The shining of the light leaves a burning in the heart.
4. The guilt which arises in the human heart confesses its accountability.
5. The continuing revelation of God in the natural order makes civic virtue possible.
 - a. The negative function
 - b. The positive function