

What is Revelation?

The doctrine of revelation. The Oxford Shorter Dictionary defines the word revelation as “a disclosure or communication of knowledge to man by a divine or supernatural agency.” Actually our English word revelation is little more than a transliteration of the Latin word *revelatio*—‘an uncovering, a laying bare.’ And this Latin word was used in the Vulgate, the Latin Bible, and it in turn was a rendering of the Greek word, *apocalypsis*—‘disclosure.’ *Apocalypsis* was typically used in the New Testament to denote the unveiling of hidden truths, truths particularly about God, the cosmos, and/or the future.

Lying behind all of that is the pervasive Old Testament understanding that God has made Himself and His will known, and He has done so most clearly to His chosen people, Israel. Now this notion of revelation runs so consistently throughout the Bible that we can speak of a single biblical concept of revelation. The traditional way of analyzing the biblical concept of revelation is to distinguish between general revelation and special revelation, and this distinction still provides a useful indication of what we might call the spectrum or the organism of God. But where might we locate this word? Where in the universe could we possibly find the subject for our study? The primary element, the primary fact, of the biblical understanding of God, it seems, is that He is radically other. We see it in the very first statement in Scripture in Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” God is transcendent; He is not an element; He is not a constituent of the created order. He is, as Scripture repeatedly tells us, the incomparable One. The universe is made up of two realities: God and everything else, the Creator and the creation. And these two can never be confused.

In philosophical terms God is ontologically other than us; He is the incomparable One. Further, standing outside, standing above the world—that is what transcendence means, ‘standing above the world’—God is incomprehensible. He is the incomprehensible One that man cannot fathom. Job 36:26 declares, “How great is God beyond our understanding!” And here you might want to compare Isaiah 40:11-18. Now noting that incomprehensibility, the epistemological problem which comes from God’s ontological otherness, some theologians and philosophers have spoken of the essential unknowability of God. We can speak of God only as the hidden One, as the *deus absconditus*. This correlation of incomparability—ontological otherness—and incomprehensibility—epistemological unknowability—ends in agnosticism. Concerning God we must all remain know-nothings. Well, so long as God does not reveal Himself, so long as He does not explain Himself and His will to us in some way, the agnosticism of this hidden God seems to me inescapable.

But the biblical religion holds that God has communicated something of Himself to human beings. He reveals, He makes known, what was formerly hidden: His will and something of His character to us. And furthermore He does this in such a way that it is perceivable by human beings. Thus Calvin would speak of revelation as an accommodation. As a mother leans close and whispers baby talk into the ear of her infant, so God reveals Himself by way of an accommodation, a condescension to the hearts, minds, and capacities of human beings. Yes, there is an infinite gap between God and us, that gap of God’s transcendence, but God closes the gap, for God crosses the gap in His accommodation.

Reading from Matthew 11:25-27, “At that time Jesus said, ‘I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you’ve hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son, except the Father, and no one knows the Father, except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.’” As verse twenty-five makes clear, God is to be praised for His work of revelation. As we are going to see, God does not have to reveal Himself; it is purely an act of

His grace; it is the product of His mercy. Second, God the Father is the revealer, yet verse twenty-seven also tells us that the Son is the revealer; He reveals the Father and if you were to look at Luke 10:21, something of a parallel passage here, it also speaks of the Spirit as the revealer. Third, God the Father is sovereign in revelation, but it is also the case here that the Son is too. Revelation is a sovereign act of God. Fourth, revelation is personal in character; its content is the knowledge of God. Fifth, revelation is necessary for human beings to know God. The word 'hidden' here means beyond any human ability or rational deduction, thus all human ability is excluded. God is the initiator, the sovereign gracious initiator. Man is the receiver. And finally, joy is the proper response to revelation.

With that little introduction to revelation, let us start looking at the different aspects of revelation. If you recall we said we were going to follow a distinction between general and special. Let us first take up the issue of general revelation and we are going to start this by talking about creational revelation, the knowledge of God the Creator. Psalm 19 is certainly the best known statement regarding God's revelation of Himself in creation:

The heavens declare the glory of God. The skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech. Night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth; their words to the ends of the world. In the heaven he has pitched a tent for the sun, which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion, like a champion rejoicing to run his course. It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other. Nothing is hidden from its heat. (Ps. 19:1-6)

First of all, as the sky and sun bear witness to their Creator, we might say that God has revealed Himself in His creation, even though that revelation is wordless or inaudible. There is an objective revelation of God in the heavens; we see that in verses two and three. Second, this revelation, this creational revelation, reveals something of God's existence, His glory, and the fact that He is the Creator. The word 'glory' is interesting throughout Scripture. The Old Testament word is *kabod*; it often has the connotation of 'reputation.' But almost always in any context there is also a very strong notion of the presence of God throughout Scripture, both Old Testament and New. The New Testament word is *doxa*. Third, this revelation is continuous. God's revelation in creation is not just at the origination of creation but it is continuous; it is still going on. Fourth, this revelation is worldwide in scope and universal in extent. That is to say, it comes to all, and it comes to all no matter where they are. Now Psalm 19 is one of the earliest expressions of what will later be known as the teleological arguments for the existence of God. The design and the artistry of creation speak of the One who brings that creation about. We see this same sentiment expressed in Psalm 8:3-4, but there the psalmist's response is one of awe. He says, "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you've established, what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?"

I would like to put this creational revelation into a theological context, to say something to the theological tradition and what it has made of this creational revelation. Augustine spoke of the *vestigia* of God. Augustine held the notion, a pretty good notion I think, that all workman leave some evidence of themselves in their work. Every artifact tells you something about its maker. This chair right here tells us something about its maker. It tells us that whoever made it put some value upon sitting down, right? It can tell us something about the workmanship of its maker: Were they competent or incompetent? It tells us something about their aesthetic sense: Is it a beautiful chair or not? Every artifact tells us a certain number of things about the worker. In the case of the human artifact, we would say that these *vestigia*, these traces, are inescapable. They are simply there; they are accidental; you cannot get away from it. In the case of creation, these *vestigia*, these traces of God, are not only inescapable, they are also intentional. As Calvin said, God displays innumerable evidences and unmistakable marks of His glory, right within the workmanship of the universe. Thus the universe is a grand theater in which we

contemplate God through His works. Or to change the metaphor, the universe is a sort of mirror in which we contemplate God who is otherwise invisible.

But God's revelation of His character by way of these *vestigia*, by way of these traces, is not enough. God must also make us receptive to that revelation. It does very little good to prefer the color red to blue if you are colorblind. It really does not matter. God makes us in a way that we are going to pick up on His revelation. We thus naturally seek, we have a bent for, God's revelation of Himself in creation. Both Augustine and later Calvin develop this idea strongly. We are going to follow Calvin's articulation of it here, particularly in the first five chapters of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Calvin held that human beings are inherently religious beings. What separates man from animals? What makes us different from the apes? Calvin said the primary difference is that man worships. As a matter of fact, what Calvin actually said was, "Man is the animal who worships." He spoke of a seed of religion, a *semen religionis*, which resides right in our core. We are by our very constitutions, our very structures, worshippers. What this means is that we are all, and all the time, doing business with God. Calvin's phrase here is literally translated as, 'doing business'; we are negotiating with God. Now that is true for man in our original integrity before the fall, and in man as he is now, fallen. Indeed Calvin said no matter how far we might drift away from God, even to the point of saying that God no longer exists, still that seed remains, which can in no way be uprooted. This seed of religion, which is planted deep within us all, means that, all of us, no matter what—just think of that, no matter what—are responding to God. There is no such thing as irreligion. There is no such thing as a nonreligious creature, a nonreligious human being. You see, we are all responding; we are all in relationship either in obedience or disobedience. We will either worship the true God who manifests His glory within the created order, or we will make an idol. As Calvin said, "Man is a veritable factory of idols, but worship we will."

Calvin also used another phrase, along with the seed of religion; he spoke of an awareness of divinity, a *sensus divinitatis*, within man, but he used this term, this phrase, a bit more equivocally. At times it is merely a synonym for the seed of religion, the fact that human beings need to worship, that we are all religious, that we all have a god. Even Carl Sagan had a god. But at other times, Calvin would use this second term, this awareness of deity, to refer to the content, the knowledge, that God exists and that we are morally accountable to Him. So sometimes Calvin will use the awareness of deity as the objective complement to the subjective need, which is included in his argument of the seed of religion. Calvin speaks of this *sensus divinitatis* as an ingrained natural instinct. It is an unmediated perception that God exists, that there is a God. As such this *sensus* is not the result of learning, and it is not the result of natural deduction. It is universal and it resides in all men. Calvin said, "There is within the human mind, indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretence 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."

Further Calvin says, "This conviction, namely, that there is some God, is naturally inborn in all and is deeply fixed within, as it were in the very marrow. From this, we conclude that 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." Notice his last statement here; our need for God is insuppressible; this knowledge that there is a God is insuppressible. This need and God's revelation of His character and will, will have one of two effects: it will either produce piety or impiety. Let me define those two terms as Calvin used them. I am doing this because John Calvin has thought on the issues of revelation more deeply, more consistently than anyone else I can think of. I am going to follow someone who is trustworthy here; I am going to follow Calvin on the issue of revelation. If you want to follow him as well, pick up a copy of the *Institutes* and read the first five chapters. It is a wonderful piece of literature. 'Piety': "That reverence joined with the love of God

which the knowledge of his benefits induces”—reverence joined with love. And ‘impiety’: “An idolatrous substitution of creaturely things as objects of worship.” Calvin concludes here that “human beings can never remain indifferent when it comes to the issue of God for we know God by intimate acquaintance right from our mother’s wombs.” Again, there is no such thing as irreligion—you are either for Him or you are against Him, you are either walking and living in obedience and grace, or you are walking in disobedience. Augustine was getting at the same thing a thousand years before when he said the restless heart calls out for God and is satisfied only in God’s presence.

Let us move from on from creational revelation to revelation through providence (IV). Now revelation through providence is clearly related to what we may call creational revelation. As a matter of fact, they are so related you will hear me use the term ‘creational revelation’ as being synonymous with all of general revelation. That is fairly common, but is somewhat artificial when we make the distinction between creation and providence. When we talk about providence, we are really thinking in terms of God’s continuing along with His creation, of God’s seeing to man’s need in history and to man’s cultural reality in history.

The thought is fairly well expressed in two of Paul’s speeches to Gentiles in the book of Acts. Acts 14:14-18 is the first of these two texts:

But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd shouting: ‘Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth, the sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.’ Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowds from sacrificing to them.”

This passage is literally resonant with Old Testament language and reference: “The living God that made the heavens and the earth, the sea and everything in them.” Verse fifteen is a fairly classic Hebrew expression of monotheism; see Exodus 20:11 and Psalm 146:6 (it is almost a quotation of that text). The description of God’s providential care in verse seventeen echoes the Old Testament reflection on God’s goodness as it is expressed in the fruitfulness of creation (see Leviticus 26, Psalm 147, and Jeremiah 5; your outline contains other Old Testament references). There are several items of note here in Acts 14. First of all, the regularity of the order of creation testifies to God’s existence. It testifies to His status as the Creator, and it testifies to His benevolence. Second, this revelation is continuous. It occurs season after season. Thus God’s revelation of His kingship of His presence is not limited to the origination of the universe. Third, this revelation has occurred whenever crops and fruits have grown. And fourth, we should note the corollary that Paul draws from this statement: those who see God’s goodness and benevolence should recognize that God is not like mortal man, and thus God cannot be imaged by idols made of stone or wood, worthless things (this is intentionally an Old Testament notion).

We get a better picture of this when we turn to Acts 17:26-28. This is our second speech, with a closely related theme, and it, too, echoes Old Testament concerns about revelation. Again, Paul is speaking to the Gentiles:

From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men should seek him and perhaps reach out to him and find him, though he is not far from each of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’”

Notice first, Paul says mankind is made from a common stock. Of course, you want to compare Genesis 1 here. Second, God has fixed the seasons and the boundaries of the nations, so God's providence here is historical action. Historical providence is not merely a matter of the seasons or the rains, but is also a matter of God fixing the boundaries of the nations. Third, the objective of this revelation is that men should seek God. The verbs that are actually used in verse 27—if perhaps they should 'grope' for Him and 'find' Him—capture the reaching out in the dark of those moved by God's general revelation. But God has created us, created us with this hunger for Him, and then He has not left us alone, He does not leave this hunger unsatisfied. God is not far from each of us. Once again the idea is thoroughly Hebraic (see Psalm 145 and Jeremiah 23), but interestingly Paul can cite two things from Greek poets, which get at the same idea. The first is from an unknown source: "In him we live and move and have our being." The second is from the Stoic Eritus: "For we too are his offspring." By citing both a Hebraic source and a Greek source, Paul is saying this revelation of God's providence is universal. But again, as in the former text, he comes back with a warning against idolatry: even though this revelation is given to all, it is continuous, it is universal, there is a certain priority to the Hebraic understanding of things, to its controls or limits.

V. Revelation through moral consciousness. Psalm 19 has two parts. Verses 1-6, which we have already looked at, meditate on the revelatory voice of creation. The second half of the Psalm meditates on the revelatory force of the law. The law informs the conscience in the will of God, and for the psalmist these two go hand in hand. Both are important; both provide us instruction into God's character and something of His will. The Enlightenment philosopher Emmanuel Kant saw very clearly that these two forms of revelation entail one another. He said he was filled with wonder and awe at two things: the starry heaven above and the moral law within. We now look at the second half of Psalm 19, verses 7-11:

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the Lord are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there's great reward.

Now the psalmist here clearly has the Mosaic code in mind. As a matter of fact, the term 'torah' comes up more than once there. But to speak of the Mosaic law at this point would mean a huge jump along the historical timeline of revelation.

What we have in mind here is what Paul intimates in Romans 1 to be the moral law written within man. Later we will see that the Ten Commandments, the Mosaic code, not only the ten words, but the law, and the case law that comes with it, is really an historical restatement, an historical codification, of God's moral law written on the heart. But our concern here is not the Mosaic code per se, but this more general moral law.

Romans 1:32 states, "Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these things, but also approve of those who practice them." Paul elaborates in Romans 2:12-16:

All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. (Indeed, when Gentiles, who did not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law by themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witnesses, and their thoughts now accusing, now even

defending them.) This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.

First, man has the requirements of the law written on his heart. All of us have the requirements of the Law written on our hearts. God has revealed His moral expectations right within the human constitution; we see that here in 2:14-15. Second, men do by nature the things of the law. We will actualize, we will positivize the things of the law, either in obedience or disobedience. But we are always acting in reference to it. Even though we do not have the law of Moses, the law written on our hearts causes us to be a law ourselves. Remember the law of Moses is a codification of God's one, moral, universal law. Third, man's sense of moral order, of right and wrong, is really an expression of God's moral norms. Man knows even without a written law, that certain actions are wrong and they incur God's judgment. Fourth, God's law reveals His holiness, justice, and His judgment. Fifth, this revelation of divine law is known by all people, it is universal (1:19-21)—we are going to come back to look at that text. Sixth and finally, this universal revelation, this revelation of God in all men is suppressed and perverted, but even in our suppression, even in our perversion of it, even as we run away from the law, we force it upon others and we judge them when they do not keep it, when they don't follow it.

VI. Natural religion. From what we have said so far about God's revelation in creation, His revelation in providence, and His revelation in man's moral conscience, we might conclude that all men know God, that God's revelation of Himself is universal in such a way that there's sufficient revelation in the world that we all know God and we know Him completely; we know Him as much as we need to know Him; we don't need any other knowledge of Him. Also from our discussion of Calvin, we might conclude that Calvin was a proponent of natural religion, or natural theology. The idea here is that one can come to true knowledge of God through simply an examination of the created order, through simply those revelational sources that are in creation—in creation, in providence, and in moral conscience.

At one point in the *Institutes*, Calvin did concede that the order of nature would have led to a right knowledge of God if Adam had remained upright (book 1, chapter two, paragraph one). But Adam did sin, and the result was the moral blinding of the entire race. I am glad Calvin put that in the hypothetical because I really have my doubts about it. It is one of the places I disagree with Calvin. What is one thing this chair cannot tell me? It cannot give me a name; it cannot give me a face—can it? I think that is a lot of what God walking with Adam in the garden was about. God was making His revelation personal; He was putting a name on it, He was putting a face on it. All the other facts in the world cannot tell me that much. But the fact of the matter is that Adam did sin, so I guess that hypothetical is going to remain there. Calvin said, "Now that we have sinned, it is in vain that so many burning lamps shine for us in the workmanship of the universe to show forth the glory of its author. Although they bathe us wholly in their radiance, yet they can of themselves in no way lead us to the right path. They do not go further than to render us inexcusable."

Our need to worship—it is still there. But now we make *ourselves* the object of worship. That is Paul's indictment in Romans 1:19-23. Sin corrupts our senses to God's revelation in the created order. In 2 Corinthians 4:4, Paul says that the god of this age has blinded the mind of the ungodly; simple human autonomy, self will, blurs our apprehension of God's revelation. Our understanding of our dependence upon God, our sense of our purpose in the world, our understanding of how we are to relate to ourselves, the world around us, and the people around us has all been shattered. But that revelation has not been lost. God's general revelation, God's word in creation, God's word in providence, God's word in moral constitution is still there. The heavens still declare God's majesty; the created order still shouts the praises of the Creator. What is broken is us.

The lines have been broken between our need to worship and the creation's theater in which we are to see Him. But the break is not on God's side, it is on our side. In our fallenness, God's revelation of Himself in creation only tells us that there is someone there. Turn to Romans 1:20. I think this text has often been over-exegeted, even over-translated. The New International Version of that text says, "For 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 all men are without excuse." The word with which the NIV renders the divine nature is *theiotes*, which does not appear often in the New Testament, but in the other places it appears, it means 'divinity'—really little more than the idea that God is God. I think it is difficult to imagine how creational revelation can tell us much about God's true nature, His true character. Paul's argument in Romans 1 should not be pressed too far. It should not be pressed to say anything more than that there is evidence enough in creation, the unregenerate man knows that God exists and that man is held morally accountable. That is sufficient enough for Paul's argument and I do not think you can pile anything more on the term. In other words, man cannot employ a theological excuse for atheism or for immorality. Throughout Calvin's treatment and throughout Scripture, the images of visions keep coming up, for Paul and for Calvin, and the sense we get is that in the fall, in our sinfulness, we do not see very well. I can make out something is there, I can make out someone is there; I cannot tell a whole lot more than that. It is enough that I can make out someone is there and I am accountable that there is someone. That's Paul's argument in Romans 1.

Thus Calvin concludes that the knowledge of God by the created order now has only a negative function within the fallen world. It renders us without excuse in our idolatry. Calvin will conclude in his treatment of Romans 1 that if fallen man were left to himself, he would never arrive at God. Natural religion, in other words, can never be a guide for man to God.

Following Calvin, the Reformed tradition will say, "Yes, there is a general revelation. Yes, God still speaks within the created order, and it is still good; He is still doing it. And even though you and I as fallen human beings are not praising Him, the heavens are, the stars are, the rocks cry out. We are the bad apples." But the tradition has said 'no' to natural religion. I am going to need more than that revelation I have got. That is what Calvin is doing; he is setting up his argument for the need for Scripture. I need more than that word in creation, that word in providence, that word in moral conscience. We need the assistance of other revelation.

Karl Barth however, would go much further. Barth said, "The logic of the matter demands that even if we only lend a little finger to natural theology, there necessarily follows a denial of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ." But Barth is not merely rejecting natural religion here; he is also rejecting general revelation. For Barth restricted revelation to God's action in history, especially His mighty deeds of redemption, in the history of Israel, the exodus, and then God's revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ.

Barth said (and compare what he is saying here to your understanding of Psalm 19), "In itself, and as such, the text of the cosmos is dumb, as is clearly stated in Psalm 19:3, 'There is no speech or language, their voice is not heard.'" Now Barth was not a great Hebraicist, but even in English Psalm 19 does not say that. What Barth has done, quite simply, is confused our knowledge with God's revelation. He has confused what is real in God's intention in the action of God and what is known by fallen man; he has confused the ontic and the noetic. What I mean by the ontic is what is real: God's revelation. And the noetic: what we know about it. Because of the fall, the work of God in creation, preservation, all the rest, is incapacitated. G.C. Berkouwer said, "The activity of God in created reality is not observed and acknowledged due to the radical darkening of the human heart which did and does still withdraw itself from the full communion with Him who is very close to the world and all His actions." Is it possible that this revelation in creation has some positive effects? Is Calvin right when he is saying that it only brings

us God's condemnation? I want to suggest there are some good results, even of a revelation which says there is no excuse.

First, a creational revelation of the sort that Paul was talking about in Romans 1 evidences God's presence, His power, His kingly sovereignty (Romans 1:18-25):

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For 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. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their heart to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

In verses 19-22, Paul makes it clear that this creational revelation evidences God's presence. Second, it also tells us something about our accountability. We are accountable to God. If there were no objective revelation of God in creation, we would not be responsible. God could not hold us responsible for our rebellion against Him. It is only in reference to such a revelation that we are without excuse. Third, this revelation leaves a burning in our hearts. One effect of a persistent general revelation—now remember it is not only in creation, and in providence but it is also in us—is that it leaves us uneasy with our state of estrangement. It leaves us longing for something more, groping for something more. We know something is amiss; we know things do not work right; we know we are not complete, and we are restless with our condition. Fourth, guilt which arises in the human heart confesses its own accountability. It is interesting that Adam and Eve did not forget God. It was not like they bit the apple and got amnesia—they hid. The presence of God in wrath against sin, His being near rather than far away becomes the problem for the guilty conscience. Remember, we have this longing, there is this hole, but He is right there. And all this has to be understood together at the same time. Even though He is right there, we cannot bring Him in because of our sin. We cannot accept Him because of our sin. Fifth, the continuing revelation of God in nature makes civic virtue possible; sometimes this is called common grace. Berkouwer writes, "It's indeed remarkable that human life in manifesting an innate aversion to God and His holy will, still stands for right and justice, for punishing that which is evil and rewarding that which is good." (See Romans 13:3-4.) "There's still an appreciation of human community. There's still a searching for truth and knowledge. In short there is still a working of the law written in human hearts, which neither know God nor serve him." It is interesting that even though we are fallen, we are not as fallen as we can be; we can still be a whole lot worse. Let us talk about total depravity sometime and what it actually means. In effect from this, the first two uses of the law as Luther and Calvin used that terminology are the necessary implications of God upholding His created order. The negative function of God's general revelation, His presence, is that it continually reminds us of our sin and it produces guilt. Luther spoke of the first use of the law as that which tells us we have sinned and pushes us toward Christ. The positive function of this creational revelation is that it brings us enough light, it brings us enough power, to know even in broken ways what God's expectations for human life are, something of God's norms, something of His law. Yes, we tend to get it wrong, but it still breaks through in ways. My next door neighbor is not a Christian but he loves his wife, he loves his children. That is that second use of the law for Luther. He called it the fence, or the civil use of the law.

As I tend to use the term common grace to mean that God upholds the order of His creation in spite of the falleness of His image-bearer. That is the wonderful irony, it seems to me, of the early chapters of Genesis. You and I are the ones who have been called to image God within a created order, right? Yet we are the thing that stinks up the joint. And God says, “No! I am going to have to preserve My creation in spite of you.” This is a lot of what the flood is about—getting rid of the bad guys, right? “I’m going to wash this place clean of you all.” But pretty early on in the story God sees there is a downside here. Judgment has real limitations; it just kills. That is all judgment does; it just kills. So He makes this promise: “Never again am I going to bring this kind of judgment, even though the stink of man is on My creation, I am going to hold it in other ways.” That is the common grace of God, that He upholds the order of His creation. The goodness of His intention, of His structure, of His design breaks through, even upon fallen man, even upon depraved hearts.