

GENERAL REVELATION

1. Definition.

- a. General revelation is “all God has revealed to man about himself and his plan in the world around us and our experience within us, totally apart from Scripture and the life of Jesus.”

2. Comparison with Special Revelation.

- a. General revelation is sometimes called “natural theology,” while special revelation is called “revealed theology.”
- b. The source of general and special revelation is the same—God.
- c. God is always truthful and accurate. Thus, general revelation and special revelation never contradict. Scripture is verifiable.
 - (1) “[T]hat an assertion is in the pages of a leather-covered book does not necessarily make it valid. Instead, the Bible states reality as it exists in the universe, as God has made it and as he governs it. We would expect, therefore, the affirmations of Scripture to be demonstrated in the world around us.”¹
- d. General revelation proves God’s existence; special revelation assumes it.
- e. To be saved, general revelation isn’t enough; special revelation is needed.
 - (1) **Ro 10:14-17** 14 How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? 15 And how are they to preach unless they are sent? ... 17 So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Messiah.
 - (2) General revelation is not the gospel.
- f. Apologetics is concerned with general revelation; evangelism is concerned with special revelation.
- g. Linking general revelation to special revelation is key for the evangelist.
 - (1) **Ac 17:22-23** 22 Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. 23 For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: To the unknown god. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.
- h. See *Special Revelation*.

3. Characteristics.

- a. Universal.
 - (1) **Ac 14:15-17** 15 Men [of Lystra], why are you doing these things? We [Paul and Barnabas] also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all that is in them. 16 In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. 17 Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.

¹ H. W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, Kindle ed. (Baker Publishing Group, []), Kindle Locations 1107-1109.

- (2) **Ro 2:14-15** 14 For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. 15 They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also testifies, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.
- (3) “That there exists in the human minds and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of Deity, we hold to be beyond dispute, since God himself, to prevent any man from pretending ignorance, has endued all men with some idea of his Godhead, the memory of which he constantly renews and occasionally enlarges, that all to a man being aware that there is a God, and that he is their Maker, may be condemned by their own conscience when they neither worship him nor consecrate their lives to his service.”²
- b. Accessible to all mankind.
 - (1) **Ps 19:1** 1 The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.
 - (2) **Ps 19:4** 4 Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.
- c. Constant.
 - (1) **Ps 19:2** 2 Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.
- d. Silent.
 - (1) **Ps 19:3** 3 There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard.
- e. Plain.
 - (1) Ro 1.19-20
 - (2) Have you met a child who didn’t immediately comprehend the idea that God made the world?
- f. Brings condemnation, if rejected.
 - (1) Ro 1.18-20

4. Avenues.³

- a. Essentially, we have three options to explain the world around us and in us: atheism, pantheism, or theism. Atheism and pantheism have severe flaws. Theism stands out clearly as the option most likely to be true.
- b. Creation.
 - (1) Cosmological argument: our universe had a beginning.
 - (a) The universe around us is an effect that requires an adequate cause. It is not eternal, and there is no evidence it is self-caused.
 - (b) Every effect has a cause, the effect caused depends on the cause for its existence, and nature could not have originated itself.⁴
 - (c) There cannot be an infinite regress of causes of being. There must be a “first cause” that is “infinite, necessary, eternal, simple, unchangeable, and one.”⁵

² J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 1997).

³ See J. Warner Wallace, *God’s Crime Scene*, 24-25.

⁴ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 32.

⁵ Norman Geisler, *Philosophy of Religion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 190-208.

- (d) God is not an effect. By definition he is eternal.
 - (e) **Job 38:4-7** 4 Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. 5 Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? 6 On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, 7 when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?
- (2) Fine-tuning argument: our universe is fine-tuned for life.
 - (a) Mathematically, random chance could not have produced what we observe in the universe.
 - (b) **Ps 104:5-9** 5 He set the earth on its foundations, so that it should never be moved. 6 You covered it with the deep as with a garment. The waters stood above the mountains. 7 At your rebuke they fled. At the sound of your thunder they took to flight. 8 The mountains rose, the valleys sank down to the place that you appointed for them. 9 You set a boundary that they may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth.
 - (3) Life argument: non-life cannot produce life.
 - (a) **Acts 14:15-17** 15 Men [of Lystra], why are you doing these things? We [Paul and Barnabas] also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a *living* God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all that is in them.
 - (4) Design argument: biological organisms have been designed.
 - (a) See William Paley, *Natural Theology* (1802), and his illustration of a watch demanding a watchmaker.
 - (b) Randomness could never have produced the highly integrated organisation we observe in the world.
 - (c) Ps 19.2, Ac 14.15-18
 - (d) **Pr 6:6-7** 6 Go to the ant, sluggard. Consider her ways and be wise. 7 Without having any chief, officer, or ruler, 8 she prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest.
 - (e) **Mt 6:26-29** 26 Look at the birds of the air. They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ...28 Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. They neither toil nor spin, 29 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.
 - (5) Ontological argument: a maximally great being must exist in the actual world.
 - (a) See Anselm.
 - (b) We have an idea of a Most Perfect Being. The idea of a Most Perfect Being includes existence, since a Being, otherwise perfect, who did not exist would not be so perfect as a Being who did exist. Therefore, since the idea of existence is contained in the idea of the Most Perfect Being, that Most Perfect Being must exist.⁶
- c. Conscience.
- (1) Mind argument: matter cannot produce mind.

⁶ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 36.

- (a) **Ac 17:29** 29 Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.
- (b) **Ps 139:13-14** 13 You formed my inward parts. You knitted me together in my mother's womb. 14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works. My soul knows it very well.
- (2) Free will argument: we are "free agents" in our otherwise "cause and effect" universe.
- (3) Moral argument: transcendent, objective moral truths exist in our universe.
 - (a) We don't need an officially promulgated law to know basic right and wrong. Our conscience testifies that there is a law we are obliged to follow and obey.
 - (b) **Ro 2:14-15** 14 When Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. 15 They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also testifies, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.
- (4) Problem of evil: evil and injustice continue to persist, in spite of our best efforts.
 - (a) Man feels a deep need for justice and to stop evil.
 - (b) **Ro 8:19-22** 19 The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.
- (5) Religion argument: man is a fundamentally religious being.
 - (a) **Ac 17:22-23** 22 Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. 23 For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: To the unknown god. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.
- (6) Summary.
 - (a) All facets of man together demand some explanation as to their origin. The "mannishness" of man shows we are fundamentally different from animals, dissatisfied with just collecting food and making babies. We're not satisfied with these things.
- d. Culture.
 - (1) General revelation includes analysis of the human condition through art, culture, economics, film, history, law, literature, politics, and science.
 - (2) Artists, philosophers, religious gurus, scientists, and writers can gain perceptive insights about ourselves and the world around us (i.e., Plato and Aristotle).
 - (3) The study of science, literature, music and other culture forms of revelation is not optional for Christian theologians.⁷
 - (4) The artistic products of man's mind, particularly modern art, generally reveals man's "lostness."

⁷ G. Kreider, *God with Us*, 172. See Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation* (1909).

- (5) The trajectory of human philosophy, ending in nihilism and existentialism, generally reveals man's lostness.
- (6) That human society functions poorly without some sort of religious framework believed by the common man to be true generally reveals man's need for God. History has no record of a totally atheistic civilization.
- e. Biblical support.
 - (1) **Ps 8:3-4** 3 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have set in place, 4 what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?
 - (2) Ps 19.1-6; Ro 1.18-23
 - (3) **Pr 30:18-19** 18 Three things are too wonderful for me. Four I do not understand: 19 the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a virgin.
 - (4) Man should know from observing the universe God exists. Instead, man rejected that truth and makes idols over which man is supreme.
 - (5) Man is justly condemned when he rejects what God has revealed about himself through creation.

5. Content.

- a. From Scripture.
 - (1) God's goodness.
 - (a) **Ge 1:31** 31 God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.
 - (b) **Acts 14:16-17** 16 In past generations [God] allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. 17 Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.
 - (c) **1 Ti 4:4** 4 Everything created by God is good....
 - (2) God's glory.
 - (a) **Ps 19:1** 1 The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.
 - (3) God's love.
 - (a) **Ps 119:64** 64 The earth, Yahweh, is full of your loyal love.
 - (b) **Mt 5:44-45** 44 But I [Jesus] say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.
 - (4) God's power and divine nature.
 - (a) **Ro 1:20** 20 For [God's] 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.

6. Value.

- a. We must not overestimate or underestimate the value of general revelation. General revelation proves the existence of God. It does not prove the existence of the God of the Bible.

- b. General revelation is valuable in:
- (1) Providing evidence for theism (as opposed to atheism and pantheism).
 - (2) Testing man's initial volition toward God.
 - (3) Justly condemning unbelievers who reject general revelation.
 - (a) "God intends that people should be able to see that a mechanistic, atheistic, irrationalistic explanation is inadequate to account for the highly integrated world and the various facets of man. Mankind should respond by acknowledging that there has to be behind it all a living, powerful, intelligent, superhuman Being. If men do not make that minimal but crucial acknowledgment, but rather turn away and offer some other explanation, then God is just if He rejects them and does not offer more truth. The rejection of what is revealed in general revelation is sufficient to condemn justly. ... If a concerned student goes to his fellow student who needs one thousand dollars for tuition and offers with genuine loving concern ten dollars (which is all he has), and if his ten dollar bill is thrown scornfully on the floor with a mocking 'What good will that pittance do me?' what further obligation does the student have to provide additional help to his fellow student? If he should suddenly be able to give the entire one thousand dollars, would anyone charge him with injustice if he gave it to another needy student? Accepting a ten dollar gift will not 'save' the person who needs one thousand dollars; but rejecting it will condemn him. We must not forget that the majority of people who have ever lived have rejected the revelation of God through nature, and that rejection has come with scorn and deliberate substitution of their own gods. They have condemned themselves, and when God rejects them, He does so justly."⁸

7. Wrong Response.

- a. Philosophical naturalism.
- (1) "The ancient Hebrews from whom the Bible came were a religious people. They thought in religious patterns, they spoke in religious phrases, they saw in every event the direct activity of God. If it rained, it was God who sent the rain. When crops were good, it was God who yielded the increase. But that is not our language, nor the pattern of our thought. We think in terms of law—chemical, natural law. When it rains we know it is the natural condensation of vapor. When crops are good we credit it to the fertilizer. An amazing thing has happened in our way of thinking. In a world that could not for one moment exist without the activity of God, we have conditioned our minds to a way of thinking that leaves no room for him. So many of our wants are provided by what seem natural and impersonal forces that we have lost sight of the great Provider in the midst of providence. Some of us who were brought up in the country and then later moved to the city remember how easy it was to get out of the habit of returning thanks at the table, partly because the food on it came not directly from the earth but from the grocery store. A physician in New York City said, 'If you ask a child where

⁸ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 37-38.

milk comes from, he won't think of saying "From a cow." He will say "From a container."""⁹

b. Hardheartedness.

c. Foolishness.

(1) **Ro 1:21-22** ...But [men] became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools....

(2) See R. Dawkins's explanation for the origin of life on earth.

(3) See N. D. Tyson's explanation for the origin of life on earth.

(4) "I don't have enough faith to be an atheist."¹⁰

d. Truth suppression.

(1) **Ro 1:18** 18 The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

e. Idolatry.

(1) The rejection of general revelation always results in the worship of idols.

(2) **Ro 1:23** 23 ...And exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man, birds, animals, and creeping things.

(3) As creatures, we must worship someone or something.

8. Right Response.

a. To honour and thank God.

(1) **Ro 1:21** 21 For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him.

b. To seek God and feel their way toward him.

(1) **Ac 17:24-27** 24 The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, because he himself gives to all humanity life, breath, and everything. 26 And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, 27 that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him.

c. If one responds positively to general revelation, God *always* will provide special revelation.

(1) **Ac 10:34-35** 34 So Peter opened his mouth and said: Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, 35 but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

d. At the moment of God-consciousness, what one does with general revelation is all important. If a child is negative to God at the moment he first becomes aware of God through general revelation, his heart is hardened just a little. But if a child is positive to God at the moment he first becomes aware of God through general revelation, his heart is softened just a little, and the Father begins to draw him. There is something inside each of us that chooses to go positive or negative toward God at various points throughout our lives. It starts when we are very young.

⁹ H. W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, Kindle ed. (Baker Publishing Group, []), Kindle Locations 1145-1156).

¹⁰ Norman Geisler.

- (1) **Jn 6:44** 44 No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.
- (2) See *Order of Salvation*.

“The Spacious Firmament on High” (1712) | Joseph Addison

The Spacious Firmament on high,
With all the blue Ethereal Sky,
And spangled Heav’ns, a Shining Frame,
Their great Original proclaim:
Th’ unwearied Sun, from day to day,
Does his Creator’s Pow’r display,
And publishes to every Land
The Work of an Almighty Hand.

Soon as the Evening Shades prevail,
The Moon takes up the wondrous Tale,
And nightly to the list’ning Earth
Repeats the Story of her Birth:
Whilst all the Stars that round her burn,
And all the Planets, in their turn,
Confirm the Tidings as they rowl,
And spread the Truth from Pole to Pole.

What though, in solemn Silence, all
Move round the dark terrestrial Ball?
What tho’ nor real Voice nor Sound
Amid their radiant Orbs be found?
In Reason’s Ear they all rejoice,
And utter forth a glorious Voice,
For ever singing, as they shine,
The Hand that made us is Divine.