

THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD:
GENERAL AND SPECIAL REVELATION

by

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From Carl F. H. Henry, ed., *Basic Christian Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971).

It is the psalmist who sings "The Heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows his handiwork. Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night shows knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard." Men have known these things for generations. They have gloried in the glory of a God who manifests himself in his wondrous works. No speech nor language is spoken; it is not in the words of Greek or Hebrew or German or English; yet every day speaks and every night shows knowledge. The apostle adds in a later day, "the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and godhead; so that they are without excuse." Psalmist and apostle declare what no man can deny: that there is a God who can be known through his works, and when we refuse to see him there we are without excuse.

Such knowledge of God forced on us by the world around us has been recognized and accepted by believers in every generation. In some fashion it is the approach of Plato, as he moves level upon level to his supreme Idea, an idea which, according to Plato's thinking, necessarily has moral qualities which can be defined as an Ideal. In some fashion it is the approach of Aristotle, as his system carries us from utter matter to perfect form or from the inanimate world to the high reaches of the Unmoved Mover. More specifically, in the Christian tradition, men have discovered in the world around them "proofs" for God, reasons for faith, necessities for believing, and, at least in the direction of their thinking, they have been forced toward some knowledge of God. Arguments for the existence of God, and in support of the nature of God, are very old ones. They have been subjected to much criticism and, therefore, to considerable refinement in the history of thought. In spite of such criticism, however, they keep cropping up in one form or another, one argument, or one way of stating the argument, appealing to one generation more than to another; but none of the arguments ever quite disappears. That these arguments keep reviving is probably a reason for their fundamental strength; men feel under some duress to define what they know must be true about God from the evidence of the external world.

FROM EFFECTS TO THEIR CAUSE

Keeping in mind that these arguments say something about God's attributes as well as giving

reasons for His existence, we are justified in using them as supports in natural theology for our knowledge of God. In general, the arguments move under at least four titles: the **cosmological**, the **teleological**, the **anthropological**, and the **ontological**. These arguments all allow somewhat the same scheme, namely that an effect must have a cause equal to or greater than the effect itself. In the general scheme of things you cannot get something from nothing and, surely, one can observe a great deal of something in the world of nature; the question is, therefore: what is "the source, the support, and the end" of all these things about us? What is the explanation of their existence?

The easiest argument is the *cosmological*. It argues from the existence of the Cosmos, the universe, what C.S. Lewis calls "the whole show." Man does not need to be either clever or subtle merely to wonder about the world around him. How can one account for all these things he sees and experiences--the birds, the rocks, the trees, and the stars in their courses? This first argument in "natural" theology finds us unable to escape the belief that back of all this Cosmos there is something or someone equal to bringing into existence (by what method we need not argue here) the universe within us, around us, and above us.

The *teleological* argument is more reflective regarding the universe. Here, our interest is focused on design and purpose, as we discover the amazing intricacy with which all things are interlocked as if united in some grand mutual interdependency, some basic design. These interlocked designs and purposes point to a designer, some intelligence with creative purpose. There are no isolated data, there is no item so small that it is not somehow interrelated with every possible other thing. Nothing ever "just happens." You can never really say of anything that "it doesn't really matter." Butler in his *Analogy*, Paley in his *Evidences*, and in these latter days F.R. Tennant in *Philosophical Theology* found this argument from design almost conclusive for the existence and the nature of God.

In his master work, *Nature, Man and God*, William Temple sets himself to examine the world of nature, only to discover that nature includes man and that nature and man together point us to God. In some such fashion the *anthropological* argument grows out of the teleological argument, for nothing points more clearly to intelligence and design than the fact of man himself, man who is able to understand the design and to appreciate the designer. But beyond this is man as person. Man as a person has what we call personality. Will anyone seriously argue that personality can arise from some impersonal source? Will anyone seriously support accidents or material or both as sufficient to account for all the wonders in man? Since man is so creative himself, was the ground of his existence uncreative? Thus the argument runs. We cannot get something from nothing; we have something personal in man; we cannot believe that this personal end product comes from impersonal sources.

The *ontological* argument points to perfection, or more exactly, to the idea of perfection, which we find inescapable in our ways of thought. To use our thinking about God as an example, how is it possible for us to talk about the perfections of God without some idea of perfection as a point of reference? Yet we are imperfect ourselves; we think imperfectly; we are surrounded by a world of imperfections. Since, once again, we cannot get something from nothing and since assuredly we have ideas of perfection which cannot be accounted for in the immediacies of our surroundings, the conclusion suggests itself that this *idea* of perfection must come directly from the perfect source, namely, from God Himself.

It would appear from this brief treatment that we have at least four reasons for believing in God.

(Some add the moral argument, that is, the inescapable sense of "oughtness" common to all men, Kant's *categorical imperative*. We believe that the moral argument, which we have not here expanded, can find a natural place in the anthropological argument.) These tell us some very definite things about God's nature: He is mighty enough to account for the universe itself; He is intelligent enough to satisfy its design; He is personal enough to account for man as person; and He is the ground of all our understanding and perfection. If we add creativity and morality as necessary to man as person, we may presume to have found as necessary a God who is almighty, intelligent, personal, creative, moral, and perfect. We are not far from the kingdom!

FROM NECESSARY PRESUPPOSITIONS

What has been said thus far usually comes under the heading of *a posteriori* reasoning, that is, reaching our conclusions inductively. There are others who prefer the *a priori* approach; this is, as a matter of fact, the approach of much of the theology of our day. Knowledge of God with this approach is not so much the result of our thinking as it is the starting place of our thinking. The starting place is always there, described sometimes as a first truth, and it is only in personal intellectual maturity or perhaps in the maturity of the race that man gets around to analyzing the nature of his starting place. Living as we do in an age dominated by scientific method, it is difficult for us to accept the fact that we operate, even in science, even in our "proofs," from the foundation of various presuppositions. For many, the fact of God is one of the necessary presuppositions.

All of us must accept some first truths about ourselves from the outset. We are alive and awake and sane; such truths about ourselves we cannot prove objectively, but merely accept as starting places. On a deeper level we base our thinking on the assumption that there are certain foundations of truth and reason from which we operate and to which we constantly return. We believe that truth has an interrelatedness in a *universe* (which is a single organizational principle of truth).

All serious thinking, especially the most objective scientific research, upholds the necessity of absolute honesty in methods and in findings, appealing, therefore, to a moral ground built into the structure of reality. In other directions our words betray us: "It stands to reason" or "That doesn't make sense." Thus, we are insisting that our thinking, as well as our experimenting, demands a frame of reference that is sensible. Moreover, we appeal to one another on the grounds of a common acceptance of these necessary fundamentals. Notice the presupposition of this paragraph recently published in the "Science" section of *Time* magazine, where the discussion has to do with the possibility of interplanetary conversations: "But what message would aliens send that could be understood by earthlings? Dr. Drake suggests a familiar series of numbers, such as 1, 2, 3, 4. Professor Purcell believes that a simple on-off signal would be more logical as a starter. After that the message could progress to *Mathematical relationships, which are surely the same in all planetary systems. . . .*"¹ Note how normal it is for scientists to assume an underlying rational system.

FROM SPECIAL REVELATION

From this *a priori* approach it is interesting to note that we are talking again about a reality at

1 *Time* magazine, "Science--Project OZMA," April 18, 1960, p. 53.

the source of things, showing attributes of truth, reason, and morality. We are being pressed to the conclusion again, namely, that in what is called natural theology there are strong reasons for knowing that there is a God and knowing something of his attributes. But, "can a man by searching find out God?" Only is this possible when God is pleased to reveal himself and to answer finally and authoritatively man's deepest questions. This is not natural revelation but special revelation. This is the Bible record of God's mighty acts and his authoritative word about the revelatory acts and about himself. This is the climax and fulfillment of God's word to us in the Living Word, even Jesus Christ. Natural revelation gives us direction and confidence in our search for God; God's special revelation gives us final authority and assurance regarding his own nature and his will for man. As Calvin suggests, in the Bible we have the "divine spectacles" which bring the truths of natural theology into focus.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

In addition to classic systematic theologies by C. Hodge, A.H. Strong, L. Berkhof, and others, we suggest the following:

R. Flint: *Evangelical Theism* [an old standard work]

J. Gerstner: *Reasons for Faith* [popular and sound]

S.M. Thompson: *A Modern Philosophy of Religion*

H. Heppel: *Reformed Dogmatics*

K. Barth: *Die kirchliche Dogmatik* [dialectical]

F.R. Tennant: *Philosophical Theology* [liberal but surprisingly firm in its objective approach]

Special revelation is a theological term used mainly by evangelical scientists and Christian theologians which refers to the belief that knowledge of God and of spiritual matters can be discovered through supernatural means, such as miracles or the scriptures, a disclosure of God's truth through means other than through mans reason. The distinction between Special and General revelation was first elucidated in-depth by the Catholic systematic theologian St. Thomas Aquinas in his discussion of General revelation is the knowledge of God, as well as the knowledge of right and wrong, that can be obtained through nature. This general revelation of God's existence and basic morality is known by everyone. First of all, the apostle Paul tells us that the people can obtain knowledge of God in creation. Knowledge of God, Rom. 1. The difference between general and special revelation. General revelation does not provide sufficient information for the gospel message. The gospel, which is the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, is found in the Bible.