

Building Your Theology

Lesson 3

Relying on Revelation

Manuscript



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Lesson Three

Revelation on Revelation

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever given someone a gift only to learn later that they never used it? An artist once gave his friend a beautiful painting. His friend was extremely busy at the time, so he stuck it in a closet until he could decide where to put it. About a year later, the artist visited his friend again. Looking around, he asked about the painting, but his friend had forgotten all about it. His friend felt terrible as he tried to explain what had happened. But no matter what he said, the artist still assumed that he hadn't liked the gift.

Something like this is true as we build our Christian theology. As followers of Christ, we believe that God has given us his gift of revelation in countless ways. But we show how much we appreciate his gift by how much we actually use it in our lives. When we fail to rely on God's revelation, we demonstrate how little it matters to us, and we foolishly try to build our theology without it.

This is the third lesson in our series *Building Your Theology*, and we've entitled it "Relying on Revelation." In this lesson, we'll explore how to make use of God's gift of revelation as we develop our theology.

This lesson will divide into three main parts. First, we'll explore what the Scriptures teach us about finding revelation. Second, we'll examine some of the more important dynamics involved in understanding God's revelation. And third, we'll consider ways of developing confidence in the theological conclusions we draw from God's revelation. Let's begin by looking at where we find God's revelation.

FINDING REVELATION

Theologians have often spoken of God as the "hidden God," or in theological terms, the "*Deus Absconditus*." And God would be entirely hidden from us if it were not for the fact that he's revealed himself. All genuine believers should acknowledge our need for divine revelation. After all, Old Testament prophets, Jesus and New Testament authors spoke with one voice on this issue. And faithful Christians throughout church history have done the same. We simply can't build reliable theology on human speculation. We must build on the solid foundation of divine revelation. But all of this raises a crucial question. Where do we find God's revelation?

As we explore the subject of finding revelation, we'll touch on three issues. First, we'll look at the doctrine of general revelation. Second, we'll consider the doctrine of special revelation. And third, we'll examine the interconnections between these two forms of revelation. Let's begin with general revelation.

GENERAL REVELATION

One of the principal ways God has revealed himself to humanity is what we often call “general revelation.” We use the term “general” to indicate that God reveals himself through *all* created things in general and to all people in general. It’s sometimes also called “natural revelation” because this revelation comes through the medium of nature or creation.

A number of biblical passages teach us about general revelation. For instance, we find the concept mentioned in Psalm 19:1-6; Acts 14:15-17; and Acts 17:26, 27. But perhaps the fullest description of general revelation in the Bible appears in the familiar verses of Romans 1:18-32.

General revelation is what God reveals to us about himself or tells us about himself through creation and through providence, that is to say, through nature and also through the course of history. It’s revelatory; it tells us about God as we see in, for example, Psalm 19: “The heavens declare the glory of God.” So, contemplating the heavens, the heavenly bodies, the earth, the sun, the moon, the stars and so on, we can contemplate that there is a Creator who is glorious. And in Romans 1, also, Paul talks about that we can know about God, about his power and his wisdom through what we perceive in creation.

— Dr. Larry Trotter

To look into this biblical teaching on general revelation, we should touch on two matters: the medium — instrument or conduit of general revelation — and the content of general revelation. In the first place, the Scriptures teach that the medium of general revelation is all of creation.

Medium

Listen to the way Paul put the matter in Romans 1:18-20:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven ... God has shown it to [human beings]... in the things that have been made (Romans 1:18-20).

These words tell us that God reveals himself to us through the creation, or as it says here, “in the things that have been made.”

Revelation comes through massive galaxies in space and through microscopic units of matter. The physical, the abstract, and the spiritual dimensions of creation — even our own existence as human beings — everything in creation mediates God’s revelation. Unfortunately, Christians often assume that the words in Romans 1 only refer to creation in its natural state. We all know how forests, lakes, mountains, and wilderness

can turn our thoughts to God. But we often fail to realize that civilization, technology, and human culture as a whole also reveal God.

In Scripture, God tells us, and Paul gives us argument in Romans 1, that it doesn't matter who it is or of what culture, every human being who has ever existed has known about the existence of God... Paul said that every man knows that God exists by conscience. Man has a reason, he has a conscience, and through what has been created in the world, God's divine nature has been clearly seen. So, all men know that God exists by creation and conscience. And if you look in Romans 1, it also says that God's righteous nature and his holiness is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness of men, and it is seen in that men denied that. They suppressed the truth of God in their unrighteousness.

— Rev. Clete Hux

As we read in Romans 1:32:

Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such [perversions] deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them (Romans 1:32).

These words indicate that general revelation comes through what people do with nature, not just through creation in its natural state. Human technologies, science, architecture, politics, family life, art, medicine, music, and the countless products of human culture also facilitate God's revelation. We simply cannot escape the revelation of God.

In addition to the medium of general revelation, we should note that in Romans 1 Paul also indicated the basic content of general revelation.

Content

Now, from one perspective, Paul was not very precise about what people know through general revelation. His lack of specificity probably results from the fact that different people in different places and times encounter and acknowledge different aspects of general revelation. Nevertheless, Paul made it clear that general revelation reveals at least two kinds of information to human beings: God's attributes and our corresponding moral responsibilities.

On the one hand, as Paul put it in Romans 1:20, creation reveals:

[God's] invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature (Romans 1:20).

Here, Paul made it clear that the attributes of God that cannot be viewed directly are seen indirectly in his creation. Every person, no matter who they are, knows some

dimension of God’s character because, as we read earlier in Romans 1:19, “God has shown it to them” in general revelation. For example, the beauty of creation points to God’s astounding beauty. Nature’s provision for human life demonstrates God’s goodness. The mere size of creation reveals his enormity. The complexity of creation shows his unmatched wisdom. And the power of nature reveals his divine power.

If we look at the human body, it’s part of general revelation. God gave us a very complex body. It’s exquisite and marvelous. For instance, scientists estimate the number of cells in the human body to be thirty-seven trillion. Thirty-seven trillion! And each cell is complex and has a certain structure and function... If we think about space around us, we see marvelous things. We have the solar system, and planet earth is just one of the planets that revolves around the sun, and we call this the solar system... We are just one solar system within countless solar systems in our galaxy. What is more astonishing than all of this is that scientists estimate that there are hundreds of billions of galaxies! So, the question is: Why all of this? Who made all of this? Is it reasonable that all of this came about by itself? Or is it that a wise and great God, who is full of majesty and power, with no beginning or end, created these things?

— Rev. Dr. Emad A. Mikhail, translation

On the other hand, in addition to displaying God’s invisible attributes, general revelation communicates aspects of our moral responsibilities before God. Listen again to Romans 1:32 where Paul spoke of the sinfulness of the human race:

Though they know God’s righteous decree that those who practice such [perversions] deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them (Romans 1:32).

In other words, various aspects of creation reveal moral responsibilities that we bear before God. For instance, the biological distinctions between male and female reveal our obligation to practice heterosexuality. Children’s dependence on parental care reveals both parents’ obligation to care for their children and children’s responsibility to honor their parents. The suffering of human beings in famine and war reveals our obligation to show mercy. Everywhere we look, the creation calls out to us, demanding that we conform our lives to the moral standards God exhibits in and through the creation.

Now that we’ve examined finding revelation by touching on the doctrine of general revelation, we should turn to the doctrine of special revelation.

SPECIAL REVELATION

In traditional Christian theology, it’s common to distinguish between general revelation — how God has revealed himself to all people through all things — and

special revelation. This distinction is helpful in many ways, but we have to be careful. When evangelical Protestants speak of special revelation, they often think exclusively of the Scriptures. To be sure, the Bible is a crucial dimension of God's special revelation, but special revelation includes much more than the Bible.

Special revelation has been called "special" largely because it's not given to all people in all places, but it's given to specific or special segments of humanity. This type of revelation has taken many forms throughout history, but from the Christian point of view, God revealed himself most clearly and fully in his Son Jesus. Hebrews 1:1-3 offers a succinct summary of the Christian outlook on special revelation:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature (Hebrews 1:1-3).

Prior to the coming of Christ, God revealed himself and his will in many special ways. He spoke directly to people, gave them supernatural dreams, opened their eyes to visions, and spoke through prophets, priests, kings, and sages. But none of these revelations compares to the fullness and supremely glorious revelation in Christ, the Son of God. Jesus' life and teachings are the premier special revelation of God. And for this reason, it's quite appropriate to say that the standard for Christian theology is God's revelation in Christ. Now, this commitment to Christ as God's supreme revelation leads to a number of important implications. But for our purposes, one of the most important and practical implications is that we should also be committed to Scripture as God's revelation.

When we think of why we should submit to the Old and New Testaments as God's revelation, we can think of how Jesus Christ treated the Scriptures. When Jesus read Scripture, where did his authority come from? He claimed that he was from the Father, but a lot of times when he referred to the Father's authority, his words were based on the Old Testament. That means, the Bible that Jesus read was the entirety of the Old Testament; the Old Testament was his canon. Then, he also told us that he gave us apostles and prophets. As Ephesians 2, 4 repeatedly emphasize, Jesus Christ is the cornerstone, with the apostles and prophets as the foundation of the church. To us, the Old and New Testaments together are the revelation that we have received.

— Dr. Biao Chen, translation

Those who look to Christ as the supreme revelation of God must follow his example and submit to his teaching by receiving the Old and New Testaments as God's special revelation for his people today.

It is vital for us to love the Scripture as having come from the mind, from the heart of God. God is our heavenly Father in Christ, and he's speaking to us. And when Scripture speaks to us, we need to love what he's saying. And probably, there's no part of Scripture that displays this love for Scripture as much as Psalm 119. The psalmist over and over says, "Oh how I love your law and meditate on it day and night. I eat your words; I ponder them; they are my food." And he just delights, verse after verse — 176 verses of delighting in the law of God. And I think to myself, how much more should I, as a New Testament believer, delight in the whole counsel of God? We have "better promises," the book of Hebrews tells us. We have the fulfillment of the life of Christ, and so I can love whatever the writer of Psalm 119 loved, plus a whole lot more.

— Dr. Andrew Davis

We've seen that, in our day, finding God's revelation involves both general revelation in creation and special revelation in Scripture. Now, let's turn our attention to the interconnections between these doctrines. Understanding these interconnections will help us see that we can't neglect either form of revelation.

INTERCONNECTIONS

The last thing we want to do as we build Christian theology is to ignore anything that God has revealed in either general or special revelation. Jesus pointed to the importance of general revelation in his parables and also every time he drew from common life experiences in his teaching. He also pointed to the importance of special revelation every time he referred to the Scriptures. But for you and me to rely on both of these forms of revelation as Jesus did, we must come to grips with how they are deeply interconnected. Special revelation of the Scriptures guides us as we reflect on general revelation. And general revelation helps us as we seek to grasp God's special revelation in the Scriptures. At every step along the way, the two go hand in hand.

We'll touch on two aspects of the interconnections between these types of revelation: the overlap between general and special revelation and the need for both forms of revelation. Let's look first at the overlap between general and special revelation.

Overlap

Although we often speak of general and special revelation under separate headings, we need to recognize that these two forms of revelation overlap significantly. To see this, we must acknowledge the variety of content found in both forms of revelation.

On the one side, special revelation in the Scriptures touches on many subjects that form a continuum between extraordinary insights and very common insights. Some portions of the Bible are so extraordinary that no one could have written them through normal observations or experiences, even with divine guidance. These portions of the Bible were given in extraordinary, supernatural ways. Perhaps the most obvious examples of this kind of material in the Bible are portions of books like Daniel, Joel and Revelation. The men who wrote these materials received their information through visions and other supernatural means given particularly to them. In this sense, we may call these portions of Scripture “very special revelation.”

Along this continuum, a sort of middle ground appears in Scripture where we find mixed elements of esoteric or extraordinary insights and insights granted by the Spirit through ordinary means. Take, for example, the biblical books of Kings and the Gospel of Luke. The writers of these books explicitly mentioned that they collected much of their data from ordinary human sources. Kings refers to the royal annals of Israel and Judah. Luke mentions that he gathered his material from eyewitnesses of Christ’s life. Special supernatural insights were certainly added as the Spirit of God guided these biblical writers. They had insights into the accuracy of the information they found in their sources, insights into how to interpret their sources, and insights into information not found through ordinary means. So, in this sense, these portions of the Bible mix the esoteric and the ordinary.

Beyond this, large portions of Scripture consist of rather common but inspired insights. This is because the Holy Spirit often guided biblical authors to make correct observations about ordinary experiences. For example, in Proverbs 30:25 we read:

Ants are creatures of little strength, yet they store up their food in the summer (Proverbs 30:25, NIV).

This statement is inspired and true, but it resulted from observing nature, not from receiving an esoteric vision.

So, in this sense, special revelation contains materials that we often commonly associate with general revelation. These are the kinds of things that practically anyone can notice about the world. We may even say that these portions of the Bible are “generalized special revelation.”

In Proverbs 14:20, it says, “Even a poor man is hated by his neighbors, but everyone loves the one who is rich.” That’s not making necessarily a positive or a negative evaluation, that’s just the skill of observation, of being able to understand what has happened there... It’s dealing with the kinds of things we run across all the time, whether it’s relationships, dealing with authority, thinking about our use of money, thinking about relationship to our parents, in thinking about our job, and even table manners, all kinds of really practical issues like that. And then, in a broader way ... being able to understand life and the world correctly so that we can live skillfully. We know the kinds of pitfalls to avoid. We know the ways to get ahead in life. And it’s the Bible that begins to help us understand that

if we really want to live life skillfully, we have to do that in terms of the fear of the Lord.

— Dr. Eric J. Tully

On the other side, just like special revelation, general revelation also includes a wide variety of content that can be characterized from common to extraordinary. On one end of this continuum, general revelation contains very common elements, things that are known to most, if not all, people who have ever lived. Nearly everyone knows that the world is immense, covered by a vast expanse of sky. And nearly everyone can remember times when they have experienced their moral conscience. These almost universal experiences have always revealed God and his will for humanity. We may speak of them as “very general revelation.”

Toward the center of the range of general revelation are mixed elements of common and extraordinary general revelation. These are experiences of creation that are given only to some people because they are limited in some way, such as by space or time. For instance, the winds of a terrible hurricane display the mighty power of God. But many people have never experienced a hurricane. The heights of the Himalayan Mountains reveal the glory of God, but most of the human race has not seen the Himalayas first-hand. Because we all face many limitations, not all general revelation goes to all people all the time.

On the other end of the spectrum are rather extraordinary elements of general revelation. These involve times when people explicitly acknowledge, even without knowing the one, true God, some of the truths that God has revealed. The fact is that general revelation includes things we often associate more closely with special revelation.

For instance, some non-Christian religions believe that there is only one God. Many religions distinguish between the ordinary and sacred in ways that parallel the true Christian faith. Murder is condemned in most religions. Basic social justice is extolled by many different faiths. In the ancient world of the Bible, other religions often closely resembled true biblical faith in some remarkable ways. And even today, missionaries report that some unreached peoples have beliefs similar to the Christian faith. In such cases, we may speak of “specialized general revelation.”

So, as we reflect on the roles of special and general revelation in theology, we need to remember two things that are often forgotten. On the one hand, we need to remember that special revelation teaches us about things that are relatively common and can also be discerned through general revelation. This is why we look to the Scriptures as our authority, not only in purely religious and moral matters, but also as they touch on history and science.

On the other hand, we also need to realize that general revelation has much to teach us about matters that we normally reserve for Scripture. In fact, as we’ll see in these lessons, many theological truths addressed by Scripture are also disclosed in general revelation. This is why we must look carefully at general revelation for divine guidance, even in matters that are highly religious.

As we’ve considered the interconnections between general and special revelation, we’ve seen the many ways they overlap. But now we should turn to our second concern. Why do we need both forms of revelation for theology? What does each one contribute?

Need

On the one hand, we need special revelation because it exceeds general revelation in a number of ways. Special revelation is designed to specify, clarify, and reveal God and his will beyond what general revelation presents.

For example, think of Adam and Eve. A number of theologians have observed in recent decades that God provided both special and general revelation to Adam and Eve while they were still in the state of innocence, before their fall into sin. Because Adam and Eve were without sin, we can be confident that they knew much about God and his will for them as they looked at creation. Yet, even before sin, theology was not to be derived by observing creation without the guidance of special revelation. God also gave his special word to Adam with specific instructions regarding the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, keeping the Garden, multiplying, moving beyond the borders of the Garden, and exercising dominion over the whole earth.

Of course, once sin came into the world, special revelation also focused on God's plan of redemption. Although general revelation reveals that we are under God's judgment, only special revelation discloses salvation in Christ. Especially since the fall into sin, the process of building theology out of general revelation — what has sometimes been called “natural theology” — must be guided by special revelation. Otherwise, it's more than likely that we'll mishandle what God has revealed in creation.

I would want to be very careful about what we can learn about God through the label or through the category of natural theology. I would want to hang my hat upon a statement like Romans 1:20 that does talk about his majesty, his power. I think those are things you can hang your hat on in terms of what you can learn. But I would want to say immediately that we are in desperate need of special revelation to have a proper perspective... Therefore, you are in need of special revelation to check human reasoning — autonomous, or I should say *independent* human reasoning — because the created realm yields some things that can also be read and understood problematically. Special revelation of the reality of the Lord Jesus Christ fills in accurately who God is.

— Dr. Bruce L. Fields

Keeping our need for special revelation in mind, we should also look at our need for general revelation. Why isn't it enough simply to build our theology from the Bible? What does general revelation contribute that we don't find in Scripture?

As we've emphasized here, we should never approach general revelation without the authoritative guidance of Scripture. But at the same time, the Scriptures only address a limited number of things directly, and they speak of relatively few things compared to the breadth of general revelation. In fact, every time biblical authors wrote their inspired texts, they built on knowledge that they and their audiences acquired from general

revelation. General revelation provided the context within which special revelation could be communicated. And it does the same for us today.

The need for general revelation appears in at least two ways. On the one hand, what we learn from general revelation enables us to understand special revelation. Think about it this way: We all know that a person must be able to read, or at least understand language to some degree, to access the revelation of Scripture. But how many of us learned how to read or understand language by poring over the words of the Bible without help from other sources? Almost certainly the answer is “none.” Most of us learned language from a parent or caregiver, with the aid of objects and actions involving other elements of creation. And we later learned to read by similar means. Only by building on what we’d learned from these aspects of general revelation were we then able to approach the Bible.

Our dependence on general revelation is even deeper as we come to the Scriptures. We wouldn’t even have Bibles to read if it were not for what people learned from general revelation. Bible translators learned how to translate, printers learned how to print, and publishers learned how to publish, largely from general revelation. In these very basic senses, we must give attention to general revelation because it equips us to study special revelation.

On the other hand, general revelation is also necessary for applying the Bible successfully to our lives. For example, the Bible touches on many different subjects and gives infallible principles to follow. Yet, to apply these principles we have to know something about the creation to which we are applying them.

The Bible tells us that husbands are to love their wives, but to apply this biblical principle we have to know some things from general revelation. What is a husband? What is a wife? We also have to know what it means to show love to a particular wife in her specific situation. In this sense, the faithful application of Scripture is always dependent on the general revelation of God.

So, we see that God has revealed himself in both general and special revelation, and that he expects us to find his revelation both in creation and in the Scriptures. Neither form of revelation was designed to stand on its own. God has ordained that we must hold fast to both as we build our theology.

Just as our knowledge of special revelation can help us to understand general revelation, our life experiences from general revelation can actually help us understand special revelation too. In other words, our life experiences can help us understand the Bible. One way in which this is apparent frequently throughout the Bible is how the Bible appeals to creation in order to communicate things about God. Psalm 19 says, “the heavens declare the glory of God, the firmament ... his handiwork.” What it’s saying there is when we look out at the world, we see certain things, and then when we come to the Bible, we see how those things communicate to us about God... It’s not as if God said, “Let me see how I can illustrate myself. Oh, there’s a rock. I’m like a rock.” But as the Creator, God made the rock so he could turn around and say, “I’m like the rock.” God made the waters so that he could turn around and say “I am living water.” You see, because God

is the Lord of creation, the creation is God’s poem that then the skillful interpreter, the scientist, under the lordship of Christ, interprets. But you see that creation, therefore, is intentional by God in order to give the context in which the Bible describes God using creation as a metaphor or imagery.

— Rev. Michael J. Glodo

Having seen that finding God’s revelation requires looking to both his special and general revelation, we should turn to our second topic: understanding revelation. How are we to understand revelation so that we may derive theology from it?

UNDERSTANDING REVELATION

It’s one thing for us to acknowledge how God has revealed himself and his will to us, but it’s quite another thing for us to formulate proper theological responses to it. Even sincere Christians who are fully committed to relying on God’s general and special revelations go in different directions as they form their theologies. In fact, the history of formal and informal Christian theology can be written in terms of our disagreements over a host of issues related to orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos. Why is this true? It’s because grasping how divine revelation should impact our theology is a complex process.

To see how this process of understanding revelation takes place, we’ll focus our attention in three directions. First, we’ll explore the hindrance of sin. Second, we’ll explore the illumination of the Holy Spirit. And third, we’ll touch on the results of these dynamics on our theology. Let’s look first at how sin hinders us as we seek to understand God’s revelation.

HINDRANCE OF SIN

Every follower of Christ knows that sin is a powerful force, not only in the lives of others, but in our lives as well. True believers have been set free from the tyranny of sin and from God’s eternal judgment against sin. But sin continues to impact us in every area of our lives. Sin corrupts and leaves us building our theology as fallen creatures living in a fallen world.

As sad as it is, we must acknowledge that sin has had a severe affect on human beings. In fact, it’s so severe that if God were to leave the influence of sin unchecked, we would reject his revelation with all of our strength. Apart from God’s common and special grace, every attempt to acknowledge and develop our theology from God’s revelation would be in vain. In traditional theological terms, this problem is often called the “noetic effects of sin,” a term deriving from the Greek word *nous* (νοῦς), meaning “mind.” It refers to the ways sin has negatively affected our intellect and understanding.

To explore the hindrance of these noetic effects of sin, we'll look first at how sin darkens our minds to general revelation, and then at how it does the same to special revelation. Let's begin with general revelation.

General Revelation

As we've said, every person on earth knows some dimensions of general revelation. But sin causes us to suppress much of what we know and blinds us to much of what general revelation has to offer. In Romans 1:18, Paul said that sinful Gentiles, who know the truth of general revelation, "by their unrighteousness suppress the truth." In other words, sin compels us to suppress the truth that is clearly revealed through creation. We deny and turn away from general revelation. In this same chapter, Paul also wrote, in verses 24-28, that as unbelievers violate the moral principles revealed in general revelation, God gives them over to "the lusts of their hearts," to "dishonorable passions," and to "a debased mind."

Lust and depravity guide our hearts so that we have, as it were, skewed or damaged vision. It's not that we can't see *any* of the truth of general revelation, because we can. Rather, to the degree that we are removed from God's grace, we twist the facts of general revelation into conformity with our depraved desires. We call the truth lies and lies the truth. We call good evil and evil good.

I just don't see how anyone can think for a moment that sin has not affected the human mind — what we often call the "noetic effects of sin" — because it seems to me that it should be plain that we just sometimes don't think in the right ways. Now, let's be truthful. Some people think better than others in different situations, and the same person can change and be good in one situation and bad in another. But the truth is that human beings make mistakes. Human beings even purposefully pervert the truth that they see around them for various reasons... It's easy for people to be mistaken as to what is good and what is evil. I mean, how many of us don't have situations that we've assessed as being good that we find out later from the Bible really weren't good? They may feel good, they may appear to be good, they maybe appear to be beneficial by every standard you can imagine, but the Bible says, "No it's not." Well, that's an effect of sin on our minds. We also find that we cannot even draw out the right implications by arguments and by logical thinking sometimes because sin has affected our minds. So, the reality that we always have to grapple with is that even our most refined and careful and cogent ways of thinking have been impacted by sin.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Romans 1 speaks of the external revelation of God, in a general sense, through the attributes being clearly seen, and then Romans 2 speaks about the internal aspect of general revelation, which is a sense of right and wrong. In order to discern particularly that sense of right and wrong, we have to go to the Scriptures. We are fallen, and our interpretation of our sense of right and wrong is a fallen interpretation, and the only objective standard that we have, then, is the Word of God. So, the Scripture is absolutely necessary for clarity when it comes to ethical standards.

— Dr. Jeff Lowman

Having seen the hindrance of sin in our ability to make appropriate use of general revelation, we should now turn our attention to special revelation. How does sin affect our use of special revelation, especially the revelation of God in Scripture?

Special Revelation

Sin is more than an external hindrance to our understanding of Scripture. It's also an internal hindrance. For instance, Romans 7 describes sin as an internal alien power that overpowers our ability to even desire truth. And so we can't just assume that when we pick up a Bible we are naturally going to interpret it correctly. If we do, we're making a grave mistake. This explains a lot of our disagreements about the meaning of Scripture. We simply underestimate the power of sin within us... That's why Ephesians 1 says that Paul prays desperately that the Ephesians will be illuminated by the Holy Spirit to understand the teachings that he's passing on to them... So, as believers, if we want to be unified and work toward unity in our understanding of what Scripture teaches, we have to be to face the magnitude of sin's power within *us*, pray for the power of the Spirit to overcome it, and to work towards unity in our interpretation of Scripture and the doctrines that come out of it.

— Dr. Andrew Parlee

The Bible itself shows that sinful human beings resist the teaching of Scripture if left without the mercy of God. Jesus commented on this in John 5:39, 40 when he said that the Pharisees misused the Old Testament. Peter commented in much the same way in 2 Peter 3:15, 16 when he said that people distort Paul's writings as they do other Scriptures. Apart from God's grace, sinful human beings tend to mishandle and to misappropriate the Scriptures.

This problem of sinful misinterpretation of the Bible is not limited to unbelievers. It infects believers as well. One example that comes to mind easily is how many European and American theologians believed that the Scriptures supported the African

slave trade of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. How did this happen? How could Christians so misconstrue the Scriptures? The answer is that sin hinders even believers' ability to handle the Scriptures. No matter the strength of our intellect or the depth of our biblical knowledge, we should be utterly convinced that we are all twisting and perverting special revelation in some way. The more we are aware of our shortcomings and biases, the more we can prevent this type of misreading. But sadly, we'll all go to the grave unaware of some of the ways we have misread the Bible.

Our interpretations of Scripture are accountable to the authority of Scripture in a way that Scripture is not accountable to the authority of our interpretation. Now, we want to be careful how we understand that. We don't want to indicate that we cannot understand Scripture accurately... But we always have to allow our interpretation to be accountable to the Scriptures themselves. It is possible to misinterpret. It's possible to not consider all of the relevant data. It's possible that there is some piece of information that we're missing about the historical situation of the original text itself. And so we always want to understand that our interpretations are revisable in light of what Scripture teaches, and we come back to that authority again and again and again.

— Dr. Robert G. Lister

Now that we've seen how the hindrance of sin deeply affects our ability to handle general and special revelation properly, we should turn to our best hope for understanding revelation: the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

ILLUMINATION OF HOLY SPIRIT

Students and scholars alike often act as if they can build sound Christian theology, based on God's revelation, simply by working hard at it. They believe that adherence to rigorously logical methods will enable them to reach the goals of orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathos. But this simply isn't the case. Now, we must certainly apply ourselves as faithful servants to our task, but to overcome the impact of sin, we have to go much further. We have to get personal — personal with the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. He illumines our minds so that we may grasp and properly apply God's revelation in our theology.

All too often, Christians do not understand the extent to which deriving true theology from God's revelation results from the personal ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Instead, we put our confidence in the natural abilities we possess as human beings. In the spirit of Enlightenment modernism, we think we can build a true theology if we are rational and apply well-defined methods to God's revelation. But in reality, our rational abilities do not exist in isolation from the fallen condition of creation. In our fallen state, sin darkens our minds, including our linguistic and logical abilities, so that we often fail to understand revelation properly. Something more is needed — something

that empowers our rational, linguistic and, for that matter, empirical capacities. We need something that enables us to understand general and special revelation as they actually are and thus to form true theology. Only illumination from the Spirit of God can bring such light to our blind eyes.

To explore the illumination of the Holy Spirit, let's look at how he grants insight into special revelation and then how he opens our eyes to see general revelation as well. We'll start with special revelation.

Special Revelation

In traditional Protestant theology, the term "illumination" is frequently applied to the Spirit's work of giving insight into special revelation. The Holy Spirit works within us, renewing our minds, so that we can apprehend, accept and apply the Word of God. Listen to the way Paul stated this truth in Ephesians 1:17-18:

[I pray] that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you (Ephesians 1:17-18).

Now, it's important to realize that the Spirit's illumination of special revelation works in different ways. On the one hand, the Scriptures make it clear that the Spirit of God operates in non-redemptive ways so that even unbelievers understand many aspects of special revelation.

For instance, according to Numbers 24:2, the Spirit of God came upon Balaam, a pagan prophet, granting him insight. And in John 11:49-51, Caiaphas, the high priest who played a significant role in Jesus' crucifixion, prophesied truly concerning the meaning of Jesus' death. In Matthew 21:45, 46, the Pharisees understood that Jesus' parable of the wicked tenants applied to them, but they responded with a murderous plot rather than genuine repentance. In a similar way, the writer of Hebrews, in 6:4, spoke specifically of the illumination of the Spirit for people whose salvation he later questioned.

We may call these examples the "common operations of the Spirit," in the context of common grace. These are some of the many non-redemptive roles that the Spirit performs in this world. This is why even unbelievers can understand and teach theology that accords with the Scriptures. It's the result of the Spirit's work on them, even though they aren't redeemed.

At the same time, it's important to remember that the church is the temple of the Spirit. The church is the repository of his special presence and ministry in the world. He gives his redeemed people saving knowledge of the Word of God. So, it would be right to expect the Spirit's illuminating work to be greater among believers than unbelievers. In fact, we'd be right to expect that believing theologians always learn from the Spirit in ways that far exceed unbelievers.

The vital role of the Spirit's illumination of our minds toward special revelation raises a very important matter for every Christian theologian. Because the Spirit of God alone illumines us, Christian theologians must consciously and sincerely devote

themselves to keeping in step with the Spirit. Christian theology is not an impersonal project that we accomplish in our own strength. Highly personal contact with and sanctified sensitivity to the work of the Holy Spirit is required if we hope to derive true theology from special revelation. We have grounds to hope that our theological conclusions are properly derived from the Scriptures only as we give ourselves wholeheartedly to seeking the lead of the Spirit of grace.

The unbeliever at one level may be able to do a better job with any one piece of Scripture than a believer would do in understanding the context, or understanding the author's intent, or understanding the language in which it's written to be able to translate. So there are these isolated ways in which you could say an unbeliever would read it and get as much as a believer from it, in a way, from a fact standpoint or understanding these pieces about the language there... But the work of the Holy Spirit is such that we should be more and more sanctified, and the Holy Spirit should be more and more active over time in opening up what God intends the Scripture to say. So that's, I think, one of the fundamental places in which the unbeliever and the believer are going to approach things differently.

— Dr. Tim Sansbury

With the Spirit's illumination of special revelation in mind, let's turn to illumination and general revelation.

General Revelation

Most Christians would readily agree that we need the illumination of the Holy Spirit as we approach God's special revelation in Scripture. Many of us regularly pray just before we begin to read from the Scriptures because we know how much we need the Spirit's help. But we also need the personal ministry of the Holy Spirit when we reflect on general revelation. The revelation of God through creation is so vast and complex that it takes much more than our natural abilities when we study and live Christian theology. We need wisdom. And who gives this kind of wisdom? The Spirit of God.

In Daniel 5:14, the pagan king Belshazzar recognized that Daniel's wisdom was of divine origin. In Proverbs 2:6, we read that all wisdom comes from God. Similarly, according to Exodus 31:3, the artisans Bezalel and Oholiab performed craftsmanship well because they were filled with the Holy Spirit. These and other similar passages teach us that the Spirit's illumination is not necessary only for special revelation but for general revelation as well. Listen to what John Calvin said in book 2, chapter 2 of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Here he spoke about the work of the Spirit as people discover truth in general revelation:

Whenever we come upon these matters in secular writers, let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of

man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God's excellent gifts. If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God... But if the Lord has willed that we be helped in physics, dialectic, mathematics, and other like disciplines, by the work and ministry of the ungodly, let us use this assistance.

As Calvin explained, the Spirit of God teaches both believers and unbelievers the truth of general revelation. He is "the sole fountain of truth." For this reason, attempting to build Christian theology in the power of the flesh, even with regard to matters related to general revelation, is as foolish as seeking salvation in the power of the flesh.

All of this is to say that successfully deriving theology from God's revelation is not something that happens automatically or something you and I can do in our own strength. When done properly, understanding revelation is a humbling, religious experience in which we constantly crash into the limits of our natural abilities and find ourselves constantly renewing our dependence on the Spirit of God.

So, when Calvin talks about not despising the truth wherever it may be found, it's important to remember the context in which he's saying this... What his purpose is in saying this is that humankind is predisposed to searching after the truth. This is one of the things that distinguishes us from, for example, the animals, is that we have an inclination, an inherent inclination towards pursuing the truth. And as such, God, who is ultimately the fount of all truth, speaks truth through his human creatures. But he does so in a way that's up to him. It's not up to us. Truth does not reside in the human being itself, it resides in God... And so, when Calvin talks about not rejecting truth wherever it may be found, or condemning it if it's outside of the Christian circle, he's doing so in a way that, I think, recognizes that truth is ultimately God's and not the product of some sort of human contribution.

— Dr. Scott Manor

The dynamics of the hindrance of sin and the illumination of the Holy Spirit in our understanding of general and special revelation prepare us to expect certain results in the process of forming our theology. Often the tension between sin and the Spirit causes us to face situations where the findings of special and general revelation seem incompatible.

RESULTS

Building theology is relatively simple so long as everything we believe the Scriptures teach fits easily with our understanding of general revelation. It's not difficult to believe that the Bible's historical record is true so long as archeological evidence

supports it. It's not hard to uphold the standards of behavior taught in the Bible so long as our cultural mores concur. We easily affirm what the Scriptures teach about our emotions, so long as they fit easily with our daily experiences. But let's face it, often we read one thing in the Bible and find something that seems to contradict it in our broader experience of life. As we've seen, Christ's followers must build theology both on God's general *and* special revelations. So what should we do when they seem incompatible with each other?

In the first place, we should enter such situations with the firm conviction that general and special revelation never actually contradict each other. In both general and special revelation, the same God is speaking — the God who only tells truth because he cannot lie. Moreover, we should also realize that God has no difficulty reconciling what he reveals in creation with what he reveals in Scripture. No matter how at odds these two sources of revelation may appear to us, we know from God's point of view, and thus in reality, that they are both true and quite compatible.

In the second place, we must remember that what we know from special and general revelation is never dealing with revelation *per se*, but with our *understandings* of revelation. These understandings always fall short of perfection. Although general and special revelation never actually conflict because they are both from God, our understandings of them certainly can conflict because they are from us.

When we encounter apparent discrepancies between special and general revelation, there are four main ways to evaluate the situation. First, it's always possible that we have misunderstood special revelation and that we must change our interpretation of Scripture without rejecting the Bible itself.

Second, conflict may arise because we have misunderstood general revelation. Frequently, we draw conclusions from experience that must be corrected by Scripture.

Third, we may have misunderstood both special and general revelation. It's always feasible that our experiences of the world don't seem to match up with biblical teaching because we've failed to grasp Scripture correctly, *and* we've failed to assess our experiences correctly.

Fourth, we may have encountered a mystery that is simply beyond our human comprehension. For example, think of the Trinity. Our experience of general revelation certainly doesn't lead us to expect three persons to be one being. Yet, this is what the Bible teaches us about God. How can we reconcile these two viewpoints? We can't. The doctrine of the Trinity is a mystery beyond our grasp.

Now, as a practical matter, we can't always tell which of these four situations we're facing. Many times we must simply act on the basis of where we put the burden of proof. Do we place a heavier burden of proof on our interpretation of Scripture or our interpretation of general revelation? Well, Christians go in different directions in this matter.

On the one hand, Christians who are considered more liberal tend to accept their understanding of general revelation more readily than their understanding of Scripture. But Christians who are considered more conservative tend to accept their understanding of special revelation over general revelation when a conflict arises.

The second strategy is the better part of wisdom. Unless the evidence of our reflections on general revelation is overwhelming, we should follow what we understand

the Scriptures to teach. Christ and his apostles endorsed the Scriptures as our guide for understanding life. So, we must be ready to submit to them when apparent conflicts arise.

I've found it helpful to think about three possible solutions whenever we see an apparent contradiction between general and special revelation. The first is that we've not adequately understood general revelation. This is very common, you know, as we go about the disciplines of science or history or archeology or various things. Just over the course of time, we're oftentimes discovering that previous ideas or things that were just accepted for truth, we find to be in error. It happens all the time. Just wait long enough and you'll learn that. So, we know that always our observation of the world is only partial... And oftentimes our interpretation of Scripture can be off. We can misunderstand it. In fact, we often do. And so that's also a possible solution. And then there's a third particular option there, and that's that there's some combination of both. That is, we have not adequately understood general revelation, and at the same time are not fully understanding the truth of Scripture in a particular area. And so I think that is a helpful way, at least for me, as I try to resolve what sometimes seem to be apparent contradictions, and yet at the same time allow us to affirm both the inerrancy and the infallibility of Scripture.

— Rev. Hutch Garmany

As Paul said in 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable ... that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Second Timothy 3:16 and following are very much in line with what you find in a lot of parts of the Bible. On the night that he is betrayed, for example, the Lord Jesus prays to his Father, "Sanctify them [through] Your truth. Your word is truth." In other words, what believers require for sanctification is the Word of God. And so, here we're reminded that all Scripture really is God-breathed. It's breathed out by God. But that's not merely a raw fact in itself. It has a purpose connected with it. It's useful, because of the fact that it is God-breathed, to do a variety of things — to correct Christians when they go astray, to rebuke them when they really need to repent, to instruct in all of the ways of the mind of God that breed righteousness within us, and so on, so on. So, our entire shaping of life and thought and priorities and conduct and ethic and belief systems, worldview and so on, all comes finally from the Word of God, mediated by the Spirit. This Spirit-breathed Word, this God-breathed Word is then

used by the Spirit to shape us and build us up into increasing conformity to Christ.

— Dr. D.A. Carson

At the same time, however, we must always remember that because our understandings of Scripture are flawed by sin, we may need to revisit issues time and again. The practice of faithful believers through the ages has been to yield their judgments to what they believe the Bible teaches, while still knowing that they may need to correct their flawed understandings of the Bible later. This way of wisdom and submission calls upon us to construct theology out of what we sincerely believe the Bible teaches.

As we've seen, relying on revelation to develop our theology is riddled with difficulties resulting from the dynamics of sin and the Spirit. The complexities involved in both finding revelation and understanding revelation lead us to our third main topic: developing confidence in our theological positions in the face of so many obstacles.

DEVELOPING CONFIDENCE

At one time or another, many of us have met theologians who are far too confident about far too many things they believe. They act as if they have mastered theological reflection. They have answers for every question, and they think their answers are unquestionable. Then again, most of us have also met theologians who have far too little confidence about far too many things they believe. They often realize the complexities of theology and end up answering lots of questions with, "I don't know." These kinds of people represent extremes. But these extremes raise some important questions as we build our theology. How confident should we be about what we believe? And is there a way to come to some sort of balance in these matters?

To explore developing confidence in theology, we'll touch on three considerations. First, we'll see that confidence in theological positions has an analog quality. Second, we'll explore how confidence results from a process of deference. And third, we'll examine how we should establish the appropriate alignment of our levels of confidence on different theological subjects. Let's look first at the idea that confidence in theological conclusions has an analog quality.

ANALOG QUALITY

To understand what we mean by an analog quality of confidence in theology, it helps to draw on an analogy. Consider a simple on-off light switch. This kind of switch is similar to the way many evangelicals think about their beliefs. They often think simply of things that they know and things that they don't know. "I know Christ is the Son of God." "I know God is Triune." These affirmations are firm beliefs. Yet, evangelicals have lists

of things they consider unknowable or unknown. “I don’t know how a good God allows evil.” “I don’t know when Christ will return.” These kinds of statements indicate that we do not know what to think. We have no confidence in positions taken on these subjects. This approach to theological convictions is adequate in many circumstances. It says simply, “I know about this, but I don’t know about that.”

Yet, when we look more closely at the whole range of things that we know and don’t know as Christians, we see rather quickly that the situation is more complex than this model suggests. Most of us are familiar with a dimmer light switch that has a range of lower and higher settings. In this kind of switch, the electrical current is not simply on or off, but flows with more or less strength depending on the position of the switch. At the extremes, the current is fully off and fully on, but the entire range in between is important as well, because it provides softer to brighter light. In many respects, these analog light switches provide a very helpful model for assessing the confidence we should have in different theological positions. We don’t simply have confidence in some beliefs and no confidence in others. We have a whole range of more or less confidence in theological positions.

Consider the ways we think about things outside of theology. Every human being holds to many beliefs. For example, you may believe that it will not rain today. You may also believe that you have a job. And, if you’re a parent, you almost certainly believe that you have a child. Now, even though you can say you believe all of these things are true, you don’t hold these beliefs with the same level of confidence.

One way to test your level of confidence is by asking how much pressure it would take to give up each of these beliefs. It probably wouldn’t take much to change your belief that it will not rain today. A few drops of rain falling on your head would instantly change your mind. Even a weather report predicting high probability of rain would make you carry an umbrella. You don’t have much confidence in that belief.

But, if you go to work every day, you probably believe that you have a job. You’d be heavily invested in that belief. It would take much more than a news report or article to change your mind. Even if you received a letter telling you that you were not employed, you’d want it confirmed in person.

But consider, for instance, that you’re a parent. What would it take for you to stop believing that you have a child? There is so much confirming this belief that it would take an unimaginable amount of evidence to make you believe otherwise, a lot more than anything else on this list.

Now, in many respects what is true in common experience is also true in theology. We hold our theological beliefs with varying degrees of confidence. In an earlier lesson we spoke of orthodoxy, orthopraxis, and orthopathos as forming webs of multiple reciprocities. At this point we need to expand this model slightly. It helps to think of this web of multiple reciprocities as suspended in a sphere. When this sphere is cross-sectioned and its interior is exposed, we see that our web of beliefs is arranged in concentric layers.

In the outer layer, our beliefs are configured loosely. The outer layer represents the many theological positions that belong on the periphery of our web of beliefs. We have little confidence about them; we have little commitment to them. And we find ourselves changing, removing, and adding to these configurations of beliefs with ease nearly all the time.

In the center, or core of the sphere, our web of beliefs is so tightly interwoven that it appears to be nearly one unified solid. The center of our web consists of our core beliefs, the central theological configurations of our faith which we hold with high levels of confidence. It's very difficult to modify, remove or add to these core beliefs. Because when we do, there's a dramatic ripple effect that reconfigures large portions of everything else we believe.

Finally, between the core and the outer layer is a series of layers made up of more or less tightly-woven webs of belief. The layers closer to the center are more densely configured and are more difficult to modify. The layers further from the center are less densely configured and are less difficult to change.

It's really important for us to distinguish between things that are really clear and certain in Scripture and things that are much less certain, mainly because the Bible does that. In the Gospels, in the Epistles, in every part of the New Testament, it is really clear that Jesus Christ is our Savior and our Lord, the Son of God who is fully God and fully man. And yet, when it comes to something like the millennium, our eschatological views, only once in Scripture is a thousand years mentioned — in Revelation 20. And so there's a lot of debate among Christians about what this thousand year reign of Christ means and what it looks like. And because of the fact that it's not emphasized in Scripture, we should respect the fact that Christians at different times have had different views on that matter. Some things are really clear, and some things are less certain. We need to know the difference.

— Dr. Gregory R. Perry

Put simply, developing confidence in our theology not only has an analog quality, but it also requires a process of deference. In this process, we submit ourselves to ways the Holy Spirit teaches and convinces us of our theological positions.

PROCESS OF DEFERENCE

The Holy Spirit illumines us so that we may believe the truth of God's revelation. But he teaches and convinces God's people in different ways. As many examples in Scriptures indicate, the Spirit of God is free to shape our theological convictions in extraordinary ways. Still, it's also fair to say that there are ordinary ways in which the Spirit of God grants us theological convictions. This variety of the Spirit's work is akin to the many ways God providentially directs every dimension of history.

Chapter 5, section 3 of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* summarizes the teaching of Scripture on God's providence nicely. It says:

God in his ordinary providence, maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure.

This statement describes how God uses “means” — second causes, or created instruments — to carry out his will on earth. He works out his plan ordinarily *through* second causes, using created instruments to accomplish his goals. But at the same time, God is not locked into this ordinary way. He is also free to accomplish his will “without, above, and against” created instruments.

God is sovereign. We all live, move and have our being through him, but there are secondary causes. So, if I want to walk across the room, I can't walk across the room outside of God's sustaining power. And yet, if I want to walk across the room, I don't just float. I actually get up. My muscles start to move. I take one step in front of the other. And so, the secondary causes of me getting from here to there is the leg movements, the muscle contractions. All of that that's going on are secondary causes. And it allows us to not pit primary and secondary cause against one another. So, the reality is, if I went to the other side of this room and the way I got there was not by walking, but instead all of a sudden I started to float, and I flew over there, in the medieval period, what we would call that is a miracle, because a miracle is the absence of secondary causes. So, God can do miracles, but the normal way God works is in and through secondary causes.

— Dr. Kelly M. Kapic

In much the same way, it's helpful to distinguish between the extraordinary and ordinary ways that the Holy Spirit illumines us and confirms our theological position. From time to time, all Christians have experienced insights and strong convictions from the Holy Spirit, even when we weren't looking for them. Something comes to mind when we don't expect it. Commitments swell within us with no explanation. In many situations like these, the Spirit of God is working without, above, and against the second causes he normally uses. While these kinds of extraordinary works of the Spirit are important, formal theology is much more concerned with the *ordinary* processes that the Spirit uses.

As we saw in an earlier lesson, the church has acknowledged three primary areas for formal theological training found in traditional seminaries: the biblical division, which concerns the exegesis of Scripture; the doctrinal and historical division, which concerns interaction in community; and the practical theology division which concerns Christian living.

In line with this wisdom, it's very helpful to describe the ordinary ways in which the Spirit grants theological confidence as a process of deferring to the influences of the exegesis of Scripture, interaction in community, and Christian living. We won't explore all three of these influences in detail, but it will help to introduce them here. First, the Spirit of God illumines and confirms us as we learn how to defer to the influence of proper biblical exegesis or interpretation.

Exegesis of Scripture

The word “exegesis” is simply a word meaning “to explain; to draw out,” and we’re drawing out meaning from the text. It’s not from the author independently of the text, it’s not from the reader independently, or even in conjunction with the text, but we say the text says something.

— Dr. Guy Waters

The field of exegesis — learning the skills by which we may discern the teaching of Scripture — is one of the most important, common and effective means of illumination and confidence building. Do you want to know what God has revealed in Scripture? Do you want to be sure of this? Ordinarily, we must employ exegetical skills that equip us to handle the Bible responsibly. Deference to the exegesis of Scripture is vital to the process of developing Christian theology.

When we develop Christian theology, we must carefully examine the Scriptures in order to be able to fulfill the principles in the right way — in our culture, in our time — in order to apply the principles that were taught in a different culture and in a different time, to our present culture and our present time. This helps us to live Christian theology the way Jesus revealed it and taught it. Failure to do so may lead us to develop a different theology from the one Jesus taught. So we must carefully analyze the Scriptures in order to follow the same steps that Jesus taught us.

— Rev. Pablo Torres, translation

Second, our process of deference not only includes the exegesis of Scripture, but the Spirit of God commonly uses interaction in community to illumine our minds and confirm our convictions.

Interaction in Community

Direct biblical exegesis is not the only influence we need in theology. We also need the help of general revelation, especially interaction with other people. In fact, direct exegesis without community is very dangerous. As we see time and again, the first step toward heresy is often exegesis. Interacting with others, learning and evaluating their opinions of what God has revealed, should be crucial in our theology. In the broadest sense, God has ordained interaction with the entire human race to help us.

But interaction among believers, where the Spirit dwells in his fullness, is especially important to the process. When interacting in community we ask questions such as, “What has the church of the past believed about these matters? What do godly believers around me today say about this or that issue? How do my personal opinions

compare to the opinions of others?” Deference to community interaction is vital to the process of deriving theology from God’s revelation.

We, as Protestants, depend on the interpretive community, the interpretive community, because Scripture does say that we as saints must evaluate every declaration whether it be true or not true. So we do not rely on the fact that someone would say, “Look, the Holy Spirit has revealed this to me.” As we know in Africa there are so many “revelations” that people get from the Holy Spirit. So our duty as brothers, we say, “Hold on brother. Do we affirm and confirm your interpretation or not?” ... So we also depend on the interpretation of the community.

— Prof. Jorum Mugari

The Scripture is given to the church, and therefore, when you read Scripture you have to read Scripture, you have to study Scripture, you have to learn to pray Scripture, and if you’re going to learn to live Scripture, you have to do it within the fellowship of the body of Christ... But not only that, where pastors and elders and those who are spiritually mature are able to help us discover in our lives what really are the issues that keep me from experiencing the transforming power of God through my encounter with the Word of God. Therefore, when we read Scripture, we have to understand we always are to read Scripture in fellowship with God’s church.

— Dr. Steve Blakemore

Third, in addition to deferring to exegesis and interaction in community, we must also acknowledge that Christian living plays a very important role in granting us confidence as we follow the Spirit’s lead.

Christian Living

Living for Christ prepares us for good biblical exegesis and interaction with others. And a faithful walk is also the arena within which we test our theological positions. Things like experiences of success and failure, prayers, worship, and service to God are dimensions of general revelation that are also instruments the Spirit ordinarily uses to illumine and to convince us of theological positions. Who we are and what we experience as we live for Christ is a third major influence to which we must defer. The Spirit uses Christian living to illumine our minds and to give us confidence that we have understood God’s revelation correctly.

There’s something very different going on when we read the Bible in that it’s not just a matter of interpreting what the author intended in

the historical sense. It's not just a matter of trying to figure out the background of a text. It is really a matter of engaging with God, because we believe the Scriptures are inspired by God, breathed out by God, and are the one of the main places of revelation where God speaks of himself and also meets with his people, and with the individual as well as the corporate gathering of God's people. And so one's spiritual condition is actually part of that whole interpretive process.

— Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington

Up to this point, we've seen that developing theological confidence has an analog quality, or is a matter of degree, and that the Spirit of God ordinarily uses a process of deference to give us confidence. Now we're in a position to see how we should bring appropriate alignment to the levels of confidence we have in our various beliefs.

APPROPRIATE ALIGNMENT

When we speak about aligning our levels of confidence in theology, we have in mind how important it is to determine the strength of our many theological convictions in responsible ways. We need to avoid making this or that belief more central than another simply according to our own judgment. Rather, we are wise to consider how exegesis of Scripture, interaction in community and individual Christian living work together to support what we believe. The concept of how to appropriately align the confidence we have in our theological positions can be rather complex. But there's a helpful model for understanding how appropriate alignment of convictions works. We'll call this model the "cone of certainty."

Imagine that we remove a section from the sphere of our beliefs and create a cone that extends from the outer edge to the core. Setting this cone upright, the layers display a scale of confidence on which we hold our various beliefs. The top of the cone is our core beliefs. The bottom of the cone is the outer edge of our beliefs. In between the top and bottom are beliefs that we hold with different levels of conviction.

One of our major responsibilities as Christian theologians is to determine at what level to place particular beliefs. Once we've decided that a theological position belongs in the Christian faith, we want to know where we should put it in the cone of certainty. Should it be toward the top — held with higher levels of confidence? Or should it be toward the bottom — held with lower levels of confidence?

Now, there's no doubt that the Holy Spirit will at times create levels of confidence within us in extraordinary ways. We may find ourselves utterly convinced of something with little justification. We may doubt a point of view with little ability to explain why. At times, we simply sense or feel that something is true or false. We should be cautious about these kinds of experiences and submit them to the evaluation of God's Word, but these extraordinary works of the Spirit should not be ignored.

Still, how does the Spirit *ordinarily* lead us to determine where to place our beliefs in the cone of certainty? In general terms, we may say that, with rare exceptions,

we should align our levels of confidence with the results of faithful deference to the influences of exegesis, interaction in community and Christian living. As we seek to come under their influences, the Spirit brings many of our convictions into appropriate alignment.

On a practical level, deferring to the influences of exegesis, interaction in community, and Christian living requires us to ask at least two basic questions. First, how much harmony exists among exegesis, interaction in community, and Christian living on a particular subject? The more harmony there is, the more confidence we should have that we've understood a particular matter correctly. Second, when there is significant disharmony, is one or more influence clearer than the others? When one or two influences are more well-defined than the other or others, we tend to place the belief supported by the clear influence higher in the cone of certainty. But, when the influence of exegesis, interaction, and Christian living are disharmonious and nearly equal in their lack of clarity, we tend to place this belief lower in the cone of certainty.

The influences that cause us to set different beliefs at different places, well, they're varied. But you can summarize them in terms of what we think the Scriptures teach because the Scriptures are very clear about some things and not so clear about others. And that tends to make this go up and down. You can also see the influence of the Christian church or the community, our interactions with other Christians. Because as you see the body of Christ over the centuries affirming this belief over and over and over again, it ought to give us an expectation that even if, personally, we're not that confident, it's probably very confident that we should believe in those sorts of those things, or very certain that we should believe in those sorts of things. And then the third element would be, I guess, our individual Christian experience, our Christian living, our experiences of life. Now, keep in mind that the exegesis of the Bible has to do with the special revelation of God, and the life in community with other Christians and our individual living has to do with the general revelation of God. So, we're still depending on God to teach us things, no matter what is influencing us here, and we're seeking Holy Spirit to help us discern what God is teaching. But as these three elements, these three influences impact us — interpreting the Bible, interacting with other Christians, living our Christian lives — as they influence us, sometimes they'll push up how much confidence we should have in certain beliefs and certain practices and certain feelings that we have. And sometimes they'll push us down. And generally speaking, though it's not always the case, but generally speaking, the more harmonious our interpretation of the Bible, and what the body of Christ is saying as a whole in our interacting with them, and our individual experiences are, the more harmonious they are, the more we tend to have confidence that we've put a belief in the right place.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson, we've explored how relying on God's revelation helps us build our Christian theology. We saw that in the process of finding revelation, God has given us special and general revelation, and we must depend on his revelation in creation and in Scripture together. We also noted that understanding revelation is harmed by the effects of sin, but is furthered by the illumination of the Holy Spirit. And finally, we saw that developing confidence in our theological beliefs depends to a large degree on deferring to the influences of biblical exegesis, interaction in community, and Christian living.

When we build Christian theology we must rely on God's revelation everywhere it's found. But understanding and applying divine revelation can be difficult. So, every step of the way, we need to refresh our commitment to the processes that enable us to draw from his revelation. Only then can we hope to formulate our doctrines, the standards of our practices, and the conditions of our hearts in ways that please God.

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