

Building Your Theology

Lesson 3

Relying on Revelation

Lesson Guide



thirdmill

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HOW TO USE THIS LESSON AND STUDY GUIDE

This lesson guide is designed for use in conjunction with the associated video. If you do not have access to the video, the lesson guide will also work with the audio and/or text versions of the lesson. Additionally, the video and lesson guide are intended to be used in a learning community, but they also can be used for individual study if necessary.

- **Before you watch the lesson**
 - **Prepare** — Complete any recommended readings.
 - **Schedule viewing** — The Notes section of the lesson guide has been divided into segments that correspond to the video. Using the time codes found in parentheses beside each major division, determine where to begin and end your viewing session. IIM lessons are densely packed with information, so you may also want to schedule breaks. Breaks should be scheduled at major divisions.
- **While you are watching the lesson**
 - **Take notes** — The Notes section of the lesson guide contains a basic outline of the lesson, including the time codes for the beginning of each segment and key notes to guide you through the information. Many of the main ideas are already summarized, but make sure to supplement these with your own notes. You should also add supporting details that will help you to remember, describe, and defend the main ideas.
 - **Record comments and questions** — As you watch the video, you may have comments and/or questions on what you are learning. Use the margins to record your comments and questions so that you can share these with the group following the viewing session.
 - **Pause/replay portions of the lesson** — You may find it helpful to pause or replay the video at certain points in order to write additional notes, review difficult concepts, or discuss points of interest.
- **After you watch the lesson**
 - **Complete Review Questions** — Review Questions are based on the basic content of the lesson. You should answer Review Questions in the space provided. These questions should be completed individually rather than in a group.
 - **Answer/discuss Application Questions** — Application Questions are questions relating the content of the lesson to Christian living, theology, and ministry. Application questions are appropriate for written assignments or as topics for group discussions. For written assignments, it is recommended that answers not exceed one page in length.

Notes

I. Introduction (0:19)

II. Finding Revelation (1:41)

God would be entirely hidden from us, if it were not for the fact that he's revealed himself.

A. General Revelation (3:00)

God reveals himself through all created things in general and to all people in general; sometimes called "natural revelation" (Psalm 19:1-6; Acts 14:15-17; 17:26, 27; Romans 1:18-32).

1. Medium (5:12)

The medium (instrument or conduit) of general revelation is all of creation.

God reveals himself to us through the creation, "in the things that have been made" (Romans 1:18-20).

Civilization, technology, and human culture as a whole also reveal God.

General revelation comes through what people do with nature, not just through creation in its natural state (Romans 1:32).

2. **Content (8:31)**

General revelation reveals:

- God's attributes (Romans 1:19-20)
- Our moral responsibilities (Romans 1:32)

B. **Special Revelation (13:11)**

Special revelation is not given to all people in all places, but it's given to specific or special segments of humanity.

God revealed himself most clearly and fully in his Son Jesus (Hebrews 1:1-3).

Our commitment to Christ as God's supreme revelation implies that we should also be committed to Scripture as God's special revelation.

C. **Interconnections (17:51)**

Understanding the interconnections between general and special revelation will help us see that we can't neglect either form of revelation.

1. **Overlap (19:08)**

General and special revelation overlap significantly.

Special revelation in the Scriptures falls along a continuum between extraordinary insights and common insights:

- extraordinary – insights given in supernatural ways (e.g., Daniel, Joel, Revelation); may also be called “very special revelation”
- mixed – extraordinary insights mixed with insights granted through ordinary means (e.g., Kings, Luke)
- common – inspired observations about ordinary experiences (e.g., Proverbs 30:25); may also be called “generalized special revelation”

General revelation also includes a wide variety of content that can be characterized from common to extraordinary:

- common – things that are known to most people who have ever lived; may also be called “very general revelation”
- mixed – experiences of creation given only to some people because they are limited in some way
- extraordinary – things we often associate more closely with special revelation; may also be called “specialized general revelation”

The roles of special and general revelation in theology:

- We look to the Scriptures as our authority, not only in religious and moral matters, but also in history and science.
- We look carefully at general revelation for divine guidance, even in matters that are highly religious.

2. Need (27:41)

Special Revelation:

- Special revelation specifies, clarifies, and reveals God and his will beyond what general revelation presents.

- Although general revelation reveals that we are under God's judgment, only special revelation discloses salvation in Christ.

General Revelation:

- What we learn from general revelation enables us to understand special revelation.

- General revelation is necessary for applying the Bible successfully to our lives.

God has revealed himself in both general and special revelation, and he expects us to find his revelation both in creation and in the Scriptures.

III. Understanding Revelation (36:09)

It is one thing for God to reveal himself and his will to us, and another for us to use it properly in theology.

A. Hindrance of Sin (37:11)

If God were to leave the influence of sin unchecked, we would reject his revelation with all of our strength.

“noetic effects of sin” – the ways sin has negatively affected our intellect and understanding (from the Greek word *nous*, meaning “mind”)

1. General Revelation (38:53)

Sin causes us to suppress much of what we know and blinds us to much of what general revelation has to offer (Romans 1:18; 24-28).

To the degree that we are removed from God’s grace, we twist the facts of general revelation into conformity with our depraved desires.

2. **Special Revelation (42:50)**

Sinful human beings resist the teaching of Scripture if left without the mercy of God (John 5:39, 40; 2 Peter 3:15-16).

The problem of sinful misinterpretation of the Bible infects believers as well as unbelievers (e.g., African slave trade).

B. **Illumination of Holy Spirit (46:54)**

Deriving true theology from God's revelation results from the personal ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

1. **Special Revelation (49:12)**

The term "illumination" is frequently applied to the Spirit's work of giving insight into special revelation (see Ephesians 1:17-18)

The Spirit of God sometimes operates in non-redemptive ways so even unbelievers understand many aspects of special revelation:

- Balaam (Numbers 24:2)
- Caiaphas (John 11:49-51)
- Pharisees (Matthew 21:45, 46)
- people of questionable salvation (Hebrews 6:4)

The Spirit's illuminating work is greater among believers than unbelievers.

Because the Spirit of God alone illumines us, Christian theologians must devote themselves to keeping in step with the Spirit.

2. General Revelation (54:10)

It takes much more than our natural abilities when we study and live Christian theology; we need the Spirit of God.

The Spirit of God teaches both believers and unbelievers the truth of general revelation.

Attempting to build Christian theology in the power of the flesh is as foolish as seeking salvation in the power of the flesh.

C. Results (58:32)

The tension between sin and the Spirit can make the findings of special and general revelation seem incompatible.

General and special revelation never actually contradict each other.

Though general and special revelation never actually conflict, our *understandings* of them can conflict.

Four ways to evaluate apparent discrepancies:

- We have misunderstood special revelation.
- We have misunderstood general revelation.
- We have misunderstood *both* special and general revelation.
- We have encountered a mystery that is simply beyond our human comprehension (e.g., the Trinity).

Unless evidence of our reflections on general revelation is overwhelming, we should follow what we understand the Scriptures to teach (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Faithful believers must yield their judgments to Scripture, knowing that they may need to correct their flawed understandings of the Bible later.

IV. Developing Confidence (1:07:25)

A. Analog Quality (1:08:41)

Evangelicals often think in terms of things they know and things they don't know.

Assessing our confidence in different theological positions is more complex than just what we know and what we don't know.

We have varying degrees of confidence in our web of theological beliefs:

- Loosely-configured beliefs – beliefs we change, remove, and add to nearly all the time (little confidence)
- Core beliefs – central theological configurations of our faith that are very difficult to modify, remove or add to (high confidence)
- Beliefs between core and loosely-configured beliefs – more or less tightly-woven webs of belief (varying degrees of confidence)

B. Process of Deference (1:16:24)

The Holy Spirit teaches and convinces us of our theological positions through a process of deference.

“God in his ordinary providence maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 5.3)

It’s helpful to distinguish between the extraordinary and ordinary ways that the Holy Spirit illumines us and confirms our theological positions.

Formal theology is much more concerned with the *ordinary* processes that the Spirit uses:

1. Exegesis of Scripture (1:20:30)

The Spirit of God illumines and confirms us as we learn how to defer to the influence of proper biblical exegesis or interpretation.

2. Interaction in Community (1:22:45)

The Spirit of God commonly uses interaction in community to illumine our minds and confirm our convictions.

3. Christian Living (1:25:50)

Christian living prepares us for good biblical exegesis and interaction with others and is also the arena within which we test our theological positions.

C. Appropriate Alignment (1:27:31)

It is important to determine the strength of our many theological convictions in responsible ways.

“Cone of certainty” model:

- Top of the cone – core beliefs
- Bottom of the cone – outer edge of our beliefs
- In between – beliefs that we hold with different levels of conviction

Christian theologians must determine at what level in the cone of certainty to place particular beliefs.

As we faithfully defer to exegesis, interaction in community and Christian living, the Spirit brings our convictions into appropriate alignment:

- The more harmony there is between exegesis, interaction in community, and Christian living, the more confidence we have.
- When exegesis, interaction, and Christian living are disharmonious and nearly equal in their lack of clarity, the less confidence we have.

V. Conclusion (1:33:52)

3. Describe the interconnections between general and special revelation in terms of their overlap and necessity.

4. Why is it important to derive our theology from revelation?

5. How does sin hinder our understanding of God's general and special revelation?

6. How does the Holy Spirit help us understand God's special and general revelation?

7. How should we handle apparent conflicts between general and special revelation?

8. What does it mean to say that theological conclusions have an analog quality?
How are our theological convictions similar to a dimmer switch?

9. Describe the process of deferring to exegesis, interaction in community, and Christian living. Why is this process helpful?

10. How can we assign proper levels of confidence to our various beliefs?

Application Questions

1. How might your understanding of God through general revelation draw you closer to him?
2. How might understanding the similarities and differences between special and general revelation change the way a person does theology?
3. How does it make you feel knowing that sin still works within us to suppress and skew much of God's revelation? What hope does the Holy Spirit bring?
4. How can we guard against theological errors caused by the noetic effects of sin?
5. Why is it necessary to approach the confidence that we have in theological positions analogically?
6. What impact have exegesis, interaction in community and Christian living had on your own beliefs? Which of these influences has been most important to you? Why?
7. What beliefs do you hold with the most confidence? What beliefs do you hold with very little confidence? Why do you assign these levels of confidence to these particular beliefs?
8. What is the most significant insight you have learned from this study? Why?

Glossary

analog – Of or relating to varying degrees or qualities

Calvin, John – (1509-1564) French theologian and key Protestant Reformer who wrote *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

common grace – God’s benevolence shown to all people

cone of certainty – Model illustrating different levels of belief in which the top represents core beliefs and the bottom represents the outer edge of beliefs with beliefs held with different levels of conviction in between

Deus Absconditus – Latin term meaning “hidden God”

doctrine – A synthesis and explanation of biblical teachings on a theological topic

Enlightenment, the – A philosophical movement of the 17th and 18th centuries that emphasized human reason over religious, social, and political traditions

esoteric – Only revealed to or understood by a select few that are granted special insight or understanding

exegesis – From a Greek term meaning "led out of" or "derived from"; the process of drawing out the proper interpretation of a passage of Scripture

general revelation – God’s use of the natural world and its workings to make his existence, nature, presence, actions and will known to all humanity

illumination – Divine gift of knowledge or understanding, primarily cognitive, attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit

natural revelation – Knowledge of God that comes through the ordinary workings of the natural world and providence

natural theology – The ongoing attempt to learn about God through general revelation

noetic – Of or relating to the mind; term used to categorize the intellectual effects of sin

orthodoxy – Sound or correct in doctrine

orthopathos – Right or correct feelings or emotions

orthopraxis – Right behavior or practice

revelation – God’s communication of truth to man

second causes – Created beings or objects that perform real but secondary roles in causing events to occur

special revelation – God’s disclosures of himself and his will to a select number of people through dreams, visions, prophets, the Scriptures, and other similar means

theology – Any matter that refers directly to God or that describes subjects in relation to God

webs of multiple reciprocities – Manifold logical connections among various beliefs or systems

Westminster Confession of Faith – An ecumenical doctrinal summary composed by the Westminster Assembly of Divines and published in 1647