

“By Two Means”

Sermon on Article Two of the Belgic Confession.

Texts: Psalm 19:1-14; Romans 1:18-25

Article 2 - How God Makes Himself Known to Us

We know Him by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a most beautiful book,¹ wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many letters leading us to perceive clearly the invisible things of God, namely, His eternal power and deity, as the apostle Paul says (Rom 1:20). All these things are sufficient to convict men and leave them without excuse. Second, He makes Himself more clearly and fully known to us by His holy and divine Word² as far as is necessary for us in this life, to His glory and our salvation.

¹Ps 19:1-4 ²Ps 19:7-8; 1 Cor 1:18-21

According to the apostle Paul, there is no such thing as an atheist—there are only people who attempt to suppress the knowledge of God in unrighteousness and who deny what they know to be true. While an atheist may claim that they do not believe in God and while they may have suppressed the knowledge of God to the point that it is buried very deep within, nevertheless, God has revealed himself to all men and women in such a way that all men and women know that God exists and that he possesses certain divine attributes. Since God has made himself known, therefore all people are without excuse for failing to worship and serve the creator. But since the revelation of God in creation cannot lead people to a saving knowledge of God in Jesus Christ, God also graciously reveals himself in his word, not only in the historical record of his mighty acts in redemptive history, but also through the divinely inspired explanation of those saving acts, found in the pages of Holy Scripture. It is through these two divinely-appointed means, and only through these divinely-appointed means that God is known.

In the previous article, the case was made that the biblical pattern found in Romans 10:8-10 of believing certain doctrines and then confessing them before the watching world, is one of the divinely appointed means by which Christians are to respond to unbelief and idolatry. We have made the case that we now live in a post-Christian age. We find ourselves confronted with secularism, paganism and false religion at virtually every turn.

What are we to do in such a situation? We do as Paul instructs us to do. We believe those doctrines revealed in Scripture and then as a church we confess these doctrines before the watching world. One place where these doctrines are defined and spelled out for us by our Reformed fathers is in the *Belgic Confession*, which not only summarizes the Bible’s teaching on those doctrines which we must believe, but also expresses them in such a way that we can confess these doctrines in an intelligent fashion before the unbelieving world around us.

We have dealt with the first article of our confession in which we believe and confess our faith in the one only true God. Our confession also identified some of God's attributes which reveal something to us of his nature and essence. Having confessed our faith in the one true God and identified several of his essential attributes, questions associated with our knowledge of God now become very important, especially those questions associated with the quality and extent of such knowledge. How does God reveal himself to us? What do we know about God? Is the knowledge of God universal? And if so, what do people do with this knowledge of God? These are important questions, especially as we interact with unbelievers and they are addressed in article two of our confession "How God Makes Himself Known to Us."

What we as Reformed Christians believe about our knowledge of God and what we confess to the world around us serves as the background to a number of other important doctrines.

Before we go through article two and define and compare the two ways in which God reveals himself, there are several things we need to keep in mind. In identifying the two ways in which God reveals himself to us—through creation and Scripture—we are laying the groundwork to more effectively bear witness to the unbelieving world around us. Not only are we confessing that God can be truly known in response to those secularists who deny that such knowledge is even possible, but we are also saying that since God does reveal himself through two specific means, all those who claim to have knowledge of God apart from these two means are either deluded or idolaters—deceived or deceivers. Contra secularism, we believe and confess that God truly can be known. Contra paganism and non-Christian religions, we believe and confess that God reveals what we need to know through the two words of law and gospel so that we might know him as he is and that we might worship him as he demands.

The way in which the pagans distort the knowledge of God and the secularists attempt to deny that such knowledge is even possible is described by Paul in Romans 1:18-25, a text we considered when discussing the previous article. As Paul sees it, all men and women know that God exists and that because of human sinfulness, people attempt to suppress this truth in unrighteousness. Paul also describes how this suppressed knowledge of God often manifests itself in false religion and paganism.

The notion that God reveals himself in such a way that all men and women know him, but that they inevitably attempt to suppress and distort what they know to be true, should tell us something profound about the nature of unbelief. If God is truly known by all those created in his image, and yet people refuse to worship and serve him as their creator, then all men and women are guilty before God and subject to his just judgments. Simply put, there is no one who will be able to stand before God's tribunal on the day of judgment and proclaim their innocence on the ground that God did not sufficiently reveal himself to them. On the contrary, God has made himself known so that all men and women are without excuse. This is the very purpose of the revelation of God in nature.

The universal guilt of the human race before God is very important to keep in mind, precisely because this is so different from the categories that most Americans bring with them to theological discussion. Like everybody else, Americans are a product of their own culture and age in which they live. Influenced by democracy (we all have one vote) and egalitarianism (that everything should be equal), Americans often erroneously assume that everyone is born neutral towards God and that they are not condemned until they self-consciously reject God by a "no" vote. But this is not the way Paul presents the matter.

Paul believes that because of the fall of the human race into sin (a subject we will address when we come to articles fourteen and fifteen of our confession), all men and women are not only guilty because Adam

sinned as the representative of the entire human race, but that since all people are born with a sinful nature, from the moment they are born and begin to interact with the world around them, they attempt to suppress the knowledge of God which God continually reveals through that which he has made.

This means that people are not in any sense neutral towards God. We are born hostile to God. We are not only guilty before God because of Adam's sin but each one of us will continually attempt to suppress what we know to be true about God until and unless God opens our eyes. If we deny that any knowledge of God is possible we take the secularist option. If we distort the knowledge of God and do not worship God as he is, but as we think God ought to be, we take the pagan/false religion option. In any case, there is no such thing as an innocent person, who, because they have not heard the gospel, are somehow exempt from the judgment of God. Paul tells us that everyone is without excuse because of the fact of God's revelation of himself through that which he has made. This not only makes the missionary and evangelistic tasks of the church a great imperative (since the gospel of Jesus Christ is the only thing which can save us from our sins), but it shows us the importance of the church professing our faith to a world in which people are already suppressing the truth in unrighteousness.

When we believe and confess how God is known, we are reminding those around us who are suppressing the truth in unrighteousness, that they are doing exactly that! God reveals himself through that which he has made and everyone knows he exists, whether they admit it or not.

There is yet another point to consider. While our confession does not specifically address the subject of the creation of Adam until article fourteen—when our confession points out that Adam was created good, just and holy, and that before the fall, Adam by his own will was able to conform to the will of God—it is clear from the nature and character of God's revelation both in creation and in his word that men and women have been created in such a way as to be able to receive and understand this revelation which God gives. God has not only created the world in such a way to reveal his perfections to his creatures through that which has been made, but he has also created us as rational beings who can understand his speech to us recorded in Holy Scripture.

It is only because of human sin that what we know about God through creation is either suppressed or otherwise distorted. In fact, human sinfulness so horribly distorts the revelation that God gives that Paul can say in Ephesians 4:18-24, that our understanding is darkened and our thinking about God is futile. Let us be perfectly clear about this matter. The problem is not with God's revelation. The problem stems from human sinfulness. We know that God exists and that he possesses certain attributes. But because of human sin, we suppress the truth in unrighteousness. We are all without excuse.

As our confession sets forth in article two, there are two ways God makes himself known to us, the general revelation of God in nature and the special revelation of God in the Bible.

In the face of the rampant unbelief around us, we believe and confess that God is known by two means. The first of the ways in which God is known is the general revelation of God through that which God has made (i.e., through creation). Our confession puts it this way, we know God is “by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a most beautiful book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many letters leading us to perceive clearly the invisible things of God, namely, His eternal power and deity, as the apostle Paul says (Romans 1:20).” The general revelation of God through creation has a very specific purpose which is also spelled out in our confession: “All these things are sufficient to convict men and leave them without excuse.”

The content of this so-called general revelation is identified in a number of places in the Bible. Following the lead of Calvin,¹ the Reformed have argued the Bible provides us with God-given spectacles so that we can understand creation correctly. While this might seem a bit backwards (looking at the Bible to find out what we learn about God in nature), we can indeed turn to the Bible in order to find out what God reveals about himself in nature. This is because the primary author of the Bible is also the author of the book of nature. In his word, God explains all of his deeds, including creation.

One place where we find the Bible's perspective on God's revelation in nature is in the Book of Job.

When faced with the grim reality of suffering and the gnawing suspicion that God may be neither omnipotent nor just in His government of the world, Job was directed to the natural world where the power, majesty, and beneficence of the Creator are plainly displayed.² (See Job 36:24-33; 37:22-23; 38; 39; 42:5-6).

We also find this throughout the Psalms. In Psalm 19 (our Old Testament lesson), we are told that nature is revelatory for all who are capable of beholding the creation. It is clear that God's revelation of himself is continuous and perpetual through that which He has created. "It is cast in the language of common experience."³ The same can be seen in Psalm 29. Other Psalms, such as 8, 93 and 104 also describe the glory of God as manifest through that which God has created. While the context of these Psalms is that the faithful are to praise God for what He has done, the implication is clear that unbelievers see the same things as believers do, but do not worship God as they should.

We also find this in the opening chapter of Paul's Epistle to the Romans, (1:18-25) where the apostle makes his most important statements concerning general revelation. All of humanity receives and perceives truth about God (defined by Paul as His invisible qualities, His eternal power and Divine nature), from rational reflection upon the creation. This knowledge of God is acquired through that which has been made. But Paul goes on to indicate that this knowledge of God is sinfully suppressed—although the force of the term *katechontone* [Κατεχόντων] indicates an unsuccessful attempt at suppression of what is known to be true.⁴

This latter point of information is very helpful when we think about some of the ramifications of believing and confessing our faith to an unbelieving culture. The implication of this attempted suppression of the truth is that all men and women have a knowledge of God sufficient to render each one without excuse. This suppression of the knowledge of God is attempted but never completed. By turning to the "back of the book," even before we begin the task of confessing to those around us, we know that there can be no such thing as a true atheist, only what the Bible calls "a fool" who says in his heart that there is no God, and who is sinfully attempting to suppress the knowledge of God. This means

¹ Calvin, Institutes, I.vi.1.

² See Demarest, General Revelation, p. 234.

³ Demarest, General Revelation, p. 236.

⁴ For exegetical information regarding the term and its usage in the overall context of Paul's argument see: John Murray, The Epistle to the Romans, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 37-42; and C. E. B. Cranfield, Romans, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1980), p. 112.

that believing and confessing our faith, in part, is reminding people of many of the things they already know to be true, but will not admit. Within every unbeliever is a “Trojan Horse” of the suppressed knowledge of God.

There is a surprising amount of information in the Bible about our knowledge of God acquired through interaction with the creation and it is useful to summarize it.

- (1) God exists (Ps. 19:1; Ro. 1:19) and is Himself uncreated (Acts 17:24).
- (2) God is the creator (Acts 14:15), is all-wise (Ps. 104:24) and is good (Acts 14:17).
- (3) God is the sustainer (Acts 14:16; 17:25), is righteous (Ro. 1:32) and has a sovereign will (Acts 17:26).
- (4) God is the Lord of all men (Acts 17:24) and has absolute standards of right and wrong (Ro. 2:15).
- (5) God is self-sufficient (Acts 17:25), immanent (Acts 17:26-27), eternal (Ps. 93:2) and should be worshiped (Acts 14:15, 17:23).
- (6) God is great (Ps. 8:3-4), majestic (Ps. 29:4), all-powerful (Ps. 29:4; Ro. 1:20) and will judge all men (Ro. 2:15-26).

From this list of what can be known about God through that which God has made, it should be clear that general revelation fulfills the purpose for which God gives it, which is to leave men and women without excuse. Creation is a beautiful book which reveals its creator. But again, let us be clear here. After the fall of the human race into sin, general revelation is insufficient to lead us to a saving knowledge of God, because the book of nature does not disclose the person and work of Jesus Christ. General revelation was never intended to tell the whole story, only to give the story of redemption its proper context.

Since general revelation does not give us a saving knowledge of God, God must make himself more fully known if any are to be saved. This he does in his word. Our confession speaks of this as follows. “Second, [God] makes Himself more clearly and fully known to us by His holy and divine Word as far as is necessary for us in this life, to His glory and our salvation.”

This second means of revelation is known as “special revelation” and is simply that knowledge of God given through the Holy Scriptures. Special revelation takes a much different form from that of general revelation. In the words of one writer,

Special revelation concerns the activity of God in human affairs. It is therefore historical, and it proceeds in stages. The mode of revelation is thus suited to the epoch and the stage of redemptive history, but has its culmination in the ‘fact of Christ.’ God has spoken, finally, in His Son, in His teaching, His work of atonement, and in the interpretive apostolic activity. The OT revelation prepares for Christ. Christ does not repudiate the OT, He fulfills it. The historical character of revelation makes clear its uniqueness....By calling revelation ‘historical,’ stress is laid on the actuality of the events recorded in Scripture. The events are not simply the projections of the religious consciousness onto history. The testimony of the Christian Church is that God revealed himself in human history, and now, in Scripture - in the very words and

propositions of Scripture - God reveals Himself.⁵

Special revelation is a subject we will take up in some detail in the coming weeks when we work our way through article three of our confession (which deals with the inspiration of Scripture), articles four and six (which deal with the Canon of Scripture), article five (the authority of Scripture) and article seven (which covers the sufficiency of the Scripture).

Perhaps the best way to understand the two means by which God reveals himself is to compare and contrast them. As B. B. Warfield points out in his magisterial essay on divine revelation,

There is the revelation which God continuously makes to all men: [general revelation] by it His power and Divinity are made known. And there is the revelation [special revelation] which He makes exclusively to His chosen people: through it His saving grace is made known. Both species or stages of revelation are insisted upon throughout the Scriptures. They are, for example, brought significantly together in such a declaration as we find in Ps. xix: 'The heavens declare the glory of God...their line is throughout the earth' (vers. 1.4); 'The Law of Jehovah is perfect, restoring the soul' (ver. 7).⁶

These two means of God's revelation are completely distinct but absolutely complementary. General revelation is addressed to humanity as men and women. It is given through nature and history and is natural, in that it is given continuously through that which God has made. This was Paul's point in Romans 1. Special revelation, on the other hand, is addressed to men and women as sinners, and is necessarily supernatural, in the sense that God must intervene in the course of human history to reveal himself redemptively.

The Bible is the historical record of God's revelation of His saving purposes for sinners, beginning with the creation account, moving on to the fall (and the proto-evangelium of Genesis 3:15), to God's call of Noah, Abraham, the creation of a covenant people (the nation of Israel) and so on, culminating in the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ which in turn serves as the basis for the promise of our Lord's Second Coming, when he will judge the world, raise the dead and make all things new. This means that special revelation was not given to the Egyptians, the Chinese or the Germans. It was given to Israel in the Old Testament and to the church in the New. In this sense, special revelation is particular, unlike the revelation God gives to all in nature.

As Warfield perceptively notes,

Revelation, therefore, in its double form was the Divine purpose for man from the beginning.... Without special revelation, general revelation would be for sinful men incomplete and ineffective, and could issue, as in point of fact it has issued wherever it alone has been accessible, only in leaving them without excuse (Rom. 1:20). Without general revelation, special revelation would lack that basis in the fundamental knowledge of God as the mighty and wise, righteous and good, maker and ruler of all things, apart from which the further revelation of this great God's interventions in the world for the salvation of sinners could not be either intelligible,

⁵ H. D. McDonald, Dictionary of the Christian Church, ed. J. D. Douglas, (Grand Rapids: The Zondervan Corporation, 1981), s. v. "Revelation."

⁶ B. B. Warfield, Inspiration and Authority of the Bible, p. 73.

credible or operative.⁷

The two modes of revelation work in harmony to fulfill the ends for which God has given them. General revelation provides the framework for God to reveal himself redemptively. It declares the existence of God to all men through that which has been made - so that they are without excuse. It reveals to all men that God is eternal and possessing Divine perfections and that they are deserving of His wrath. Due to humanities' sinful nature however, this revelation of God is suppressed (Romans 1:18). General revelation is, therefore, necessary to provide the framework for special revelation, which is God's activity whereby he reveals His plan for, and method of, the salvation of men and women.

As we believe and confess that God reveals himself in two ways, through creation and in the Bible, we know that both the secularist (who denies such knowledge is possible) or the pagan (who supposedly finds knowledge of God everywhere but in the Bible) are guilty before God for suppressing the truth in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18) or for exchanging God's truth for a lie (Romans 1:25). It is general revelation which not only renders all men and women without excuse but which also provides the necessary context for God's special revelation in the Scriptures.

But while the book of nature reveals nature's God, the book of nature does not reveal the gospel. It is only in God's revelation of himself in the Bible (special revelation) that we find the message of law and gospel, which tell us that we are guilty for our sins and how God delivers us from the guilt and power of sin through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Because of human sin, general revelation can only condemn us. But in his word (special revelation), God graciously reveals how he saves sinners through the perfect obedience and sacrificial death of Jesus Christ.

Therefore in order to know God in a saving way we need both means of revelation. General revelation tells us that God is and that he made all things. Special revelation tells us who God is, and further reveals that only through knowing the person of his son Jesus, do we truly know God. Jesus makes this very point. In the opening verses of John 17, Jesus speaks about the relationship between the knowledge of God and eternal life. While praying for his disciples Jesus looked toward heaven and prayed:

Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent (John 17:2-3).

To possess eternal life we must know God as he reveals himself to us in the person of his son. And the only place we will find God's son and know God as we ought (in the sense of trusting in his righteousness and death to save us from our sins) is in God's word written (Holy Scripture).

This is why we not only believe and confess that God reveals himself through the things and the creatures he has made, but also that "[God] makes Himself more clearly and fully known to us by His holy and divine Word as far as is necessary for us in this life, to His glory and our salvation." To fully know God, we must know his son, the central character of God's holy and divine word. For to have eternal life, we must not only know that God is, but that Jesus Christ is the only savior of sinners.

⁷ Warfield, Inspiration and Authority of the Bible, p. 75.

