

§ 2. Doctrine of Revelation

Introduction

Today we open the first section of our new Defenders survey of Christian doctrine which will be on the doctrine of revelation. In surveying Christian doctrine, we are going to be looking at the traditional so-called *loci communes* of Protestant theology. The *loci communes* is Latin for the common places or chief themes or topics of Christian theology. Traditionally the *loci communes* would include things like doctrine of God, doctrine of Christ, doctrine of man, doctrine of salvation, and so forth. We will be opening our study of Christian doctrine by looking at the locus called doctrine of revelation.

I. The Question of Authority

Key to the study of Christian theology is the question of authority. Who has the authority to speak about matters of God and our relationship to him? Is it sacred Scripture, or is it the church? I want to suggest that authority ultimately lodges in God himself. Any other authority is a derivative authority that comes from God's being, for example, the author of Scripture or his providential guidance over the church. Ultimate authority lodges in God himself. He is the one who has the ability to speak authoritatively about himself and his truth.

When we talk about authority, what do we mean? I am defining authority to mean the right to demand belief and obedience. We are all familiar with authorities in human affairs. For example, the state has a certain authority within a sphere of jurisdiction. Parents have authority in the family. Employers have a certain type of authority at the workplace. These authorities have a derivative

power, and they also have a limited sphere in which that authority is exercised. By contrast, God's authority is ultimate. There is no higher court of appeal from which God's authority is derived. God is the final court of appeal. Moreover, God's authority is unlimited. He has sovereignty over everything. Therefore, God speaks authoritatively on all matters.

The practical question then becomes: how do we discover God's will and mind on these matters? How do we come to know what God thinks about these things and what he wants us to do? The answer is revelation. God has revealed his will and mind to us.

II. The Concept of Revelation

A. Definition of "Revelation"

What do we mean by revelation? The word itself in the Greek has the notion of unveiling something that is hidden so that it may be seen and known for what it is. Revelation in this sense is the disclosure or the uncovering of a matter so that we can see a matter for how it actually is.

Immediately we confront a difficulty because typically Scripture is thought to be God's propositional revelation to us. His revelation to us in the form of sentences. Yet it is very clear that not all of Scripture is a revelation in this sense of unveiling something hidden or disclosing something that otherwise would be unknown. Indeed, this was one of the real struggles of early biblical critics in the late 17th century – to understand in what sense the Bible could be said to be a revelation from God when so much of it was knowable through mundane knowledge. For example, Luke in his Gospel talks about the sources that he consulted for writing his

Gospel, how he interviewed witnesses to the events. These witnesses would have been accessible to anyone. It is not as though Luke was imparted some revelation from on-high of these matters independently of his work as a historian in interviewing people and compiling things. Again, when Paul writes his letter to Philemon about forgiving a runaway slave, Paul doesn't seem to have any sense that he is disclosing mysteries hitherto unknown except by God. Yet we regard Philemon as a book that is inspired and part of the New Testament and therefore part of God's revelation to us. Some of the early biblical critics wondered how we can speak of the New Testament, for example, as being a revelation from God when so much of it was really just ordinary sorts of things that could be known by anyone wholly apart from some sort of a divine disclosure.

I think this makes it evident that when we talk about revelation there are really two senses here that is at work. One is this very narrow sense that is implied in the etymology of the word itself – namely, unveiling something previously unknown so that it can be seen and known for what it is. That is a very narrow sense of revelation. In that sense, not all of the New Testament is a revelation. There are revelations of that sort to be found in the New Testament. One thinks, for example, of the book of Revelation where John describes how the Lord has revealed to him what must soon take place. Or in Corinth, Paul talks about New Testament prophets who would stand up in the meeting of the New Testament Christians and would have a revelation from the Lord which they would then share with the others. Paul says you should listen carefully one at a time to these prophets and weigh with

discernment what they are saying to be sure that this really is of the Lord and not just something from themselves.

Not everything in the New Testament is like that. As I said, much of Paul's correspondence concerns just ordinary church affairs about which he wrote. Other historical books in the New Testament use sources. They copy or borrow from other sources. They are not just given from on-high so to speak. So although the New Testament has revelation in this very narrow sense in it, not all of it is revelation in that sense.

But then there is a broader sense of the word revelation, I think, in which we can speak of the New Testament and the Bible as God's revelation. Namely, it is a communication from God. This is what God wants to communicate to us. That is perfectly consistent with the human authors of Scripture using historical sources, using mundane knowledge, to write what they did. In that broader sense, you don't need to have a special revelation from God in order for this to be God's Word to us. So in the broader sense of revelation the Scripture is a communication to us from God. It is God's Word to us, and therefore is revelation in that broad sense even if in the narrow restricted sense it is not revelation in being imparted directly from God which was previously unknown.

B. General Revelation

Let's now talk about two different kinds of revelation. Theologians typically have distinguished between God's *general* revelation and his *special* revelation.

1. Two Senses of "General"

General revelation is so named because it is general in two senses. First, it is general in the sense that it is *generally available to mankind as a whole*. This is a revelation which is universal. Everybody is a recipient of God's general revelation. So the first sense in which this is general is in its universality. Secondly, however, it is also general in that it *provides merely general knowledge or information about God*, not specific information about God. For example, from general revelation you can know that God exists – that there is a Creator and Designer of the universe. But you wouldn't learn that he is a Trinity. From general revelation alone you wouldn't have any idea that there are three persons in the godhead. You would just have the idea that there is a personal Creator and Designer of the universe. Again, from general revelation alone you wouldn't know that Jesus Christ was both human and divine – that he had both a divine nature and a human nature. That doesn't belong to general revelation. Rather, general revelation will give you a broad-strokes picture of God – a kind of generic monotheism, if you will – that would be common to Jews, Christians, as well as certain pagans (for example, deists who believe in a personal Creator and Designer of the universe). Those would be the two senses in which general revelation is general. Namely, in its scope and then also in the kind of information that it gives about God.

2. Types of General Revelation

Now let's talk about types of general revelation. I've already indicated the first type. It will be God's revelation of himself in nature. God, as the Creator of the universe, has left his fingerprints as it were in creation so that you can discern the potter in the clay.

As you look at the works of creation you can see certain qualities or traits of the author of nature in it. Paul talks about this revelation in Romans 1:18-20. Look at what Paul has to say about God's general revelation in nature:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse;

Here Paul says that all men everywhere at any time in history are responsible for recognizing at least the existence of the Creator of the universe. He specifically says that from the created order around us God's invisible nature (and then he specifies two things – his eternal power and his deity) has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. Therefore, although people wouldn't know from God's general revelation in nature that this is the Christian God or even the Jewish God for that matter, they should be able to discern that there is a Creator who has eternal power and deity who has made the world. So all persons are without excuse for acknowledging at least that much about God simply on the basis of his self-revelation in nature.

Secondly, though, over in Romans 2 Paul seems to speak in a second way in which God has revealed himself generally to mankind, and that is through conscience. Through one's conscience you apprehend the moral law which God has implanted within you. In Romans 2:14-16, Paul talks about non-Jews

(Gentiles) who do not have the Jewish law and nevertheless seem to apprehend the basics of what the law requires. Paul says,

When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

Here Paul says that even those who do not have the Jewish law (for example, the Ten Commandments) nevertheless have a basic apprehension of right and wrong, of the requirements of the law. This is something that is written innately on their hearts by God. Therefore, they are held morally responsible for this knowledge. Just as all persons everywhere are held responsible for acknowledging the existence of God, so also all persons everywhere are held responsible for the demands of God's moral law upon them.

Those would be the two types of general revelation that are mentioned in Scripture: God's revelation in nature and also in conscience through his implanted moral law.

3. Functions of General Revelation

Let's say something about the functions of general revelation. There are several functions that general revelation carries out.

1. *To show forth God's glory.* Psalm 19:1. The psalmist says,

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and

night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

Here the psalmist says that the beauty and the grandeur of the heavens above (he is thinking, of course, of the stars) tell forth the glory of God to all humanity. There is no verbal speech that is spoken – no human language that is spoken – but nevertheless he says this message goes out to the whole world of showing forth the glory of God. So one of the functions of general revelation is to declare God's majesty and glory. As we've come to learn more about the universe, I think we've only increased in our awe of God's power and majesty in creating this incredible universe in which we live. When you think that what the psalmist could see with the naked eye were only stars within our own galaxy (he had no idea of the untold billions and billions of galaxies that are out there beyond the sight of the naked eye) you can only see how incredibly grand and majestic God is through his revelation in nature as the Creator of the magnificent universe.

2. To render people morally culpable before God. Let's go back to Romans 1:19. There Paul says,

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

So general revelation serves to remove any excuse that people might have for their unbelief in God's existence. It renders them

culpable or responsible before God for acknowledging his existence.

Then over in Romans 2:15-16 he says,

They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

Here he says that people will be judged on the basis of their innate knowledge of God's moral law. They will be accused or excused on the judgment day based upon their innate knowledge of the moral law written on their hearts. So one of the functions of general revelation is to remove any excuse that people might have before God. Rather, it serves to render people culpable before God.

One of the questions that arises in this connection is whether general revelation could also provide saving knowledge of God. Are those who never hear the Gospel during their lifetime uniformly lost forever? Do they go to hell never having heard of Christ? How will God judge them? Is it possible that through their response to general revelation they might come to a saving knowledge of God? That will be the question that we will turn to and take up next time.