

EVANGELICALISM AND GENERAL REVELATION: AN UNFINISHED AGENDA

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In spite of the growth of evangelicalism and the maturing of its institutions, evangelicals continue to be criticized for not coming to terms with science or modern learning. It is often believed that there is a weakness in their system of ideas that hinders them from becoming fully modern. One of evangelicalism's most prominent thinkers has himself expressed criticism along these lines. Bernard Ramm charges that "evangelicals have not come to a systematic method of interacting with modern knowledge."¹

Partially in response to Ramm, the thesis of this paper is that an adequate method for relating theology and science can be found, at least implicitly, in the evangelical view of general and special revelation, but that the weakness evangelicals often have in relating theology and science stems especially from an underdevelopment in their doctrine of general revelation.

I. SOME PRESUPPOSITIONS

Several presuppositions lie behind such a thesis. One is that revelation is the source of all true human knowledge. Another is that the traditional distinction between general and special revelation is Biblically and philosophically justified. A third presupposition is that there is a good measure of truth in Ramm's indictment. This is not to deny that many evangelicals have integrated theology and science to a respectable degree, but only to admit that we evangelicals often do resort to *ad hoc* solutions that lack consistency and integrity with respect to both theology and science.² The fourth presupposition is that Ramm's suggestion about Karl Barth's method as a paradigm for evangelicals is unacceptable.³ To be sure, Barth was admirable in his ability to appreciate modern learning while maintaining at least the bulk of historic Christianity. But my main problem with Barth is that his view of revelation does not provide a basis for the unity of all human knowledge. In his denial of general revelation he reduced all knowledge by revelation to theological knowledge and dichotomized theology and science, keeping them in two separate spheres where they cannot affect each other.

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¹B. Ramm, *After Fundamentalism: The Future of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper, 1983) 27.

²*Ibid.*, p. 114.

³*Ibid.*, p. 28.

Many neo-orthodox theologians have followed Barth's cue and have either downgraded general revelation or denied it altogether.⁴ Liberal theologians, of course, tend to go in the opposite direction and deny special revelation or reduce it to a kind of general revelation through our religious consciousness.⁵ Roman Catholic theology does recognize a twofold knowledge of God but usually lacks the Reformation emphasis that all knowledge of God is by the divine activity of revelation, whether in nature or Scripture.⁶

It would seem, therefore, that presenting a full-orbed, consistently Biblical doctrine of general and special revelation is largely the inherited task of evangelical theologians. And such a doctrine must be the basis of a workable method for relating science and theology, if indeed all knowledge comes by revelation and if the distinction between general and special revelation is valid.

So evangelicals should be well equipped methodologically for the integration of theological and scientific studies, and yet they often are not. My contention is that this is at least partly because of an underdevelopment in their view of general revelation. Evangelicals, especially in America, have concentrated on special revelation and inspiration and have highly-developed views in these areas. But they have not written nearly as much on general revelation. Many have written an essay or part of a chapter on the subject, but within the three decades since Berkouwer's book on general revelation appeared in English only one volume, that of Bruce Demarest, has been entirely devoted to the

⁴H. Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), does not accept general revelation as an objective basis for knowledge of God (1. 11–12, 25–27) and suffers the same epistemological weakness found in Barth. T. Torrance has written much about theology and science and has made some fine observations about how they relate in their purposes and methodologies. But, like Barth, Torrance has no place for general revelation in his system and thus cannot provide a fully adequate theological basis for relating Christian faith to scientific knowledge. He argues well concerning the influence that the Christian doctrine of creation has on modern science; cf. e.g. *Ground and Grammar of Theology* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1980) 105–107, 110–112. But then he loses the rational basis this doctrine can provide for science when he grounds the intelligibility of theological language in the hypostatic union instead of in the *imago Dei* (pp. 151, 160). Without general revelation Christian epistemology lacks an objective basis in the creation and becomes dependent on the mystery of the incarnation. See Torrance, *Theology of Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966) 39–40, 114. Cf. also a critique of Torrance's epistemology in C. F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority* (Waco: Word, 1976), 3. 217–221. E. Brunner and R. Niebuhr taught both a general and a special revelation, but they did not give full place to the supernatural character of special revelation nor did they do justice to the objective, rational character of both revelations; Brunner, *Revelation and Reason* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1946) 58–80; Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Scribner's, 1964), 1. 125–136. One of the most positive treatments of general revelation by a neo-orthodox theologian is A. Richardson, *Christian Apologetics* (New York: Harper, 1947) 110–132.

⁵Or, as B. Demarest says of liberalism, it reduces "special revelation to but one aspect of God's universal providence"; *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 15.

⁶G. C. Berkouwer, *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955) 75, observes that although Rome acknowledges a revelation in creation the idea of revelation has "little place" in its "exposition of natural theology." The "new Catholic theology" is more open to the Protestant view of revelation than is traditional Roman Catholic theology, but new Catholic theologians often tend to follow liberalism's blurring of the distinction between general and special revelation.

subject.⁷ Demarest is especially helpful on historical and current issues on the subject, as is also Carl Henry, who has devoted to it a few sizable sections of his *magnum opus*.⁸ But evangelicals need to do more, particularly in thinking out the implications of general and special revelation as a basis for human knowledge in all fields. I suggest that there is an important agenda on the subject that needs our attention if we want to better meet Ramm's challenge.

Before considering that agenda, let us review the doctrine of general revelation as accepted by a majority of evangelicals.

II. THE ESTABLISHED DOCTRINE

The evangelical view can be summarized by the following five propositions.⁹

1. *General revelation is a revelation of God through his works of creation and providence in a natural, continuous, universal, indirect and nonpropositional mode.*¹⁰ This is in contrast to special revelation, which is usually supernatural,¹¹ discontinuous (or distinctively historical), local (i.e., to individuals

⁷The Dutch edition of Berkouwer's book is dated 1951. For bibliographical information on his book and the one by Demarest see nn. 5 and 6 *supra*. Also note that the Dutch Calvinists have written more substantially on the subject than those in mainstream American evangelicalism; see an accounting of their views in W. Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953).

⁸Henry, *God*, 2. 77–123; 3. 203–215.

⁹Twentieth-century evangelical writings on general revelation (and its relation to special revelation) include H. Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956; originally *Magnalia Dei*, 1909) 32–60; L. Berkhof, *Manual of Reformed Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1933) 24–38; Berkouwer, *General Revelation*; "General and Special Divine Revelation," in *Revelation and the Bible* (ed. C. Henry; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958) 13–24; Demarest, *General*, esp. 227–262; Henry, *God*, 2. 77–123; 3. 203–215; P. Helm, *Divine Revelation: The Basic Issues* (Westchester: Crossway, 1982) 1–18; K. Kantzer, "The Communication of Revelation," in *The Bible the Living Word of Revelation* (ed. M. Tenney; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1968) 62–71; H. Lindell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 28–30; W. Masselink, *General Revelation*; L. Morris, *I Believe in Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 32–48; J. Orr, *Revelation and Inspiration* (New York: Scribner's, 1910) 26–66; B. Ramm, *Special Revelation and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961) 13–27; C. Van Til, "Nature and Scripture," in *The Infallible Word* (ed. N. B. Stonehouse and P. Woolley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953) 255–293; C. Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (unpublished syllabus: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1961) 62–132; B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948) 71–78.

¹⁰The means of general revelation are both external, in the natural world, and internal, in the moral and spiritual constitution of the human person. For an excellent Biblical, theological treatment of the internal and external modes of revelation see Demarest, *General* 227–233.

¹¹We should not make the terms "natural" and "supernatural" absolute in distinguishing general and special revelation. God uses both natural and supernatural means in special revelation. Moreover some theologians suggest that in some cases general revelation can be supernatural and quite personal; see Berkhof, *Manual* 27; Kantzer, "Communication" 67; Masselink, *General* 69.

or groups), more direct or personal, and often propositional.¹²

2. *General revelation gives a knowledge of God's general character and will.*¹³ The creation in its natural existence does not reveal the details of God's mind and will. It does not make known God's specific historical purposes, such as his plan of salvation for a fallen race. God's specific historical will must be made known by special revelation.¹⁴

3. *The knowledge of God by general revelation has been darkened or distorted by sin.* Evangelicals of course differ over just how badly sin has damaged human knowledge.¹⁵ But they do agree that to some extent sin has affected human thinking about God and his moral will.

4. *In spite of sin, general revelation is clear and objective and is therefore the basis for universal human guilt and a point of contact for the gospel.*¹⁶ Although general revelation does not give the knowledge of salvation, it is sufficient to make us responsible to worship God and repent of our sin.¹⁷ It is also the reason

¹²Though God speaks more directly in special revelation, he does not always have to "speak" in words. Prophetic inspiration is a common mode of special revelation, but God also reveals himself in miraculous deeds that in themselves are special revelation apart from any words that may accompany them—e.g., the parting of the Red Sea or the appearance of the risen Christ. Thus special revelation is not always propositional. See R. Nash, *The Word of God and the Mind of Man* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 44–45.

¹³Knowledge of God through general revelation is of his general or eternally necessary qualities and of his moral will, which is universally normative. Demarest (*General* 243) gives a sizable list of things that can be known of God and his will through general revelation.

¹⁴Evangelicalism teaches Calvin's distinction that by general revelation God is known as Creator and by special revelation he is known as Redeemer (*Institutes*, 1.2.1). Of course this is an oversimplification because special revelation is not always for the purpose of salvation. God revealed himself specially and personally in the garden before Adam sinned. Berkhof (*Manual* 27) classifies this as general revelation, but most evangelicals view it as special revelation. God's specific historical purposes are made known by special revelation, whether they be soteric or otherwise. Nevertheless those purposes for a sinful human race center around redemption in Christ.

¹⁵Some argue that sin so suppresses and perverts the truth of general revelation that it is not right to say that the unregenerate person has any true knowledge of God. For example, Berkouwer says that "no true knowledge of the revelation of God in the works of his hands is obtainable without faith in Christ" and that through general revelation alone there is "no static fund of knowledge on which a natural theology can be built" (*General* 285, 150); see also "General" 15. Others, however, hold that the unregenerate have genuine knowledge of God. Demarest disagrees with Berkouwer's interpretation of the Biblical texts on general revelation and argues that sinners do have a partial yet real knowledge of God through revelation, though they do not respond rightly to that knowledge in faith and repentance (*General* 60, 141–147, 242–247).

¹⁶See Demarest, *General* 250, for the ways in which general revelation is a "point of contact."

¹⁷Kantzer makes the daring suggestion that through general revelation "every soul is confronted personally and individually by God to convict him of his sin and of God's righteous judgment and condemnation upon him (John 16:8, 9), and to call all men everywhere to repentance and decision (John 1:9)" ("Communication" 67).

we can expect the Christian message to be intelligible to people of all cultures and religions.

5. *Scripture and the grace of the Holy Spirit are needed to enable us to understand properly the message of general revelation.* Evangelicals disagree widely over the value of natural theology,¹⁸ but they tend to follow Calvin's suggestion that the Scriptures are the spectacles with which to read the book of nature and that the illumination of the Spirit is needed to give us proper eyesight for the reading.¹⁹

These five points have been common emphases in evangelical theology from the time of the Reformation to the present. They would seem to be a sufficient statement of what the Bible teaches on the subject. In what sense, then, do evangelicals have an underdeveloped doctrine of general revelation? In other words, what specifically lies unfinished on the theological agenda of this doctrine?

III. SOME AGENDA ITEMS

I would like to suggest four items to which evangelicals need to give attention. These four are not altogether new but are presently either ignored or not addressed sufficiently, especially as concerns theological method and the place of the sciences in that method. Nevertheless they are items that would seem to be implied in the evangelical view of general revelation.

1. *The objective authority of general revelation.* It is not common for evangelicals to use the word "authority" when referring to general revelation. It is often assumed that general revelation cannot be used as a source of authority for theology, faith and life because the noetic effects of sin render its authority inoperative. Consequently general revelation is usually treated only in a brief way in theology books and is quickly set aside in favor of the exclusive authority of Scripture once the effects of sin have been specified. But we must bear in mind that if the illuminating grace of the Holy Spirit makes the authority of the Bible operative so does the common grace of the Spirit make the authority of general revelation operative. Both general and special revelation are an objective authority that must be entreated when it comes to questions of truth, regardless of how sin has affected our thinking.

Some systematic theologies indirectly acknowledge the authority of general

¹⁸For evangelical criticisms of natural theology see Berkouwer, *General* 21–83; G. Clark, *Religion, Reason and Revelation* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961) 28–42; Henry, *God*, 2. 103–123; C. Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1963) 67–90, 132–146, 260–285; *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1975) 221–254. For a positive attitude toward natural theology by evangelicals see J. O. Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), 1. 72–101; N. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976); S. C. Hackett, *The Resurrection of Theism* (Chicago: Moody, 1957).

¹⁹J. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.6.1; cf. Henry, *God*, 1. 342–343.

revelation by supporting the doctrine of God with theistic arguments.²⁰ Other theologies start with Scripture, God or Christ and avoid any treatment of natural theology as a prerequisite or support for their system.²¹ In both cases, however, the authority of general revelation is implicitly at work, at least in the hermeneutics of theological method, but rarely is this authority made explicit. In other words, evangelicals commonly fail to spell out the twofold authority for theology that is implied by their doctrine of general and special revelation.²² This is well illustrated by the fact that in *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* general revelation, to which the statement only briefly alludes, plays no significant part in the view of revelation, inspiration and authority from which the meaning of inerrancy is said to be drawn.²³

Some theologians limit the authority of general revelation not only because of their emphasis on sin but also because of their belief that, even for sinless thinking, general revelation needs the interpretive help of special revelation. For example, Gordon Clark not only speaks of the “darkness of the sinful mind” but also a certain “inadequacy of general revelation in itself”—that is, an inadequacy for our deriving God’s attributes from an observation of nature.²⁴ Says Clark:

When Adam was created and placed in the Garden of Eden, he did not know what to do. Nor would a study of the Garden have led to any necessary conclusion. His duty was imposed upon him by a special divine revelation.²⁵

Cornelius Van Til agrees with Clark that without special revelation Adam would not have been able to “read nature properly.” But Van Til criticizes Clark for not showing sufficiently the organic relationship of general and special revelation, and he even suggests that fallen “man is still responsible for the

²⁰See e.g. Buswell, *Systematic*, 1. 72–101; H. C. Thiessen, *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949) 31–35, 57–63; and others in the tradition of C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans reprint), 1. 18–31, 204–240.

²¹D. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper, 1978); L. Boettner, *Studies in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947); and J. C. Wenger, *Introduction to Theology* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1934), who makes a brief but incidental mention of the theistic arguments on p. 15.

²²One of the finest books in our generation on revelation and theological method is C. H. Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation: The Foundation of Christian Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1971), which is a good treatment of how both the Scriptures and rational, empirical principles operate in Christian theology. Nevertheless Pinnock makes only a very brief reference to general revelation (p. 29) and does not champion the integral place it should have in the pattern of authority for evangelical theology.

²³The statement at one point refers to “God’s self-disclosure in the created order and the sequence of events within it” but does not describe the nature of such a revelation so as to aid the development of the meaning of inerrancy; see *Inerrancy* (ed. N. Geisler; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979) 498.

²⁴G. Clark, “Special Divine Revelation as Rational,” in *Revelation and the Bible* (ed. C. Henry; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958) 8, 29.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 29.

original supernatural revelation" that God gave along with the general revelation.²⁶

Now admittedly it is important to see an integral relationship between general and special revelation. But both Clark and Van Til seem to say that general revelation is not sufficient in itself to give sinless man a definite knowledge of God and that it must be interpreted by the aid of special revelation.²⁷ If the general revelation is not sufficient by itself to reveal the Creator to sinless man, however, the sinful man cannot justly be held accountable for his failure to recognize the Creator in his works. Paul does not hold the Gentiles responsible for special revelation. He holds them responsible for the invisible things of God clearly revealed in creation and inscribed in their hearts or moral constitution (Rom 1:20; 2:12–15).

Some theologians blame the deficiency of general revelation on the curse on creation that came as a result of sin. For example, Harold Lindsell says that in addition to man's blindness general revelation itself is no longer the "perspicuous revelation of God" that it "may have been . . . before sin entered the human race."²⁸ Similarly Louis Berkhof in his *Manual of Reformed Doctrine* speaks of the "blight of sin" upon creation that has affected the clarity of its revelation, and he concludes that

the knowledge of God and of spiritual and eternal things conveyed by general revelation is too uncertain to form a trustworthy basis on which to build for eternity.²⁹

Admittedly, in the context Berkhof is leading to the point that special revelation is needed for a saving knowledge of God. But he leaves us with the impression that there is a deficiency in the general revelation in itself to reveal what it was originally intended to reveal—this in spite of the fact that Berkhof's *Manual* is one of the finest treatments of the whole subject.

Regarding sin's curse on the creation, we must ask whether the Bible anywhere teaches that the fall changed the perspicuity and sufficiency of general revelation in itself to accomplish its God-intended purpose. According to Rom 1:18, sin brought the additional revelation of God's wrath. But according to 1:20, nothing seems to be lacking in the present clarity of general revelation compared to its beginning in creation. The ground has been cursed and the creation groans, but not for these reasons is nature any less an eloquent witness to its Creator.³⁰

²⁶C. Van Til, *The Protestant Doctrine of Scripture* (Ripon: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1967) 55, 65–66.

²⁷On this point see also Van Til, *Introduction* 96; "Nature" 267. By way of contrast cf. B. B. Warfield's view about Adam and general revelation: "Man in Eden, as he contemplated the works of God, saw God in the unclouded mirror of his mind with a clarity of vision . . . inconceivable to sinners"; *Inspiration* 76.

²⁸Lindsell, *Battle* 29.

²⁹Berkhof, *Manual* 28; cf. Masselink, *General* 112.

³⁰Brunner, *Revelation* 72–73; see esp. his footnote at the bottom of p. 72.

Regardless of the qualifications evangelicals may put on the perspicuity of general revelation, they agree that it is clear enough to render all human beings inexcusable for their idolatry and false religion. As Van Til states:

The revelation of God in man and in the world is objectively clear. . . . All men are morally bound to react properly to this revelation of God.³¹

What needs to be emphasized, however, is that the authority of general revelation must be appealed to not only for establishing man's religious guilt but also for all the truth for which general revelation is the source. This has vast implications not only for theology but also for the natural and social sciences. Let me state the point quite frankly: Although theologian and scientist are quite fallible in their interpretations of Scripture and nature, general and special revelation are equally authoritative and infallible for the respective truths that they in fact reveal. This is a point that is markedly lacking emphasis in evangelical theology.

What I am contending for here is that we must stop using sin or sin's curse on creation or a supposed deficiency in general revelation as an excuse for reducing general revelation to a second-rate position so that in theology-science disputes we can go running exclusively to Scripture as though it were the only trustworthy source of truth. Let us admit that the Bible is not the only infallible source of truth. To be sure, it is the only infallible written revelation, and—admittedly—propositional revelation has a certain advantage over nonpropositional revelation. But that advantage is easily exaggerated.

What evangelicalism desperately needs to do is to state a pattern of authority that gives full weight to both general and special revelation and that articulates the place of authority each has in relation to the other. This is the key to the successful integration of theology and science.

2. *The "creational" specificity of general revelation.* What I mean by this is that the message of general revelation, while general about the character and will of God, is quite specific when it comes to matters about creation. This is an important agenda item because evangelicals tend to emphasize the knowledge of God given in the general revelation but not the fact that it also gives us knowledge of creation.³²

Notice in Ps 19:1 that nature not only reveals the "glory of God" but also "the work of his hands." In this natural revelation there is knowledge not only of the Maker but also of the things he has made. God causes the creation to be self-revealing as well as God-revealing. Rom 1:20 teaches that the invisible attributes of God are perceived and understood by the things he has created. In other words, knowledge of God comes by and with the knowledge of creation. Acts 14:17 says that God has a witness to his goodness in the "rains and fruitful seasons"—in other words, the ordinary processes of nature. As we observe and contemplate the things of creation, including our own inner spiritual quali-

³¹Van Til, *Protestant* 55. Note also the six specific things about God the heathen ought to learn from general revelation (*Introduction* 80).

³²One of the few sources that explicitly elaborates on how general revelation is the basis for the different fields of human knowledge is Van Til, *Introduction* 64–74.

ties,³³ we gain a knowledge of God. As Calvin taught, knowledge of God, knowledge of self, and knowledge of the world are all integral.³⁴

But at this point two things must be emphasized: (1) If general revelation includes both knowledge of God and knowledge of creation, and if it is an objective and infallible revelation, then not only does theology have a reliable and divinely authoritative source but so does science. (2) The reliable and divinely authoritative source for science is quite specific in its content. In the Biblical passages on general revelation the things about God are general (his glory, eternal power, goodness, etc.) but the things about creation are quite specific—namely, all the particular things God has made (the heavens, firmament, rains and fruitful seasons, etc.).

Concerning the content of revelation, then, we can say that general revelation gives us knowledge of God's general character and will and of creation's specific nature and laws. It is the authority of general revelation in its specific content about creation to which we must appeal as a check on all our theories in the natural and social sciences. Human science is a fallible enterprise, but it has a trustworthy and authoritative source in creation itself as an objective revelation from God.

On this point about general revelation as the authoritative source for science I wish to make a critical comment on a statement by G. C. Berkouwer. He says:

It will not do simply to equate the knowledge of nature with the knowledge of God's general revelation, for this revelation deals with the knowledge of God himself. In our opinion, therefore, it is wrong to say, as is sometimes done, that the natural sciences "investigate" God's general revelation.³⁵

Now of course the secular scientist is not consciously investigating nature as general revelation. But if my point about the creational specificity of general revelation is valid, then any knowledge of the creation is a knowledge of general revelation to the extent that it is indeed true knowledge. In a real sense, then, the natural sciences do investigate God's general revelation. But Berkouwer is not happy with this idea because, like most evangelicals, his concern in general revelation is with the knowledge of God and not the knowledge of creation. Furthermore he believes that this knowledge of God must be a knowledge in faith.³⁶ So the unbeliever does not have true knowledge through general revelation. Over against this I side with Demarest, who contends that everyone has a partial yet real knowledge of God.³⁷ The wrong ideas about God that non-Christians have do not cancel out the fact that they have some truth about both

³³General revelation through our inner personal nature is brought out especially in Rom 2:14–15 and perhaps also 1:19.

³⁴Calvin, *Institutes* 1.1.1–3; see also C. Henry's comment on this Calvinist concept (*God*, 1. 342–343).

³⁵Berkouwer, *General* 288–289.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 289.

³⁷Demarest, *General* 244–245; see also Masselink, *General* 116–117, 148, 150.

God and his creation. Just as we appeal to Scripture as objective truth for both Christian and non-Christian, so we must appeal to general revelation as objective truth for both Christian and non-Christian.

I conclude, therefore, that the objective authority and creational specificity of general revelation form the Christian basis for scientific pursuit. If scientific knowledge is not in a real sense knowledge of general revelation, then we lose our theological basis for the unity of all human knowledge. This leads us to a third item.

3. *The epistemological priority of general revelation.* This is implied in the evangelical notion that general revelation is a point of contact for the gospel. Earlier I referred to the advantage of propositional revelation over nonpropositional revelation. More specifically it is the advantage of infallible statements in Scripture over all our fallible statements about general revelation. Because of this advantage we commonly appeal to Scripture for the correct interpretation of general revelation. But this should not hinder us from recognizing one very important fact—namely, that all Biblical statements are dependent on general revelation for rational, empirical and personal meaning. This is what I call the epistemological priority of general revelation.

It is in the logical, empirical and personal structure of creation as general revelation that we have a basis for the meaning of any proposition, Biblical or otherwise. The laws of logic are grounded in general revelation. Without logic no statement of Scripture is intelligible. Also the Biblical statements usually refer back to the natural setting of God's empirical and personal world. Without an understanding of that world through general revelation these statements are meaningless. In order to understand Psalm 23, for example, one has to have at least a basic knowledge about sheep and a shepherd's ways with them. So against those who would claim that the Bible is the only reliable source of truth, let us confess that without the reliability of logic and of empirical and personal truth there are no reliable or meaningful statements in the Bible.

To say that general revelation has epistemological priority would seem to contradict a statement Carl Henry makes:

The scriptural revelation takes epistemological priority over general revelation, not because general revelation is obscure or because man as sinner cannot know it, but because Scripture as an inspired literary document republishes the content of general revelation objectively, over against sinful man's reductive dilutions and misconstructions of it. Moreover, it proclaims God's way of redemption to sinful man in his guilty condition.³⁸

It is clear from this statement that Henry is referring to what we have seen as the advantage of propositional revelation. What Henry calls the epistemological priority of Scripture I would call the soteric and linguistic priority of special revelation—that is, special revelation has priority for a knowledge of salvation and for a standard of how to properly verbalize the truth about God in general revelation. When I use the term "epistemological priority" as adhering in general revelation, therefore, I do not mean to contradict anything

³⁸Henry, *God*, 1. 223.

Henry says but rather to point out that when it comes to the basic questions of knowledge and meaning there is a God-given logical and intelligible structure in the creation upon which Scripture is dependent.

The epistemological priority of general revelation is at least in principle recognized by many evangelicals.³⁹ What makes it an important agenda item is that we must think out its implications for a method of integrating theology and science. One of the implications is that logic has a certain place of authority. Evangelical rationalists readily affirm this. Henry himself argues that the "intuitive view of reason" must be presupposed and that the "laws of logic belong to the *imago Dei*, and have ontological import."⁴⁰ Demarest says that part of our knowledge of God through general revelation comes by "effable intuition," which gives us "the rules for right thinking on which all further knowing is grounded."⁴¹ Ronald Nash says that "sin may hinder the ability to reason but it does not alter the laws of valid inference."⁴²

What is also implied in the epistemological priority of general revelation, however, is a place of authority for the world of empirical personal experience. Evangelicals are more hesitant to affirm any normativeness in this area, fearing the pitfalls in the subjectivism of the liberals. But by the empirical, personal world I do not mean some kind of subjectivity. I mean an objective reality that God made with empirical and personal or spiritual structures.⁴³ If we recognize the authority and creational specificity of general revelation, then we must give the empirical and personal aspects of reality their proper place as we peer into God's self-revealing creation. This of course involves an appeal to "scientific facts," which at times can be a tenuous matter. It is true that, as Arthur Holmes says, "the 'facts' of experience are more 'interprefacts' than they are bare" facts.⁴⁴ But if we heed the distinction that Holmes makes between the metaphysical objectivity of truth itself and the epistemological subjectivity of our apprehension of the truth,⁴⁵ then we will not disparage the empirical and per-

³⁹E.g. Demarest (*General* 250) says that "general revelation is the necessary prerequisite to special revelation," and Berkhof (*Manual* 31) says that "Scripture can be fully understood only against the background of God's revelation in nature." See also Ramm, *Special* 18; Berkouwer, *General* 43; Mas-selink, *General* 114.

⁴⁰Henry, *God*, 1. 229, 126.

⁴¹Demarest, *General* 223.

⁴²Nash, *Word* 109.

⁴³Observe that by putting "empirical" and "personal" together in the same repeated phrase I am suggesting that a proper view of creation and general revelation will keep us from splitting the world of sense experience and the personal, spiritual dimension into two realms, such as Kant's phenomenal-noumenal dichotomy. God's creation is integrally empirical and personal (or interpersonal). It is at the same time logical and rational. I split these aspects up only for the sake of analysis. They are all integral.

⁴⁴A. Holmes, *All Truth Is God's Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 81.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 6.

sonal authority of general revelation just because of mistaken impressions we may have of its message.

What we must do, rather, is to be more diligent in using the God-given means whereby we can correct, refine and complete our understanding of the creation in its multifarious nature. This is a philosophical as well as scientific task, and both evangelical and nonevangelical philosophers are reaching more of a general consensus these days on just what that entails. It means constructing conceptual models that are tested in their ability to explain the relevant data according to such criteria as consistency, coherence, congruity and comprehensiveness.⁴⁶ This method applies not only in science but also in metaphysics and theology.

Actually, theology of course is also a science, differing from the natural and social sciences only with respect to the data it seeks to explain. Theology seeks to explain the data of Scripture by such conceptual models as the Trinity, the hypostatic union, original sin, and Biblical inerrancy. Insofar as these concepts are not literal translations of any one passage but general models for explaining many pieces of Scriptural data, they are not necessarily infallible. Yet insofar as they, upon repeated theological testing, well explain all relevant data of Scripture, we gain confidence in them as true and reliable human perceptions of God's truth. The same is true of conceptual models in the natural and social sciences. All sciences (including theology) are fallible human undertakings, and their work is answerable to the objective truth of their respective, authoritative sources that they seek to reflect.

We can see therefore that theology and science are both on the same methodological plane. They are epistemologically on an equal footing—that is, we should have equal respect for theological and scientific models that can explain their respective sets of data with equal adequacy according to the common rational criteria. Again, the theologian must not exaggerate the propositional advantage of his authoritative source. He too must interpret his revelational data, and sometimes matters about special revelation involve perennial debates among Bible-believing theologians while sometimes the message of creation is quite clear to everyone. To be sure, we must uphold the soteric and linguistic priority of special revelation, and thus the theologian must not bow to the scientist on questions about how to be saved and how to properly verbalize the character and will of God. But because of the epistemological priority and creational specificity of general revelation we must be careful not to let the theologian lord it over the scientist on questions of the specific nature and law-structure of creation.

What infuriates the scientist is when a well-substantiated scientific view is rejected by theologians because they cannot square it with their concept of Biblical authority and inerrancy. Of course the theologian has the right to criticize questionable presuppositions that may have crept into the inductive

⁴⁶The four criteria given here are suggested in D. Wolfe, *Epistemology the Justification of Belief* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1982) 55. But similar criteria or epistemological methods can be found in such diversified works as F. Ferré, *Language, Logic and God* (New York: Harper, 1961) 162–163; J. B. Harrington, *Issues in Christian Thought* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968) 195–196; R. H. Bube, *The Human Quest* (Waco: Word, 1971) 65; Holmes, *All Truth*, chap. 7.

process of the scientist's theorizing. But there are some views that have been unpopular with theologians to which scientists have held tenaciously not so much because of a metaphysical bias but because such views have been so superior to any alternative explanation of the data that it would be truly unscientific (and unfair to general revelation) to reject them. Some of these views have eventually forced stubborn theologians to rethink their positions—for example, the Copernican view of the solar system, the great antiquity of man according to modern anthropology, and the big-bang view of the age of the universe.⁴⁷

Even the very controversial science of historical criticism has sometimes caused evangelicals to rethink what inerrancy means and does not mean. For example, it is more common these days for evangelicals to affirm that inerrancy does not mean that the gospels necessarily give us the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus.⁴⁸ But are we prepared for how other historical, critical views may or may not merit our further rethinking the meaning of inerrancy?⁴⁹ We may not be if we have not thought out the authority and relationship of general and special revelation. But this is the point of my thesis—that evangelicals often lack a mature and consistent method for relating theology and science at least partly because they have an incomplete doctrine of general revelation.

4. *The Christological progressiveness of general revelation.* It is a standard evangelical belief that special revelation was progressive throughout Biblical history but became fixed, at least in its objective form as Scripture, with the close of the NT canon. Nevertheless we need to recognize that general revelation continues to be progressive throughout the whole of human history. This of course is the basis for the increase in our scientific knowledge. As we investigate more deeply and fully the creation of God, he progressively unveils to us its true nature and structure.

But the progressiveness of general revelation is also the basis for our pro-

⁴⁷For recent treatments of the age of the universe see R. C. Newman and H. J. Eckelmann, Jr., *Genesis One and the Origin of the Earth* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977); D. A. Young, *Christianity and the Age of the Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982); R. Jastrow, *God and the Astronomers* (New York: Norton, 1978).

⁴⁸See e.g. P. Feinberg, "The Meaning of Inerrancy," in *Inerrancy* (ed. Geisler) 301; cf. G. R. Osborne, "The Evangelical and Redaction Criticism," *JETS* 22 (1979) 313.

⁴⁹For example, how shall we handle the chronology problem of 2 Kings 18? E. Thiele suggests that v 1 and v 9 are editorial miscalculations based on a wrong view of Pekah's twenty-year reign whereas G. Archer and others say that v 14 is the only problem and that it is a textual error, a scribal miscopy of "fourteen" in place of "twenty-four." Both views have supporting evidence, though Thiele's view has the advantage of being part of a rather comprehensive and coherent theory of OT chronology. But what if increased evidence were to heavily support Thiele's view as over against Archer's? How then should the authority of general and special revelation work in relation to our fallible theories about both the meaning of inerrancy and the formation of the canonical Scriptures? See Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 136–140; *A Chronology of the Hebrew Kings* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), chap. 7; Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody, 1978) 291–294; "Alleged Errors and Discrepancies," in *Inerrancy* (ed. Geisler) 69–72. See also R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 733–737.

gressive understanding of Scripture. Thus to progress in a knowledge of general revelation is to be able to better understand the significance and application of the teachings of Scripture. It is to be able to know more precisely what Scripture does and does not teach. For example, an understanding of general revelation through the sciences helps us to see that the psalmist does not teach that the sun revolves around the earth (Ps 104:19, 22) and that Paul does not teach a physiological psychology when he speaks of "bowels of mercies" (Phil 2:1; Col 3:12). It also helps us to appreciate the holistic view of man in Scripture as distinct from the Greek dualistic view. Furthermore the fact that the Church doctrine of the Trinity and the hypostatic union were formulated with the help of Greek philosophical concepts illustrates our dependence on general revelation for the systematizing of Biblical teachings.

It is important to recognize, however, that our fallible knowledge through science and philosophy can also distort our understanding of Scripture. This is why I stress a Christological progressiveness in general revelation and in our knowledge through it. Many evangelicals, and most prominently Carl Henry, have emphasized that Christ is the *Logos* of creation as well as of redemption and that he is the mediator of both general and special revelation.⁵⁰ If we accept this emphasis, then it is imperative that we seek to understand as fully as possible both Christ's view of the authority of Scripture and his view of the authority of God's truth through nature, which is so evident in Christ's parables and other sayings.⁵¹ We need to reflect in our own thinking that same natural integration of redemptive Biblical truth and the truth of creation and common human experience that contributed so much to the beauty and sublimity of Christ's teaching. We need to respect the authority of both general and special revelation and listen to God's voice in both revelations according to their respective natures and purposes, and to seek the unity of knowledge gained from both in Christ the *Logos*.

But this must be a corporate endeavor. We Protestants talk a lot about the witness of the Spirit in the believer's perception of Biblical truth, but we usually understand this in an individualistic sense. Evangelicals need to gain a little more of the Catholic emphasis on the corporate leading of the Spirit. The Christological progressiveness of general revelation takes place when believers as the body of Christ, being led by the Spirit of Christ, seek to grow in knowledge by studying reverently together and listening to each other as they encounter God's twofold revelation.

It is sometimes suggested that the evangelical debate over inerrancy is largely a battle between the systematic theologians and the exegetical, critical scholars. Maybe what we need is to have systematic theologians affirm evangelicals who engage in historical criticism out of respect for the authority of general revelation and have historical critics defend the concerns of systematic

⁵⁰Henry, *God*, 3, 164, 173, 195, 205-209.

⁵¹For Christ, nature was full of apt analogies of spiritual truths (Matthew 13; John 10:24). On occasion he even appealed to general revelation as an authoritative source for doctrine. E.g. in Matt 5:45 Christ appealed to truth from general revelation rather than from Scripture to show that God loves all persons (see also 6:26-30).

theologians out of respect for the authority of special revelation. This somewhat simplistic suggestion is at least an illustration of how we might apply Paul's principle about honoring one another and counting the other better than oneself so that we might put ourselves in the position of being led by the Spirit in our life of scholarship.

We may not agree over a precise definition of inerrancy. But we all need to draw nigh to and submit to the authority of Christ, who taught that all Scripture must be fulfilled but who also contains all the treasures of knowledge as the light of creation. Then together we may learn more perfectly the manifold fullness of truth in God's twofold revelation and better fulfill our twofold calling to disciple the nations and subdue the earth.