General Revelation & Guilt

from the book: Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs

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The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

PSALM 19:1

God’s world is not a shield hiding the Creator’s power and majesty. From the natural order it is evident that a mighty and majestic Creator is there. Paul says this in Romans 1:19-21, and in Acts 17:28 he calls a Greek poet as witness that humans are divinely created. Paul also affirms that the goodness of this Creator becomes evident from kindly providences (Acts 14:17; cf. Rom. 2:4), and that some at least of the demands of his holy law are known to every human conscience (Rom. 2:14-15), along with the uncomfortable certainty of eventual retributive judgment (Rom. 1:32). These evident certainties constitute the content of general revelation.

General Revelation
God’s Reality Is Known to All

Scripture assumes, and experience confirms, that human beings are naturally inclined to some form of religion, yet they fail to worship their Creator, whose general revelation of himself makes him universally known. Both theoretical atheism and moral monotheism are natural to no one: atheism is always a reaction against a pre-existing belief in God or gods, and moral monotheism has only ever appeared in the wake of special revelation.

Scripture explains this state of affairs by telling us that sinful egoism and aversion to our Creator’s claims drive humankind into idolatry, which means transferring worship and homage to some power or object other than God the Creator (Isa. 44:9-20; Rom. 1:21-23; Col. 3:5). In this way, apostate humans “suppress the truth” and have “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles” (Rom. 1:18, 23). They
smother and quench, as far as they can, the awareness that general revelation gives them of the transcendent Creator Judge, and attach their ineradicable sense of deity to unworthy objects. This in turn leads to drastic moral decline, with consequent misery, as a first manifestation of God’s wrath against human apostasy (Rom. 1:18, 24-32).

Nowadays in the West people idolize and, in effect, worship secular objects such as the firm, the family, football, and pleasant feelings of various kinds. But moral decline still results, just as it did when pagans worshipped literal idols in Bible times.

Human beings cannot entirely suppress their sense of God and his present and future judgment; God himself will not let them do that. Some sense of right and wrong, as well as of being accountable to a holy divine judge, always remains. In our fallen world all whose minds are not in some way impaired have a conscience that at some points directs them and from time to time condemns them, telling them that they ought to suffer for wrongs they have done (Rom. 2:14ff); and when conscience speaks in these terms it is in truth the voice of God.

Fallen humankind is in one sense ignorant of God, since what people like to believe, and do in fact believe, about the objects of their worship falsifies and distorts the revelation of God they cannot escape. In another sense, however, all human beings remain aware of God, guiltily, with uncomfortable inklings of coming judgment that they wish they did not have. Only the gospel of Christ can speak peace to this distressful aspect of the human condition.

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