

## General Revelation & Guilt

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

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### GENERAL REVELATION

*God's Reality Is Known to All*

*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 is so called because everyone receives it, just by virtue of being alive in God's world. This has been so from the start of human history. God actively discloses these aspects of himself to all human beings, so that in every case failure to thank and serve the Creator in righteousness is sin against knowledge, and denials of having received this knowledge should not be taken seriously. God's universal revelation of his power, praiseworthiness, and moral claim is the basis of Paul's indictment of the whole human race as sinful and guilty before God for failing to serve him as we should (Rom. 1:18-3:19).

God has now supplemented general revelation with the further revelation of himself as Savior of sinners through Jesus Christ. This revelation, given in history

and embodied in Scripture, and opening the door of salvation to the lost, is usually called special or specific revelation. It includes explicit verbal statement of all that general revelation tells us about God, and teaches us to recognize that revelation in the natural order, in the events of history, and in the makeup of human beings, so that we learn to see the entire world as, in Calvin's phrase, a theatre of the glory of God.

### GUILT

*The Effect of General Revelation*

*...what may be known about God  
is plain to them,  
because God has made it plain to them.*

ROMANS 1:19

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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