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## ABOUT THE CHRISTIAN ESSENTIALS SERIES

The volumes in this series have been adapted from a video seminary curriculum produced by Third Millennium Ministries. Because Third Millennium writes and produces this curriculum for a global, multilingual, evangelical audience, some aspects of this series may surprise readers. For example, we don't always follow Western pedagogical and andragogical traditions. We often organize and address subjects differently from more traditional texts. We also tend to prefer language that is easily translatable into languages that don't yet have robust theological vocabularies. As a result, we use fewer academic and theological terms than do traditional works on the same subjects.

Finally, while we don't promote ideas that contradict our doctrinal standards (the Westminster Confession of Faith, together with its Larger and Shorter Catechisms), we value and include the thoughts, insights, and wisdom the Holy Spirit has provided to those outside the Reformed tradition. We sincerely believe that Bible-believing Christians of every evangelical tradition are united by far, far more than they are divided by. For this reason, the interviews found in the sidebars throughout these volumes often come

from professors and pastors in traditions different from our own. We hope that readers will find in these interviews opportunities for valuing, admiring, and learning from our brothers and sisters in different traditions.

For more information on our video curriculum, please visit [thirdmill.org](http://thirdmill.org).

Ra McLaughlin  
General Editor

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## INTRODUCTION: A NOTE TO THE READER

“Do you believe in God?” The answers are usually straightforward. Some answer yes. Others say no. Still others reply, “I’m not sure.” But if we follow up by asking, “What do you believe *about* God?” we get all kinds of answers, even from faithful followers of Christ.

The Bible has so much to say about God that faithful Christians have followed many legitimate directions as they have summarized its teachings. This volume highlights the mainstream of evangelical systematic theology. For our purposes, the term *evangelical* means theology that acknowledges the full authority of Scripture. *Systematic theology* refers to longstanding, traditional ways of expressing the underlying logical system of biblical teachings.

The Bible itself expresses its teachings about God in narratives, laws, songs, prophecies, proverbs, and letters—to name just a few. So, if you are not familiar with the emphases of traditional systematic theology, you may be surprised by some of the things you read in this volume. They will not be entirely unfamiliar. These chapters reflect vocabulary and categories familiar to leaders in many branches of the church, but new students of theology may encounter unfamiliar terrain.

Think of this book as an opportunity to learn what the Holy Spirit has taught the body of Christ to emphasize over the centuries. It's a chance to gain wisdom in preparation for your own exploration of the Scriptures. A careful study of the doctrine of God, or "theology proper" as it has been called, will enable you to be "a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15 ESV).

Richard L. Pratt Jr.

## WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT GOD

Knowing God means different things to different people—everything from experiencing personal intimacy with God, to witnessing his mighty works, to understanding facts about him that the Holy Spirit has revealed. Most followers of Christ realize that it's valuable to have a personal relationship with God and to see him at work in the world, but unfortunately, many of us don't sense that it's equally important to learn as many facts about God as we can. It's no wonder. Studying what traditional systematic theologians often call "the doctrine of God," or "theology proper," is so complex that it requires a great deal of effort. However, as difficult as it may be, the more we learn about God, the more our personal relationship with him grows, and the more our awareness of his work in the world grows. In fact, understanding as much as we can about God strengthens every dimension of our Christian faith.



## DIVINE REVELATION

It would be difficult to imagine a more fundamental issue as we study the doctrine of God than divine revelation. What has God disclosed about himself? How has he done this? Our answers to these questions set the course for every facet of theology proper.

For our purposes, we can summarize the basic Christian idea of divine revelation in this way: divine revelation is God's self-disclosure, always given in human terms and most fully given in Christ.

### **DIVINE REVELATION IS ALWAYS GIVEN IN HUMAN TERMS**

We all know that we can't study God like we do so many other things in daily life. We can't measure his height and weight or put him in a test tube and examine him. On the contrary, God is transcendent, so far beyond us that he would be entirely hidden except for one fact: the Holy Spirit has revealed truths about God to us in human terms. Systematic theologians have often spoken of this as the "anthropomorphic" character of revelation. In other words, God has disclosed himself in human form, or in ways that human beings can understand. There are at least four kinds of anthropomorphic revelation in the Scriptures.

One of the most amazing things about the God of the Bible is *unique* to the God of the Bible: He maintains all his incommunicable attributes—infinite attributes such as sovereignty and eternity and infinity—even as he relates to creatures in history who are time-bound and finite. Not only that, the great I Am enters into time, space, and human history in relationship with creatures and relates to them on their level.

This doesn't mean he sacrifices any of his all-knowing, infinite, eternal nature, but he relates to his creatures right on the level where they are, much as we would do for a little child, and speaks to them on that level. If I walk into our kitchen and see flour all over the place and say, "Honey, did something happen with the flour?" it's not because I don't know something happened with the flour. Rather, I'm relating to my children right where they are. And that's what God does for us in his grace.

This is an amazing condescension of God—so much so that at times it seems as though he must be compromising some of his eternal, infinite characteristics, but that's never the case. God is simply relating to us on our level because he loves us that much. **K. Erik Thoennes**

### **Human Characteristics**

In the narrowest sense, the Scriptures often compare God's characteristics to human characteristics. Numerous biblical passages speak of God as having eyes, ears, nostrils, arms, hands, legs, and feet. The Scriptures as a whole make it clear that these kinds of anthropomorphisms are to be taken as metaphors—comparisons between God and human beings. God doesn't have physical eyes or hands like people do, but we know, nonetheless, that he sees and accomplishes things all the time. God also reasons, asks questions, consults others, feels emotions, and ponders. He takes action and relents, much like human beings do.

### **Social Structures**

In a slightly broader sense, the Scriptures also present God anthropomorphically in terms of human social structures. For

instance, the Bible frequently depicts God as the supreme King of creation. He sits on his throne in heaven, holds counsel, hears reports, makes announcements, sends messengers, and receives worship, similar to the ways human emperors did in biblical times. Along these same lines, Scripture portrays God as Israel's royal warrior, the lawgiver, the covenant maker, and the covenant keeper. He's the royal shepherd and the royal husband and father of his people. Once again, these revelations of God tell us that God is like human beings in certain ways. He rules in ways that are similar to the ways human kings ruled in the ancient world.

### **Visible Appearances**

Even more broadly, we can say that God's visible appearances in history are also anthropomorphic. The Bible reports a number of times when God appeared visibly in the world—what we often call “theophanies.” The most dramatic theophanies associated God with physical smoke and fire and with visions of his visible heavenly cloud of glory. Now, passages like Colossians 1:15 and 1 Timothy 1:17 tell us that God himself is invisible. So these visible appearances of God are also anthropomorphic in the sense that they don't present God as he knows himself. Rather, they present God in ways that we human beings can experience him with our limited capacities.

### **Abstract Qualities**

Finally, in the broadest sense, the Scriptures also reveal God in human terms even when they refer to his abstract qualities. The Bible often speaks of God as being just, holy, powerful, and the like, but biblical authors explained these abstract descriptions of God in human terms, in ways that we can understand. So it's fair to say that, in one way or another, all divine revelation is anthropomorphic. God has revealed truths about himself to the human race, but always in ways that accommodate our human limitations.

## GOD HAS REVEALED HIMSELF MOST FULLY IN CHRIST

Certainly, there's nothing more central to the Christian faith than Christ himself. He alone is our Savior and our Lord, and he is God's supreme revelation of himself to the human race. As Christ's followers, we acknowledge that God has revealed himself in many ways throughout biblical history, but passages like Colossians 1:15 tell us that Jesus is God's ultimate disclosure of himself in human terms. Jesus is the incarnate, eternal Son of God, the perfect human image and representative of God. For this reason, everything we believe about God must accord with God's supreme revelation in Jesus, in his teachings, as well as in the significance of his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and glorious return.

## TYPES OF DIVINE REVELATION

More often than not, traditional systematic theologians identify two categories or types of divine revelation that Jesus himself acknowledged in his teachings. The first type is often called *general* or *natural revelation*.

### General Revelation

*General revelation*, sometimes also called *natural revelation*, refers to the biblical teaching that God has revealed himself to human beings through their experiences of creation. In line with a number of Old Testament passages (Ps. 19, for example), Jesus himself frequently drew theological lessons from general revelation. He often referred to nature and common human activities, like farming and fishing, to teach about God. In fact, he repeatedly called on his disciples to look within and around themselves to discern what they could about God from their experiences of life.

We see something similar in passages like Acts 14:17 and 17:28. In these verses, the apostle Paul followed Christ's example and appealed to general revelation. Specifically, he pointed Gentiles

toward what they knew about God through reflection on nature and Greek poetry.

We can't come to know God unless he reveals himself to us, and he does so in a number of ways: through creation and the wonders we see as we look around, in our relationships with other people who speak to us the things that they have learned about God, and, most important, in his holy Word, where God has revealed himself to us. We receive revelation from God on many different levels. We look around and we see God revealed to us; we know he exists. And then he tells us about himself through his disciples and his holy Word. **Jeffery Moore**

Romans 1–2 offers the most extensive explanation of general revelation in the Scriptures. These chapters draw attention to both positive and negative outlooks on general revelation that we must keep in view as we explore theology proper. On the positive side, Romans 1–2 teaches that human beings know many things about God through our experiences of life in God's creation. As the apostle Paul wrote, "God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made" (Rom. 1:20). When we look closely at Romans 1–2, we see that "what has been made" is more than just the natural order. Paul also had in mind what is revealed about God through human culture, from human beings themselves, and even from our personal inner lives—our moral consciences, intuitions, premonitions, and the like.

General revelation is a really important theological concept because it's the one thing that cannot be denied. Christian or not, we're all living in the world God created. Now, whether or not a non-Christian acknowledges that is another story, but nonetheless we see a lot about who God is just by looking at creation. We see that we have a powerful God because he has created

planets and stars and the moon. We have a God who has an eye for beauty—beautiful things matter to him, as we see in animals, in trees, in a sunset. We see the majesty of God in a lion. We see his character everywhere we look.

Now, this is very important, especially from an evangelistic point of view, because we need a starting point, and general revelation gives us that starting point. We know certain things about the world we live in, and therefore we know certain things about the God who created that world, by simply looking around us. **Ric Rodeheaver**

Throughout the centuries, this positive perspective on general revelation has played a major role in the doctrine of God in the form of “natural theology.” Natural theology is the ongoing attempt to learn about God through careful reflection on general revelation. Followers of Christ have always recognized that we can learn a lot about God through natural theology. With rare exceptions, formal theological reflections on the doctrine of God in nearly every branch of the church have included natural theology.

In fact, leading Scholastic theologians during the medieval period constructed a formal, threefold strategy for pursuing natural theology. First, they spoke of “the way of causation” (*via causalitatis* in Latin). By this they meant that we can learn truths about God by observing the good things that God has created or “caused to be” in his creation. For instance, we can see that God created beauty and order in the world, so we may conclude that God himself must be beautiful and orderly.

Second, Scholastics spoke of “the way of negation” (*via negationis*). By this they meant that we can infer truths about God by contrasting him with the limitations and imperfections of creation. For instance, creation is limited by time, but God is eternal. Creation is limited by space, but God is infinite.

Third, medieval Scholastics also spoke of “the way of eminence” (*via eminentiae*). By this they meant that we can infer truths about God from general revelation by noting how God is always

greater than the good things he has created. For example, the power of nature leads us to believe in the supreme power of God. Human intellectual abilities point us toward the incomparable wisdom of God.

For the most part, evangelicals today don't follow such rigorous methods, but natural theology continues to play a major role in theology proper. God designed every dimension of our experience of creation to reveal things about himself (Pss. 19:1–4; 97:6; Acts 14:17; 17:29; Rom. 1:19–20; 2:14–15). So, as his faithful people, we should be eager to search out everything we can learn about God through general revelation.

These positive outlooks on general revelation and natural theology are important to any study of theology proper, but we must also take into account that Romans 1–2 presents some crucial negative outlooks on the ways fallen human beings respond to general revelation. For example, Paul wrote, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness” (Rom. 1:18).

In this verse, Paul explained that general revelation reveals “the wrath of God” rather than his mercy and salvation. This is true because, more often than not, sinful people “suppress the truth” of general revelation “by their wickedness.” In fact, according to Romans 1:25, sinners have “exchanged the truth of God for a lie.”

Jesus himself indicated time and again that sinful human beings frequently fail to learn what they should about God from their experiences of life. As Jesus and Paul both conveyed, sinful people have a propensity to lie to themselves and to others about what God has revealed through his creation.

God's creation teaches us a number of things. Most basically, of course, it teaches us that he is the sovereign Creator. God is the one who brings all things into being out of nothing; therefore, creation teaches us also about his power.

According to Romans 1, creation also teaches us about God's righteousness. Romans 1 tells us that all human beings know that there is a God and that he is to be worshiped. It tells us that we all have a sense of the righteousness and holiness of God, even though as sinful human beings, we suppress that knowledge and attempt to ignore it.

Creation teaches us that God is Creator, God is powerful, and God is righteous. We, as sinful human beings, attempt to deny and suppress those things. **Carl R. Trueman**

These perspectives raise a word of caution about relying too heavily on natural theology. Natural *revelation* is always true because it comes from God, but natural *theology* is fallible because sin has corrupted our ability to learn about God from our experiences of his creation. Despite the best efforts of sincere Christian theologians, natural theology has frequently misconstrued general revelation and introduced falsehoods into our concept of God.

For instance, during the patristic and medieval periods, Hellenistic mysticism led many to deny that human beings can rationally comprehend anything about God himself. In the eighteenth century, misunderstandings of the order of nature led a number of theologians to endorse Enlightenment deism—the belief that God is uninvolved in the affairs of the world. In recent centuries, scientific studies in biology have led many people to deny the biblical portrait of God as the Creator. At every turn, the corruption of the human heart has led theologians to miss the truth about God disclosed in general revelation.

These negative outlooks on natural theology lead to a fundamental question: If sin corrupts our awareness of general revelation, how can we know the truth about God? The answer, of course, is that we need special revelation, especially Scripture, to guide our interpretations of general revelation.

I would want to be very careful about what we can learn about God through the category of natural theology. Passages like Romans 1:20, which talk about God's majesty and power revealed in creation, give us something to hang our hats on. But we are in desperate need of special revelation to check human reasoning, since the created realm yields some things that can be read and understood problematically. Special revelation, which speaks of the reality of the Lord Jesus Christ, accurately fills in who God is. We desperately need to consult his Word to keep our reasoning in line. **Bruce L. Fields**

### Special Revelation

Broadly speaking, *special revelation* is God's self-disclosure through supernatural means. The Holy Spirit has given revelation through dreams, visions, auditions, and through his great acts of salvation and judgment. God has also made himself known through inspired human representatives—his prophets and apostles who were inspired by the Holy Spirit. Of course, as we said earlier, God's greatest special revelation was in Christ.

The significance of special revelation for the doctrine of God hardly can be overstated. It is so essential to God's purposes that even before sin came into the world, God guided Adam and Eve through special verbal revelation, and, of course, special revelation has been critical after sin as well. It not only guides our attempts to understand general revelation, it also discloses the way of eternal salvation.

As wonderful as it is that God has granted supernatural revelation, both before and after sin came into the world, what we commonly call "special revelation from God" took place thousands of years ago. So, how do we learn about God through special revelation today?

Once again, we must turn to what Jesus, God's supreme revelation, taught. In brief, Christ taught his followers to devote themselves to God's special revelation in Scripture. Passages like Mark 12:28–34 clearly convey that Jesus, like other Palestinian rabbis in his day, affirmed the Old Testament as God's special written revelation.

The New Testament is also God's inspired revelation. In places

like John 16:12–13 and Ephesians 2:20, we learn that after Jesus’s ascension into heaven, he sent the Holy Spirit to equip his first-century apostles and prophets to reveal God to his church. The New Testament is our representative collection of these first-century apostolic and prophetic special revelations.

Divine revelation is the source of everything we know about God. Whether we’re speaking of general or special revelation, God’s self-disclosures are completely true and trustworthy. Still, evangelical Christians rightly insist that special revelation must always guide us as we seek to understand general revelation.

## KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

divine revelation

general revelation

natural theology

special revelation

*via causalitatis*

*via eminentiae*

*via negationis*

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is divine revelation?
2. In what four ways has God revealed himself in human terms (anthropomorphic revelation)?
3. What is general revelation?
4. How does God use general revelation to reveal himself to us?
5. What is special revelation?
6. How does God use special revelation to reveal himself to us?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What attributes of God shown in the person of Jesus Christ most amaze you about your Creator?

2. How does the person of Jesus Christ prevent you from fashioning God into your image?
3. What kinds of things have you learned about the world around you from what God has revealed in nature apart from Scripture?
4. Has God's revelation through creation made a difference in your daily life?
5. How did God use his special revelation to bring you to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?
6. How should the importance of special revelation impact the way you minister to those around you?
7. How might you use general revelation to prove God's existence?

### FOR FURTHER STUDY

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### CHAPTER QUIZ

<https://thirdmill.org/quiz?GOD1>