

Theology for Life
Faith Presbyterian Church
Lesson 1: Knowing God and General Revelation

What are common critiques of studying theology?

Centrality of Belief

It is not so much that evangelicals cease to believe anything theological, it is rather that belief is no longer central to their identity and program!

Richard Lints, Fabric of Theology

To many modern Christians, a church that emphasizes theology can seem irrelevant or ineffective. Why don't we focus on other important aspects of Christianity?

- Service: The church that does good in the world, cares for each other, and lives the right way.
- Experience: The church that has powerful experiences of God where we feel his presence and engages our emotions.
- Practical Help: The church that offers useful guidance for the difficult situations of life.

These are **all important aspects** of a **healthy church**, but we are Christians because of what we believe. It is our faith in Christ that defines us. Galatians 3:1–9

[1] O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. [2] Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? [3] Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? [7] Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. (see also Exodus 12:26–27, Deuteronomy 6:4–9, 2 Thessalonians 2:15)

Our identity as a church is most essentially what we believe, and our beliefs drive what we do. Our beliefs will be crucial to evaluating our experiences and determining what is godly guidance.

The Goal of Theology

We study theology because our goal as creatures is to know God. Theology is a crucial component of knowing God.

"Knowing God is more than knowing about Him; it is a matter of dealing with Him as He opens up to you and being dealt with by Him as He takes knowledge of you. Knowing about Him is a necessary precondition of trusting in Him, but the width of our knowledge about Him is no gauge of our knowledge of Him...What were we made for? To know God. What aim should we have in life? To know God. What is the eternal life that Jesus gives? To know God. What is the best thing in life? To know God. What in humans gives God most pleasure? Knowledge of himself." J.I. Packer

But, can we know him? This is the major contention by those who remain secular: the belief that you cannot know God or, at least, cannot know him for certain.

God the Revealer

At the core of Christianity is the firm belief that God makes himself known.

John 1:18 "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known."

“...the religion of the Bible presents itself as distinctively a revealed religion. Or rather, to speak more exactly, it announces itself as the revealed religion, as the only revealed religion; and sets itself as such over against all other religions, which are represented as all products, in a sense in which it is not, of the art and device of man.” B.B. Warfield

*Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush aflame with God;
But only those who see take off their shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.*

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

What is Elizabeth Barrett Browning's point?

- What difference does it make that God is not only knowable but that he actively reveals himself to us?
- What would you say to someone who claims that God cannot be known?

General Revelation: The Book of Nature

Belgic Confession:

Q2. By what means God is made known unto us

We know him by two means; first, by the creation, preservation and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to contemplate the invisible things of God... Secondly, he makes himself more clearly fully known to us by his holy and divine Word, that is to say, as far as is necessary for us to know in this life, to his glory and our salvation.

These are often called the two books of God's revelation, **Nature** and the **Bible**: Which one is infallible? Which one is authoritative?

Psalms 19:1-2

- 1. The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.*
- 2. Day to day pours out speech,
and night to night reveals knowledge.*

God is revealed not just in birds and trees. He is most clearly revealed in humanity Genesis 1:26, “Let us make man in our image” (see also, Gen. 9:6)

Also, because of this, we have a knowledge of God implanted in us.

There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty.
Calvin, *Institutes* I.III.1

What aspects of human behavior demonstrate that all people have an awareness of God?

Westminster Confession of Faith 1-1a

Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable;

How would an agnostic or an atheist respond to the claim that God has made himself clearly known?

Romans 1:18-20 18. *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. 19. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. [20] For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.*

Insufficiency of General Revelation

WCF 1-1b

...yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation

Note the ways in which the Book of Nature is **sufficient** and **insufficient**. Romans 1 tells us that it is sufficient to condemn. WCF explains that Nature is not sufficient for salvation.

The second half of Romans 1 explains the difference:

Romans 1:21-23

[21] For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. [22] Claiming to be wise, they became fools, [23] and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

We should worship God because of his creation. Yet, sin has so affected our minds (noetic effects of the Fall) and our wills that we suppress this clear knowledge and misuse it, worshipping idols.

At this point, **nature** doesn't offer us any help; it **only condemns**. Nature does not communicate God's plan of salvation from condemnation; it offers nothing about Jesus or God's covenant promises of redemption. We need an in-breaking act of God. That act is only revealed in scripture.

WCF 1-1c

Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing: which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.

Revealing and Knowing

God's Part: Revealing Himself (making himself known in Nature and Scripture)

Our Part: Knowing God (Belief)

Connecting the Dots: Where Theology meets Life

Summary: Christianity teaches that God is a God who makes himself known and calls us to know him. One way God reveals himself is through creation, the world around us and ourselves. General Revelation tells us God exists but does not offer us hope of salvation.

- What about people who have never heard the gospel? Can God condemn someone who has never heard of Jesus or has no access to a Bible?
- What has sin done to our ability to understand General Revelation?
- How can General Revelation be a starting point to talk to others about Christianity? How is it limited?

Additional Study for Next Time

Read Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 1

- Free online. Print version available upon request
- Study guides to read along
 - A.A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (1869), free at Monergism.com
 - Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith* (2014)