

“Canst Thou by Searching Find Out God?”: On General Revelation and Adventist Theology

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Without God’s revelation in time and space, humanity would be utterly lost as to who He is, what His will is, or even if He exists. Morality would be completely alien to us and life would probably resume itself to the daily routine of looking after one’s own needs. Thankfully, God is a relational Being and from the moment He created mankind He began imparting knowledge about Himself, His actions and His thoughts. Through direct contact (Gen. 3:8; Exod. 33:11; Num. 12:8), visions (Num. 12:6), dreams (Gen. 28:12; Matt. 1:20), theophanies (Gen. 18:1-2, 13-14), angels (Num. 22:31-35), Urim and the Tummim (Num. 27:21), nature (Psa. 19:1-4), history (Dan. 2:21; 4:17), human conscience (Isa. 30:21; Rom. 2:14-16) and ultimately Jesus Christ (John 1:18), God communicates bits of truth and knowledge to us (Heb. 1:1-2). This is a knowledge that originates itself from a divine revelation outside of us, beyond our power to acquire it through simple rational effort.

While God reveals himself in many and different ways, Christians tend to classify God’s means of revelation into two categories: special and general/natural revelation. On special revelation, Millard Erickson’s definition is particularly enlightening. To him, it is “God’s manifestation of Himself to particular persons at definite times and places, enabling those persons to enter into a redemptive relationship with him.”¹ This revelation

¹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983), 175. On a similar note, Peter M. van Bemmelen comments that “God’s explicit

ARAUJO: GENERAL REVELATION AND ADVENTIST THEOLOGY

comes to us today through the Bible. It is the infallible revelation of God, the supreme rule of truth and faith, given to men by God through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It is often referred to as God's special revelation because it is His special disclosure to a particular set of people, and intended in the end for the whole of the human race. Plus, it is there where we find God's greatest revelation—Jesus Christ.²

God's other means of revelation is often referred to by Christians as "general revelation."³ It is God's general manifestation to all of humankind in nature, history and conscience.⁴ It comes to us through sense-experiences of the everyday world and it is accessible to all human beings, being universal in scope.⁵ As Alister McGrath argues, "there is an intrinsic capacity within the created order to disclose God. Here, nature-as-creation is understood to have an ontologically grounded capacity to reflect God as its maker and originator."⁶

Although both special and general are called God's "revelation," the

intention is that through this revelation human beings may come to know Him and enter into a saving relationship, which will result in eternal fellowship with Him." "Revelation and Inspiration," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2001), 23.

² On special revelation, see Fernando Canale "Revelation and Inspiration," in *Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach*, ed. George W. Reid (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2005), 47-74; Peter M. van Bemmelen, "Revelation and Inspiration," 22-57; and Raoul Dederen, "The Revelation-Inspiration Phenomenon According to the Bible Writers," in *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration*, eds. Frank Holbrook and Leo Van Dolson (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 1992), 9-30.

³ Millard Erickson explains the terminology: "It is general in two senses: its universal availability (it is accessible to all persons at all times) and the content of the message (it is less particularized and detailed than special revelation)," 154.

⁴ Fernando Canale simply defines it as "the revelatory activity of God by means other than Scripture." *The Cognitive Principle of Christian Theology* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Lithotech, 2005), 28.

⁵ Norman Gulley highlights that "general revelation in nature, history, and human conscience provides a universal avenue for God's outreach to all humans." He further comments that "God's revelation in nature is external to humans, whereas His revelation within human history and within human existence is internal to humans." See Norman R. Gulley, *Systematic Theology: Prolegomena* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2003), 189, 191.

⁶ Alister McGrath, *A Scientific Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001-2003), 1:297.

Bible surpasses God's manifestation in nature by far. When it comes to the knowledge of God, it is more specific, content-heavy and instructive than general revelation; it is "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2Tim 3:16-17). It also unfolds all of the plan of salvation, showing to sinners how to obtain forgiveness for their sins and the way to heaven.

So, "If we have God's special revelation—the Bible—why is there the need for a general revelation," some may ask? Or do we even need it? What is its purpose? To answer these questions, we need first to understand what God's general revelation actually reveals. Is general revelation a biblical concept? Is it only a revelation of God himself? Or does God reveal other things through this channel of revelation?

Is General Revelation Biblical?

Because general revelation (sometimes equated with natural theology) came into question by theologians such as Karl Barth,⁷ Alvin Platinga,⁸ and

⁷ Karl Barth was the most outspoken opponent of natural theology in modern times. He was skeptical of the view that man could be able to know God apart from the revelation in Christ. To him, if this were possible, it would mean that man could know the existence and the being of God without knowing anything of His grace and mercy. If man could achieve some knowledge of God outside of his revelation (which he restricted to Jesus Christ), man would have contributed at least in some small measure to his salvation. For Barth, God's only revelation took place in Jesus Christ. "For this very reason all the ways of natural theology are automatically and radically cut off for the proclamation of faith and the Church and with it for a theology of the Word of God [...]. Christian theology has no use at all for the offer of natural theology, however it may be expressed," *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of God*, Vol. 2/Part 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 168. Cf. Idem, "No! Answer to Emil Brunner," in Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, *Natural Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 65-128. Millard Erickson evaluates Karl Barth's rejection correctly by showing that "his interpretations followed necessarily from his presuppositions, some of which are dubious: (1) That God's revelation is exclusively in Jesus Christ. (2) That genuine revelation is always responded to positively, rather than being ignored or rejected. (3) That knowledge of God is always redemptive or salvific in nature." Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 166.

⁸ Platinga sees natural theology's role as limited. Alvin Platinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," in *Philosophical Knowledge* (Washington, DC: American Catholic Philosophical Association, 1980), 49-62; idem, "The Prospects for Natural Theology," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991), 287-315; idem, "Natural Theology," in *A Companion to Metaphysics*, ed. Jaegwon Kim and Ernest Sosa (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009),

ARAUJO: GENERAL REVELATION AND ADVENTIST THEOLOGY

Fernando Canale,⁹ we think it necessary to review some of the biblical texts that discuss this issue in order to better understand the subject and extract the correct principles for our study. Another reason for this step is due to the scarcity of material available in Adventist literature on this topic.¹⁰

But before we do that, it is important that we discuss the methodology and presuppositions of our study. Much of the discussions surrounding natural theology or natural revelation can become clouded due to unspoken presuppositions. Considering the diversity of theologies and ideologies in our postmodern society, this becomes particularly pressing when the subject is revelation: “A clear explanation of theological methodology is necessary to justify the way in which we identify and understand the basic elements of Christian theology in the pluralistic atmosphere of twenty-first century Christianity.”¹¹ Unfortunately, most theologians nowadays do theology without giving much thought to their tradition’s methodologies and presuppositions.¹² By doing thus, they simply extend their tradition’s

438-441.

⁹ While Canale does acknowledge the authenticity of general revelation, he questions the claims of natural theology. To him, the two are not the same. While one is God’s revelation in nature, the other is by nature a product of man’s rational and philosophical effort to acquire knowledge about God. As he argues, it is a difference of agency, and these two should not be confounded. Cf. Canale, *The Cognitive Principle of Christian Theology*, 33-34.

¹⁰ A quick review of Adventist literature will soon lead to the conclusion that, when it comes to the subject of revelation, Adventist thinking seems to converge only on the subject of special revelation. Much of the literature on the subject of revelation/inspiration dedicates at most a paragraph to general revelation while the rest of the discussion is spent on special revelation. Although the subject of special revelation is by no means important, it is curious to see that, while very interested in subjects related to nature and the human self and history, such as creationism (biology, biochemistry, paleontology, geology), health (medicine, nursing, nutrition, public health, natural treatments, psychology) and the cosmic conflict (world history, church history, philosophy and world politics), Adventist thinkers tend to leap over the issue we are currently treating. Some exceptions can be found: Gulley, *Prolegomena*, 189-228; Canale, *The Cognitive Principle of Christian Theology*, 28-40; and van Bemmelen, “Revelation and Inspiration,” 26-29.

¹¹ Fernando Canale, *Basic Elements of Christian Theology* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Lithotech, 2005), 14.

¹² “For the most part, theologians uncritically follow the theological sources of the tradition to which they belong. This decision necessarily predetermines their understanding of God and their assumptions of how He reveals Himself.” (Ibid.). On the important role played by presuppositions in theology, see Frank M. Hasel “Presuppositions in the

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

way of doing theology and inhibit any possibility for new ideas or concepts. In this study, we take as presuppositions that:

1. Although God should not be confounded with time and space, He exists and acts within these two elements of reality. Therefore, He is not timeless nor spaceless.¹³ His ontology includes time as well as space, yet without making Him somehow limited to or by these two elements
2. All of God's actions (including His revelations) take place within a literal and factual time/space framework.
3. Once space-time becomes a setting for God's actions, it also becomes a witness to His existence and action.
4. Created as a living soul within time and space, man was endowed with the image of God, having, among other aspects, cognitive capabilities to think rationally and understand his

Interpretation of Scripture” in *Understanding Scriptures: An Adventist Approach*, ed. George W. Reid (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2005), 27-46; Marcos Blanco, “The Role of Presuppositions in Biblical Theology: A Methodological Approach,” in *The End from the Beginning: Festschrift Honoring Merling Alomía*, eds. Benjamín Rojas et. al (Lima, Peru: Universidad Peruana Unión, 2015), 435-452.

¹³ Fernando L. Canale is one of the main theologians in Adventist academic circles to push for a temporal God. Cf. Fernando L. Canale, *Toward a Criticism of Theological Reason: Time and Timelessness as Primordial Presuppositions* (Doctoral thesis, Andrews University, 1983). However, when it comes to God's “spaciality,” nothing is mentioned. Although Canale defines timelessness as the lack of space and time, due to his emphasis on time one could almost conclude that Canale's God is temporal yet spaceless.

Nonetheless, the Bible is full of examples of God's presence within space, or as Durham calls them, “teophanic sites.” Cf. John I. Durham, “Exodus,” *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas, TX: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 3:31. For instance, when He appeared to Moses in a burning bush, the surrounding area became sacred due to God's presence (Exod 3:1-5). When God was about to proclaim His law to Israel, he ordered Moses to “set bounds around the mountain and consecrate it,” for God himself would come down on the mountain (Exod 19:10-23). After its dedication, both the desert tabernacle and Salomon's temple were considered holy places due to God's presence (Exod 40:34-35; 1Kg 8:10-11). These few examples should be enough to show that geographical space acquired a different status due to God's ontological presence at these sites. Furthermore, in Hebrews and Revelation, the heavenly sanctuary is depicted as a physical structure. Logically, the God who walks among the lampstands (Rev 1:13) must be spacial also. In addition, it should be mentioned that in our current post-Einsteinian society, it is almost impossible to think of time without including the concept of space.

surroundings.

5. Because of his cosmic fall, man's whole being (physical, social, spiritual and cognitive capacities) became affected by sin, jeopardizing his capacities to apprehend God's actions and revelation.

6. Consequently, knowledge about God can only be acquired by man through faith and the help of the Holy Spirit.

With this in mind, we will continue our study.

On Nature

“O LORD, our Lord, How majestic *is* Your name in all the earth, You have set your glory in the heavens!” (Psa. 8:1, NIV). In many of the “nature psalms” (see Psa. 19, 29, 104, etc.), the biblical writers praised God for his glory¹⁴ manifested in nature. The Redeemer-King of Israel is the Creator, and His name is glorified “by virtue of his creative activities.”¹⁵ God's name¹⁶ is qualified as “majestic” (*'addîr*, “mighty”)—a royal attribute denoting his victories, judgment, law and rule over creation.¹⁷ As he is taken by awe before the vastness of the universe, the psalmist praises the Creator, for he recognizes the glorious manifestation and the fullness of God's glory in nature (Isa. 6:3). Nature itself is not the object of praise, but a witness to the Creator's majesty.

Nature's inherent witness of the glory of God is sometimes personified,

¹⁴ In the Old Testament, when *hōdh* is used in reference to God, it is understood as a manifestation of His lordship in creation and history. It implies majesty, honor, greatness, power and beauty. God's “creating and maintaining the universe are part of his ‘honor and majesty’ (Psa 104:1),” being an attribute of his universal dominion, of his being king and judge. Kiel G. Warmuth, “Hōdh,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, eds. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1988), 3:352-353.

¹⁵ Willem A. VanGemeren, “Psalms,” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, org. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 5:110.

¹⁶ R. Tournay reminds us that “pour les Sémites, le ‘nom’ évoque le mystère de la personnalité; il est le substitut de la personne, du moi incommunicable. En Israël, le nom divin joue le rôle théologique que les autres religions donnent à l'image divine; c'est comme un double de l'essence divine.” “Le Psaume 8 et la Doctrine Biblique du Nom,” *Revue Biblique* 78, n. 1 (1971), 19.

¹⁷ VanGemeren, 110.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

as in Psalm 19:2-4: “Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night reveals knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard. Their line has gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.” Although the psalmist declares that “there is no speech” (v. 3), nature’s activity is clearly “vocal and linguistic.”¹⁸ This “language of their own”¹⁹ is a genre of communication often characterized by linguists as non-verbal language.²⁰ Despite not being “vocal” or “written,” information is still being imparted.²¹ That this is a communicative activity can also be concluded from the use of expressions such as “declare,” “show,” “utter speech,” and most interestingly “reveal *knowledge*.” This last one implies information—a crucial aspect of any communication between two participants. In this pictorial description offered by the psalmist, knowledge is said to be communicated from “night unto night.” Poetically and without mentioning, the psalmist (and the reader) is treated as an eavesdropper, absorbing the content of that communication.

It is a speech that doesn’t seem to stop (v. 2) nor is interrupted by man’s distractive activities.²² VanGemeran beautifully describes the universality of nature’s speech: “Natural revelation is without words and is universal, being unrestricted by the division of languages. It transcends human communication without the use of speech, words, and sounds. To those who are inclined to hear, revelation comes with no regard for linguistic or geographical barriers, even to the ends of the world.”²³ It is

¹⁸ Rolf P. Knierim, *The Task of the Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 323.

¹⁹ Francis D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1977), 3:676.

²⁰ Cf. Albert Mehrabian, *Nonverbal Communication* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017); Mark L. Knapp, Judith A. Hall and Terrence G. Horgan, *Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction* (Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2014).

²¹ When discussing these verses, Canale creates an interesting distinction between the two modes of revelation: “In special revelation the cognitive content is given through human words, while in general revelation the cognitive content is given through the mode of divine works or historical events accessible to all. In special revelation God talks by way of human words; in general revelation the same God speaks by way of physical and historical facts.” Fernando Canale, “Doctrine of God,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, 107.

²² VanGemeran, 179.

²³ *Ibid.*, 180.

ARAUJO: GENERAL REVELATION AND ADVENTIST THEOLOGY

through this medium of communication that God communicates to those who do not have access to His special revelation.²⁴

Nature doesn't only "declare the glory of God," but speaks of "His handiwork" (v. 1b). This is a reference to God's original work of creation, the establishment of "the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them" (Gen. 2:1), as well as His ongoing work as Sustainer.²⁵ As such, God's handiwork should not be confused with God himself. The Creator of whom nature testifies is not a pantheistic divinity. He is above nature and works through nature.²⁶ "It is to this biblical God that universal revelation points to rather than to an immanent deity within the confines of nature and history."²⁷

Although some may question the concreteness or factuality of nature's revelation, Paul is coherent in his argument when he points out that, because of natural revelation, man is "inexcusable" (Rom. 2:1). Ellen White reinforces this concept when she states that "upon all created things is seen the impress of the Deity. Nature testifies of God. The susceptible

²⁴ Ellen G. White even refers to nature as God's voice speaking to humanity: "Among the heathen are those who worship God ignorantly, those to whom the light is never brought by human instrumentality, yet they will not perish. Though ignorant of the written law of God, they have heard *His voice speaking to them in nature*, and have done the things that the law required. Their works are evidence that the Holy Spirit has touched their hearts, and they are recognized as the children of God." *The Desire of Ages* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1999), 638, emphasis added. Cf. Nichol, 3:675.

Even after the fall, despite all that evil has done to this world, "much that is beautiful remains. Nature testifies that One infinite in power, great in goodness, mercy, and love, created the earth, and filled it with life and gladness. Even in their blighted state, all things reveal the handiwork of the great Master Artist. Wherever we turn, we may hear *the voice of God*, and see evidences of His goodness." Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2003), 411, emphasis added.

²⁵ Throughout the Bible we can find references to his sustaining work (Psa. 104; Heb. 1:3; Col. 1:17). The Creator did not limit himself to just bringing into existence the whole of the cosmos. The fact is that "even the physical reality of the world cannot exist without God's ceaseless work of preservation, which is continuously brought about by God's power." Canale, "Doctrine of God," 116-117.

²⁶ Ellen White affirms that "nature is the servant of her Creator. God does not annul His laws or work contrary to them, but He is continually using them as His instruments. Nature testifies of an intelligence, a presence, an active energy, that works in and through her laws. There is in nature the continual working of the Father and the Son." *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2002), 114.

²⁷ Gulley, 210.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

mind, brought in contact with the miracle and mystery of the universe, *cannot but recognize* the working of infinite power.”²⁸

This same point is hammered down when Paul appealed to the people of Lystra. God “did not leave Himself without witness.” Although the Lystrans did not have access or knowledge of God’s special revelation, the Creator employed nature as a witness of His goodness,²⁹ giving them “rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling [their] hearts with food and gladness” (Acts 14:17). By this, Paul understood that God’s constant providence through nature and history serves as a witness of God’s continuing action, care, love and goodness. Jesus himself made this point by using nature’s continuum as a source of revelation: “Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap, which have neither storehouse nor barn; and God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds?” (Luke 12:24). By calling his disciple’s attention to the ravens, Christ was inviting them to examine³⁰ nature in order to extract knowledge about the goodness of God.³¹

²⁸ Ellen G. White, *Education* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 202), 99; emphasis added.

²⁹ Christian Dionne highlights a nuance in the text that points to God as the agent doing the witnessing through nature: “c’est bien Dieu qui est le premier agent actif qui dispense ses bienfaits envers les nations, mais en agissant comme il le fait, il ‘se rend témoignage’ à lui-même.” Different from other instances, when men are usually the ones called to witness for God, this “Dieu-témoin” figure, he adds, “est unique dans les Actes.” Christian Dionne, “La Figure Narrative de Dieu Dans le Discours À Lystre (Ac 14, 15-17),” *Science et Esprit* 57, n. 2, (2005), 116.

³⁰ The Greek expression *katanoō* means “to apprehend,” “to study,” “to examine,” “to consider reflectively.” Far from a passing contemplation, this expression describes an “attentive scrutiny of an object,” “the observation or consideration of a fact or process, whether natural or miraculous.” In this sense, scientific research is clearly being indicated as a source of knowledge not only of the cosmos, but of its Creator as well. Cf. Johannes Behm and Ernst Würthwein, “κατανοέω,” org. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 4:973-975.

³¹ The idea of studying nature in order to understand God’s character and actions is not a new one. From its beginnings, the concept of universal laws of nature was imbedded in a worldview that portrayed God as constantly sustaining and keeping the universe in order. Through the study of these laws, it was believed that man would be able to discern God’s mind as well as His actions in the cosmos. For this reason, science was understood not simply as a secular activity, but as a “calling” that enabled the researcher to acquire knowledge about God. Cf. Lydia Jaeger, “Laws of Nature,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Science and Religion*, eds., J. B. Stump and Alan G. Padgett (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell,

ARAUJO: GENERAL REVELATION AND ADVENTIST THEOLOGY

It is not only God's goodness that can be identified in natural phenomena. In Romans 1:18-23 Paul declares:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful.

Here, Paul mentions God's wrath,³² His "invisible attributes," His "eternal power" and Godhead³³ as disclosures of the Creator in nature. For this, Paul concludes, "they are without excuse." What is most astonishing about Paul's declaration is that he condemns mankind for *knowing* God and yet not acting accordingly.

This raises an interesting question: How could these people know God if they did not have access to Scripture? A few attempts to answer this question can be made from the text. First, Paul emphasizes the guiltiness of unrighteous men by highlighting the clarity of nature's revelation—"His invisible attributes are *clearly* seen." This means that, even affected by sin, man is still able to detect God's existence and nature through His created

2012), 453-463; Walter Ott, *Causation and the Laws of Nature in Early Modern Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Ellen White seems to support this view. What science normally sees as physical laws, she refers to as "the hand of God": "It is not because of inherent power that year by year the earth produces her bounties and continues her motion around the sun. The hand of God guides the planets and keeps them in position in their orderly march through the heavens." *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 115.

³² The *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* argues that the revelation of the wrath of God is increasingly manifested until it culminates with "the final revelation of God's wrath on that day when the Spirit of God is at last withdrawn." Therefore, God doesn't manifest His wrath on just one single eschatological occasion, but through a continuous natural revelation in history, culminating with His final manifestation, when "heaven, and sin and sinners are forever destroyed" (Nichol, 6:477).

³³ This is the only occurrence of *theiotēs* in the New Testament ("divine nature," "divinity," "Godhood"). "The apostle here speaks of the divine essence and the manifestation of the divine attributes, not of the Trinity as such." *Ibid.*, 6:478.

works.³⁴

Secondly, when declaring that God’s attributes are “*understood* by the things that are made,” Paul shows that natural revelation isn’t limited to perception, but requires reflection and the “drawing of a conclusion about the Creator.”³⁵ Therefore, interpretation is a key element in this scenario, and if men are inexcusable, the flaw is on their part. Therefore, although not possessors of all knowledge, all men have enough information to decide on how they should relate to their Creator. And because they chose to live a life of unrighteousness, they are condemned.

The *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* points out that, consequently, “God’s wrath against sin is exercised in the withdrawal of His presence and life-giving power from those who choose to remain in sin and thus share in its inevitable consequences. This is illustrated by the terrible experience of the Jews after their rejection of Christ. Since they had become confirmed in their stubborn impenitence and had refused the last offers of mercy, ‘God withdrew His protection from them and removed His restraining power from Satan and his angels, and the nation was left to the control of the leader she had chosen.’”³⁶ This leads us to our next instrument of natural revelation: History.

On History

Just as God left His mark on nature as Creator, He leaves His mark in human history as the God of providence.³⁷ For this reason, history is sometimes called “His-story.”³⁸ The biblical worldview of history and time

³⁴ “Even though blighted by sin, the ‘things that are made’ testify that One of infinite power created this earth. [...] Thus it is possible for even the heathen to recognize and acknowledge the power of the Creator.” Ibid.

³⁵ Everett F. Harrison, “Romans,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Romans through Galatians*, org. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 10:23.

³⁶ Nichol, 6:477. The inner citation is from Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2008), 28.

³⁷ Gulley, 195. “By looking at history it is possible to see, despite all the tragedies, that there is providence at work in it, that there is a God who provides.” Markus Sluys, “Revelation,” in Anne L. C. Runehov and Lluís Oviedo, eds., *Encyclopedia of Sciences and Religion* (New York, NY: Springer Reference, 2013), 2044.

³⁸ Norman L. Geisler, “Revelation, General,” *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 671.

ARAUJO: GENERAL REVELATION AND ADVENTIST THEOLOGY

is not static. “Time is meaningfully forward-moving.”³⁹ Its linear perspective sets God as the main actor in history, conducting its twists and turns toward an ultimate goal—not an end of history and time, but the fulfillment of an eternal plan (Matt. 25:34; 1 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 1:4; 2 Tim. 1:9).⁴⁰ God is the one who “changes the times and the seasons; He removes kings and raises up kings” (Dan. 2:21; cf. 4:17).

Therefore, if God is at work in the world and is moving toward His intended goals, it should be possible to detect the trend of His work in events that occur as part of history. However, the evidence here is less impressive than that of nature. “For one thing, history is less accessible than is nature. One must consult the historical record. Either [the person] will be dependent upon secondhand materials, the records and reports of others, or he will have to work from his own experience of history, which will often be a very limited segment, perhaps too limited to enable him to detect the overall pattern or trend.”⁴¹

Nevertheless, the Bible constantly refers to history as the arena for God’s divine action and manifestation. It speaks of God’s dealings with Egypt (Exo. 9:13-17; Jer. 46:14-26; Rom. 9:17), Assyria (Isa. 10:5-19; Ezek. 31:1-14; Nah. 3:1-7), Babylon (Jer. 50:1-16; 51:14), Medo-Persia (Isa. 44:24- 45:7), the four kingdoms that followed the break-up of Alexander’s kingdom (Dan. 11:5-35), and the Roman Empire (Dan. 7:7f., 23f.). Scripture shows throughout that “righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people” (Prov. 14:34). It shows also that although God may, for his own wise and holy purposes, allow a more wicked nation to triumph over a less wicked, He will in the end deal more severely with the more wicked than with the less wicked (Hab. 1:1-2:20).⁴²

³⁹ H. Douglas Buckwalter, “Time,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 774. Cf. Jacques B. Doukhan, *Hebrew for Theologians: A Textbook for the Study of Biblical Hebrew in Relation to Hebrew Thinking* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993), 200-207; James Muilenburg, “The Biblical View of Time,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 54, no. 4 (1961), 225–52.

⁴⁰ “God has not only left an impress on nature as its creator, so that He can be discerned partially through the natural realm, but He works in human history through His providential care over His intelligent creatures.” Gulley, *Prolegomena*, 195.

⁴¹ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 154. One of the examples Erickson cites is Israel’s preservation throughout history.

⁴² Henry Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 9.

On Conscience

In his Letter to the Romans, Paul states that “for when Gentiles,⁴³ who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves *their* thoughts accusing or else excusing *them*” (Rom. 2:14-15). Although he later admits that “there is none righteous, no, not one” (Rom. 3:10) and that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (v. 23), in Romans 2 he speaks of a working conscience on those who have not received God’s special revelation about his moral law. According to him, there is an “inner law,” “written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness” (v. 15).

Paul speaks of the Gentiles, who did not know the law given by particular revelation, yet still had a law written on their hearts—not in the sense of the new covenant experience of Jeremiah 31:33, but in the sense of the image of God (*imago Dei*) with its awareness of right and wrong. He says that their consciences, together with this internal law, bear witness to them in these matters. The internal law is antecedent to the conscience.⁴⁴

⁴³ P. Richard Choi raises a crucial question. It concerns the identity of the gentiles of whom Paul is referring to in Romans 2:14-16. If these gentiles are non-Christians, then we have a case for natural revelation. But if Paul is talking about Christian gentiles, then the law to which he refers is not a universal moral code, but the covenantal law of Jeremiah 31:33. As Choi admits, “scholarship is sharply divided about the identity of the Gentiles in these verses, whether they are pagan or Christian.” “Paul and Revelation 14,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 20, no. 1 & 2 (2009), 237-240. For instance, while N. T. Wright, Jouette Bassler and Choi himself argue that these verses refer to Christian gentiles, the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (6:489), James Dunn (Romans 1–8 [Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998], 98, 100) and Robert H. Mounce (*Romans*, [Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995], 94-95) all refuse this hypothesis. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of our study to review the literature on the subject and provide a solution. On a preliminary note, however, if the law which Paul refers in v. 14a is God’s moral law, it would seem unlikely that Paul had Christian gentiles in mind. If that were the case, he would be suggesting that gentile Christians don’t have and don’t need to obey the Ten Commandments. Such a proposal would be absurd.

⁴⁴ Gulley, 196-197. A fundamental distinction must be made between this inner law and conscience. Conscience is a judgement executed on the thoughts and actions of a human being, based on the previous knowledge of a normative moral code, or as Roy B. Zuck defines it, “the inner knowledge or awareness of, and sensitivity to, some moral standard” (“The Doctrine of Conscience,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 126/504 [October–December 1969], 331). While conscience isn’t God’s natural revelation *per se*, it is based on the requirements

ARAUJO: GENERAL REVELATION AND ADVENTIST THEOLOGY

Consequently, natural law as general revelation plays a specific role in the plan of salvation. This inner law informs the creature of his spiritual duties vis-à-vis the Creator and Judge of the world. Once conscious of its own guiltiness, the sinner is aware of the need for transformation and salvation.

Only when one sees himself as a sinner before the God of Creation does the offer of reconciliation in the gospel make sense. If intuitional and inferential knowledge of God were not present, God's gracious communication to man in the form of special revelation would remain a meaningless abstraction. Special revelation, then, begins at the point where man's natural knowledge of God ends. Natural theology is properly the vestibule of revealed theology. [...] Special revelation completes, not negates, the disclosure of God in nature, providence, and conscience.⁴⁵

Despite Paul's despairing portrayal of mankind in Romans 3, his reasoning in chapter 2 shows that "even in its estrangement from God, humanity still has some connection with its Creator and is not sunk away in total anarchy and lawlessness."⁴⁶ This only became possible because immediately after the fall, God implanted enmity between mankind and Satan (Gen. 3:15). This enmity must be understood as a grace from God, otherwise humankind would find it impossible to accept and appreciate God's work on our behalf. "It is grace that implants enmity in human nature," declares Gulley. "This is not to suggest that the enmity is sufficient to bring salvation. At best it is common grace that necessitates the new birth. In this sense it has everything to do with general revelation, for all humans have this 'enmity' within, which explains why so many non-Christians have a sense of justice and fairness."⁴⁷ This double-sense, he believes, are God's natural revelation within mankind. All human beings, from all cultures and epochs, can attest to the effects of these two

of the law written on the heart of every human being. Cf. Harrison, 10:31. C. A. Pierce, "Conscience in the New Testament," Vol. 15, *Studies in Biblical Theology*, (London: SCM, 1955).

⁴⁵ Bruce A. Demarest, *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 250-51.

⁴⁶ Hans K. LaRondelle, *LaRondelle Biblical Theology Courses* (Bradentown, FL: Barbara LaRondelle, 2015), 2.

⁴⁷ Gulley, 192.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

senses in their lives. It is a constant reminder that we were made for something far greater.

One further comment must be made on this issue. The argument of morality should not be stated as a proof for a specific set of standards that all humanity follows (which they don't), but as a "moral impetus"⁴⁸ or consciousness.⁴⁹ Although God does have a set of moral laws to be followed, natural revelation does not reveal what these are. Although every culture has a concept of right and wrong, what these mean exactly can vary widely from one culture to another. What all have in common, though, is the sense that there is such a thing as "right" and "wrong."⁵⁰

On this, Ellen White adds that "wherever there is an impulse of love and sympathy, [...] there is revealed the working of God's Holy Spirit."⁵¹ Hence, we should understand that the Holy Spirit is by no means restricted to Jews and Christians, but works on the minds and hearts of men everywhere. Paul's message should be a warning against "Christians who are tempted to assume too narrow and selfish a view of salvation."⁵²

This last mode of natural revelation brings us to the important question: What is the purpose of natural revelation? Does it offer enough information about God? Are its contents sufficient for the salvation of mankind?

Purpose

On this issue, most commentators seem to agree that natural revelation is not sufficient to build a theological system. Although it can provide general knowledge about the existence of a Creator and a vague understanding of His nature and capabilities, there's hardly any concrete information to build a theology about God. From a biblical perspective, this

⁴⁸ Robert H. Mounce, "Romans," *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 27:95.

⁴⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1952), 17-39; Edward Carnell, *Christian Commitment: An Apologetic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 80-116; Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1968), 119-25.

⁵⁰ "Despite the great differences in laws and customs among peoples around the world, what unites them in a common humanity is the recognition that some things are right and others are wrong." Harrison, 10:31.

⁵¹ Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2003), 385.

⁵² Nichol, 6:490.

also doesn't seem to be the main purpose of natural revelation.

A question that is crucial for understanding the goal of natural theology is whether it is sufficient for salvation. In other words, is it possible for someone to genuinely know God through natural revelation and be saved?

Nestor Rilloma, for example, argues that by obeying the inner "natural law," man would be able to obtain salvation, at least theoretically.⁵³ It is also with this positive view of natural revelation that Vatican II⁵⁴ adopted its new philosophy of religion, to the extent that all religions are now considered viable ways to God and that all humans are already reconciled in Christ, according to 2 Corinthians 5:19. Karl Rahner refers to them as

⁵³ "If a person who had access only to such knowledge of God were to experience salvation, he or she must respond to that knowledge in faith and obedience. After all, Paul taught that only those who are justified by faith will live (i.e., be saved) (Rom 1:17). For him, this was what made the possibility of salvation via general revelation purely theoretical. He saw the problem as lying not with God's revelation but with humans whose minds had been corrupted and led astray by their own folly (Rom 1:18-3:20)." Nestor C. Rilloma, "Toward a Theology of Religion in an Asian Adventist Perspective," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 14/2 (Fall 2003), 108. Fernando Canale seems to agree with this position: "On this basis, it can be seen that if the Gentiles, who do not have access to the Bible (Rom 2:14), willfully surrender to the calling of the Holy Spirit presented to them through general revelation, they will be transformed into the image of God in Christ, whom they do not know, thus showing 'that what the law requires is written on their hearts' (Rom 2:15). At this point, it should be noticed that, according to Scripture, the writing of the law in the human heart is an essential component of the eternal covenant of salvation (Jer 31:33; Heb 8:10). [...] Paul's explanation presents a God who is able to communicate the same plan of salvation, grounded in the revelation and work of Christ, by speaking either through Scripture, or through nature and history. [...] Clearly, Scripture affirms the salvific reach of general revelation." Fernando Canale, *The Cognitive Principle of Christian Theology*, 32-33.

⁵⁴ On this, the *Documents of Vatican II* state: (1) "Nor does divine Providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to live a good life, thanks to His grace" (35; 1.2.16); "since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with the paschal mystery" (221-222; 4.1.22). While concurring with the importance to preach the gospel, the Council said, "God in ways known to Himself can lead those inculpably ignorant of the gospel to that faith without which it is impossible to please Him (Heb. 11:16)" (p. 593; 13.1.7). The Council sees in non-Christian religions some truths that "often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men." Walter M. Abbott, S.J., org. the *Documents of Vatican II* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1965), 662.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

“anonymous Christians.”⁵⁵ This, however, raises a serious concern. If true, what should be done about the mandate to preach the gospel to the world (Matt. 28:19-20)?⁵⁶

What natural revelation truly seems to do is create a background for the presentation of the content found in special revelation. In other words, it is able to “give every human being enough of God’s revelation so that no one has an excuse to reject God on the basis of place of residence or status of education. Even the disadvantaged living in the Third World, without the ability to read, are still humans loved by God, and He can lead them to be open to His revelation and working through nature, history, and human life.”⁵⁷

The elementary information provided by natural revelation serves as a common ground between Christians and non-Christians, enabling the possibility to discuss and study the contents of special revelation.⁵⁸ This possibility is illustrated by Paul’s discourse to the Athenians in Acts 17. As he called the Greek philosophers to repentance before the Creator of the world, he built his argument on a previous knowledge they accepted as given: the “Unknown God.” In his discourse, Paul declared that this “unknown God” not only made mankind, but also provided time and place for all nations to live (v. 24-27). The *purpose* of God’s providential care for each person is the crucial point: “God did this so that men would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us” (v. 27).⁵⁹ We may then conclude that God’s natural revelation intends to make man aware of God’s presence and of man’s responsibility to seek and worship Him.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Karl Rahner, *The Church after the Council* (New York, NY: Herder and Herder, 1966), 62.

⁵⁶ “The fact that this mandate is mentioned after the Cross indicates that the objective sacrifice for all humanity needs to be accepted by each person individually, or else human freedom would be violated.” Gulley, 208.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁵⁸ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 25.

⁵⁹ For Henry Thiessen, general revelation is intended “to incite man to search for a fuller revelation of God and his plan of salvation, and it constitutes a general call of God to man to turn to him.” *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, 8.

⁶⁰ On the missiological benefit of natural theology, George Goddard argues: “Paul’s affirmation that God can be at work in the thoughts and experiences of non-Christians exemplifies a natural starting point for conversation between those holding a biblical

ARAUJO: GENERAL REVELATION AND ADVENTIST THEOLOGY

From this perspective, general revelation becomes particularly helpful in a postmodern setting, as Gulley clearly argues:

Though postmoderns have overthrown the unified worldview of modernism and are awash in a seemingly meaningless sea of pluralism, they still have a God who comes to them, implants enmity for evil in them, and writes the law in their hearts. Their case may seem hopeless, but their very hopelessness makes them long for hope and open to the only One who can bring them meaning out of chaos. We should not underestimate the preparation Christ made in His salvific work for humanity. He is able to get through to the most hopeless because He implants a sense of right and wrong in the conscience, producing a sense of longing for something better through the “enmity” factor. These facts should galvanize evangelicals to proclaim the gospel to postmoderns. [...] God can reach postmoderns through general revelation, and to that extent prepare them for the reception of particular revelation.⁶¹

Limitations of Natural Revelation

Although God uses nature, history and conscience to reveal himself to human beings, natural revelation clearly has its limitations. To begin with, it is surprisingly devoid of propositional content on God.⁶² While it is a mean for God to reach humanity, it cannot provide the basis for a theological system.⁶³ For that, only the Bible seems to have the necessary information.⁶⁴ What natural revelation can do, at most, is to create an awareness of the existence of God, or a vague sense of infinitude. All that the human mind can perceive is “that whatever lies beyond must be the

worldview, and those who do not.” *A Program for Increasing Personal Reflection from a Biblical Perspective for Spiritual Growth at the Topeka Wanamaker Seventh-day Adventist Church* (doctoral thesis, Andrews University, 2015), 47.

⁶¹ Gulley, 217.

⁶² Ángel M. Rodríguez states that it is “extremely vague and inconclusive.” “God’s Revelation in Nature,” *Biblical Research Institute*, 14 August 2003. [Http://adventistbiblicalresearch.org/materials/theology-godgodhead/god-revelation-nature](http://adventistbiblicalresearch.org/materials/theology-godgodhead/god-revelation-nature).

⁶³ Gulley, 189. He adds, “With general revelation, we have, at best, only a fragmented view of God. To be a system, it must be a full study, but how can such a study be done when only two of the parts, nature and history, can be examined? Natural theology is not possible,” 214.

⁶⁴ Canale, *Basic Elements of Christian Theology*, 17.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Creator, who alone should be worshiped.”⁶⁵

Furthermore, general revelation is not inspired, as is God’s Word. While nature has been referred on several occasions as “God’s second book,” nature is far from being considered inspired:

to elevate nature—and with nature the natural sciences—to the same level as Scripture, to accept both—nature and Scripture—as valuable revelations from God, overlooks an important difference and distinction. While nature has a divine origin, neither Scripture nor Ellen White attribute the quality of inspiration to nature. The Bible is God’s inspired book. Nature is not. Nature is God’s creation and came into existence through God’s special design. As such it reveals something about God, its creator. But nature is not inspired.⁶⁶

Another aspect that limits its revelational potential are the effects of sin on nature. While nature points to all the beauty, love and wisdom that the universe contains, it also reveals a darker side, full of death, suffering and misery.⁶⁷ “The present condition of humanity and this world, filled with sin, disruption, disaster, and death, raises serious questions about the possibility of a true knowledge of God through the natural world or through human experience.”⁶⁸

Furthermore, nature lacks what is most relevant for the present sinful

⁶⁵ Richard Alan Young, “The Knowledge of God in Romans 1:18–32: Exegetical and Theological Reflections.” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43 (2000), 706. Henry Efferin, after reviewing Rom 1:18–32; 2:12–16, comes to the conclusion that “the most consistent view, according to the Bible, should be that there is general revelation but no natural theology.” “A Study on General Revelation: Romans 1:18–32; 2:12–16.” *Scottish Theological Journal* 4 (1996), 153.

⁶⁶ Frank M. Hasel, “Living with Confidence Despite Some Open Questions: Upholding the Biblical Truth of Creation Amidst Theological Pluralism,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 14, n. 1 (Spring 2003), 237.

⁶⁷ Ellen G. White states that, after the fall, nature could no longer convey a perfect knowledge of God. “Marred by the curse of sin, nature can bear but an imperfect testimony regarding the Creator. It cannot reveal His character in its perfection.” She further says that “in the briars, the thistles, the thorns, the tares, we may read the law of condemnation; but from the beauty of natural things, and from their wonderful adaptation to our needs and our happiness, we may learn that God still loves us, that His mercy is yet manifested to the world.” *Testimonies for the Church* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2002), 8:256, 257.

⁶⁸ Van Bemmelen, *Revelation and Inspiration*, 22.

ARAUJO: GENERAL REVELATION AND ADVENTIST THEOLOGY

condition of human beings. “There is nothing about the problem of sin or the plan of salvation, nothing about heaven and the life to come in a new earth, nothing about the cosmic controversy as causative of the different problems in nature found in general revelation. Ultimately the greatest limit to general revelation is its inability to say anything about Jesus Christ. Thus the very center of particular revelation is absent in general revelation.”⁶⁹ Undeniably, special revelation is incomparable when it comes to the revelation of the plan salvation.

This situation is aggravated by the fact that sin also dulled man’s noetic capabilities, turning mankind deficient in its interpretation of natural revelation.⁷⁰ Ellen White states that

God has permitted a flood of light to be poured upon the world in the discoveries of science and art; but when professedly scientific men reason upon these subjects from a merely human point of view, they are sure to err. The greatest minds, if not guided by the word of God, become bewildered in their attempts to investigate the relations of science and revelation. The Creator and His works are beyond their comprehension.⁷¹

Despite being endowed with reason and conscience, man decreased over time in mental and spiritual strength, acuteness and discernment.

For these reasons, general revelation can only be adequately and correctly understood from the vantage point of special revelation. Nature, history or human conscience can only be rightfully explained from the perspective of eternity. Even “historical knowledge of the human Jesus is not sufficient to yield the revelational meaning of his life and work.”⁷² One clear example of this is Peter’s confession of Christ’s divinity, to which Christ replied: “Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 16:17).

What about Natural Theology?

Now that we have understood Scripture’s witness to general revelation,

⁶⁹ Gulley, *Prolegomena*, 213.

⁷⁰ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 170-71.

⁷¹ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2002), 8:257-258.

⁷² Donald G. Bloesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration & Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 74.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

we can approach the issue of “natural theology.”⁷³ Does natural revelation offer sufficient content to build a Natural Theology? This is a question which Christian scholars have responded quite differently over the centuries. Some believe that it is possible, and have even used the terms “general revelation” and “natural revelation” interchangeably.⁷⁴ They maintain “not only that there is a valid, objective revelation of God in such spheres as nature, history, and human personality, but that it is actually possible to gain some true knowledge of God from these spheres [...] apart from the Bible.”⁷⁵

In medieval times, for example, nature, history and philosophy were treated as sources of knowledge and were studied by natural philosophers

⁷³ Natural theology is generally understood as “The body of knowledge about God which may be obtained by human reason alone without the aid of Revelation and hence to be contrasted with ‘Revealed Theology.’” F. L. Cross e Elizabeth A. Livingstone, orgs., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1139. Other definitions vary slightly: “Knowledge of God drawn from nature in distinction from the knowledge of God contained in revelation. This division of theology into natural and revealed had its roots in the scholastic distinction between the two truths, one derived from nature by the use of the Aristotelian logic, subject to the authority of the Church, the other, truth above reason, revealed by God but formulated and taught solely by authority of the Church.” C. A. Beckwith, “Natural Theology,” in Samuel Macauley Jackson, org., *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, (New York; London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1908–1914), 85. Groothuis defines it as “the rational project of arguing from some aspect of nature to existence of God as the best explanation for that aspect of nature; roughly synonymous with theistic arguments or theistic proofs.” Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove, IL; Nottingham, England: IVP Academic; Apollos, 2011), 678. Brown defines it as “the attempt to attain an understanding of God and His relationship with the universe by means of rational reflection, without appealing to special revelation such as the self-revelation of God in Christ and in Scripture.” C. Brown, “Natural Theology,” in Sinclair B. Ferguson e J.I. Packer, *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 452. Fernando Canale highlights that “natural theology is a reflection about God based on data provided by nature and analyzed by the powers of human reason and imagination.” Canale, *The Cognitive Principle of Christian Theology*, 33.

⁷⁴ William L. Craig disagrees with this practice: “I think it is clear that the arguments of natural theology are not identical with general revelation; general revelation is the traits of the author reflected in his product, the fingerprints of the potter in the clay, so to speak, whereas the arguments of natural theology are the human products of men’s rational reflection upon general revelation.” William Lane Craig, “Classical Apologetics,” in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 39.

⁷⁵ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983), 1:156.

ARAUJO: GENERAL REVELATION AND ADVENTIST THEOLOGY

(what some would call the scientists of today) as a mean to obtain knowledge about God.⁷⁶

From the beginnings of the medieval church natural theology was understood to take three forms: the way of negation (*via negativa*), by which philosophers negated attributes of the finite order; the way of affirmation (*via eminentiae*), by which they affirmed positive attributes of God on the basis of creaturely analogy; and the way of causality (*via causalitatis*), by which divine attributes by means of the relationship of effect to cause.⁷⁷

One medieval theologian who excelled at this method of doing natural theology was Tomas Aquinas. In his *Summa Theologica* he developed his five proofs for the existence of God.⁷⁸ He believed that natural theology was essential for the development of faith: “the existence of God and other like truths about God, which can be known by natural reason, are not articles of faith, but are preambles to the articles; for faith presupposes natural knowledge.”⁷⁹ Through Aristotelian logic,⁸⁰ Aquina’s work shaped natural theology in such a way that it turned into a completely rational effort.

Such a system can only become a reality if certain assumptions be made: “One is, of course, that there is an objective, valid, and rational general revelation—that God actually has made Himself known in nature (for example) and that patterns of meaning are objectively present—

⁷⁶ Glauber S. Araújo, “A Hermenêutica Protestante e o Surgimento da Ciência Moderna,” *Revista Caminhando* 22, n. 2, p. 141-145.

⁷⁷ Donald G. Bloesch, *A Theology of Word & Spirit: Authority & Method in Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 144.

⁷⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trad. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, [s.d.]), I, Q.2, A.3. Cf. Timothy Pawl, “The Five Ways,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, eds., Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 115-131.

⁷⁹ Aquinas, I, Q.2, A.2.

⁸⁰ Natural Theology wasn’t a concept developed by Christian scholars, but was thriving centuries before Christianity began to use it. Cf. L. P. Gerson, *God and the Greek Philosophy: Studies in the Early History of Natural Theology* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1990); Clark, Stephen R. L. “The Classical Origins of Natural Theology,” in Russell Manning, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 9-22.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

independently of whether anyone perceives, understands, and accepts this revelation.”⁸¹ This view assumes that nature is basically intact—that it has not been substantially distorted by sin or anything else since the creation. A second assumption concerns the integrity of the person perceiving and learning from creation. “Neither the natural limitations of humanity nor the effects of sin and the fall prevent him from recognizing and correctly interpreting the handiwork of the Creator.”⁸² A third assumption is that “there is a congruity between the human mind and the creation about us. The order of the human mind is basically the same as the order of the universe. The mind is capable of drawing inferences from the data it possesses, since the structure of its thinking processes coheres with the structure of what it knows.”⁸³

Basically, “the core of natural theology is the idea that it is possible, without a prior commitment of faith to the beliefs of Christianity, and without relying upon any special authority, such as an institution (the church) or a document (the Bible), to come to a genuine knowledge of God on the basis of reason alone.”⁸⁴

From what we have studied so far, it becomes clear that natural theology, understood from these assumptions, is impractical. As a cognitive exercise, natural theology relies on presuppositions that are not compatible with what the Scriptures teach. For these reasons, general/natural revelation should not be equated with natural theology. Fernando Canale creates a helpful distinction between the two:

General revelation is a revelatory activity performed by God, while natural theology is an interpretive activity performed by human beings. In general revelation, God uses nature and history to reveal His will to each person with the goal of their salvation. In natural theology, however, human beings address these same objects, but with the purpose of interpreting them from their own perspectives to gain an understanding of God. In other words, they try to decipher God based on their interpretations of nature and events.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Erickson, 156.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 157.

⁸⁵ Canale, *The Cognitive Principle of Christian Theology*, 34.

ARAUJO: GENERAL REVELATION AND ADVENTIST THEOLOGY

He further argues that “in general revelation, God is the agent and His will the content; His purpose is to lead *each individual* to Himself. In natural theology, human beings are the agents and the contents are theoretical ideas about God produced by their imaginations. [...] Natural theology is not the work of God, but the interpretive work of human beings.”⁸⁶ To him, “natural theology is human invention rather than God’s revelation.”⁸⁷ Furthermore, for a content to be considered part of general revelation, it must be universal in nature.⁸⁸ As Canale argues, once a person takes his own experience and tries to translate it into a universal teaching, he introduces the human element of imagination, turning that content into a human product. “Therefore, the resulting teachings—natural theology—cannot be said to come from God.”⁸⁹

Natural Revelation and Scientific Inquiry

As we have seen, when it comes to the knowledge of God, general revelation is occasionally deficient in propositional content. What can be discovered about the Creator is at times insufficient or even confusing. However, its capacity to impart general truth on issues such as science, history, geometry, mathematics and arts surpasses its disclosure about spiritual truths.

When comparing God’s two modes of revelation, an interesting contrast appears. On one hand, the Bible is rich in data about God and salvation, but it is limited when it comes to scientific, historical and anthropological content. While it may be scientifically, historically and anthropologically accurate, it is not a textbook on science, history and anthropology. Even though the Bible speaks the truth, not all truth is contained in it. God could have included much more in His Word, but He allowed in only what was necessary for man’s salvation (John 20:30, 31; 21:25; 1 John 5:13). On the other hand, natural revelation imparts very little information about God. It is sufficient for someone to become aware of

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 35.

⁸⁸ “God has given us an objective, valid, rational revelation of Himself in nature, history, and human personality. It is there for anyone who wants to observe it. Regardless of whether anyone actually observes it, understands it, and believes it, it is nonetheless. . . objectively present.” Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 170.

⁸⁹ Canale, *The Cognitive Principle of Christian Theology*, 36.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

God's existence and some of His characteristics, but it won't be enough to answer life's deepest questions. When it comes to general knowledge, however, God's second book is rich with content and lessons. The Bible itself constantly refers to nature and history in order to extract general information about our existence. For instance, the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes constantly point to nature as a source of wisdom and knowledge.⁹⁰

From this short comparison, it becomes clear that, considering the fact that both sources of knowledge find their origin in God,⁹¹ both should agree with and complement each other.⁹² One isn't more valuable than the other.

⁹⁰ On the importance of joining science with the Bible, Ellen White comments: "God is the foundation of everything. All true science is in harmony with His works; all true education leads to obedience to His government. Science opens new wonders to our view; she soars high and explores new depths; but she brings nothing from her research that conflicts with divine revelation. Ignorance may seek to support false views of God by appeals to science; but the book of nature and the written Word do not disagree; each sheds light on the other. Rightly understood, they make us acquainted with God and His character by teaching us something of the wise and beneficent laws through which He works," *Signs of the Times*, March 20, 1884.

⁹¹ Ellen White argues that every idea, knowledge or concept that is correct and true comes from God, even when acquired by sources other than special revelation. She states: "We can trace the line of the world's great teachers as far back as human records extend; but the Light was before them. As the moon and the stars of the solar system shine by the reflected light of the sun, so, as far as their teaching is true, do the world's great thinkers reflect the rays of the Sun of Righteousness. Every gem of thought, every flash of the intellect, is from the Light of the world." *The Desire of Ages*, 464.

⁹² Norman Gulley argues that "in general revelation, theology finds itself in the realm of science and philosophy, for it is in the natural world that scientists and philosophers do extensive study. Traditionally general revelation includes nature, history, and human experience—the areas in which historians, anthropologists, and sociologists do research" (190-191). If Scripture is to interact with general revelation, a method of study becomes necessary. Adventism holds the *sola Scriptura* principle of interpretation, wherein the Bible alone is the final norm of truth. Natural revelation, rightly understood, is in harmony with God's written revelation in Scripture; "but as a limited and broken source of knowledge about God and reality, it must be held subservient to, and interpreted by, the final authority of Scripture." Cf. Richard Davidson, "Biblical Interpretation," in Raoul Dederen, *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2001), 61.

Canale favors a *sola, tota, and prima Scriptura* principle (Scripture, only, entirely, and first). In this case, *prima Scriptura* is a "theological principle that gives first and special attention to Scripture, and then to other subordinate authorities that may help to express or complement an understanding of Christian theology." Canale, *Cognitive Principle*, 22. Croy

ARAUJO: GENERAL REVELATION AND ADVENTIST THEOLOGY

They just have different purposes and enrich our understanding of different aspects of reality. For these reasons, it is important that we, in our search for understanding about God and reality, use both of God's revelations—special and general. Scientists, historians and scholars in general need the Bible to correctly interpret reality, while theologians need natural revelation in order to better understand God, His will and His actions. Studying one of these modes of revelation without the input of the other leaves us with a fractionary understanding of the Creator and His creation. Nature and history acquire a grander perspective from the vantage point of the Bible, and Scripture becomes more colorful and alive with the help of natural revelation. From their interaction, both fields of study are mutually enriched.⁹³

This brings us to an issue that has concerned me for some time now. Because Adventists feel deeply affected by the Darwinist/evolutionary worldview in scientific milieus, many Adventists theologian have become reluctant to give too much space to natural revelation in their theology. They tend to spend more time showing what general revelation cannot reveal than what we *can* learn through it.⁹⁴ In some cases, it would almost

also argues for adopting *prima Scriptura* in lieu of *sola Scriptura*, wherein “Scripture is still the primary authority for Christian faith and life” and “if ever there is a conflict between Scripture and tradition, Scripture must have priority.” N. Clayton Croy, *Prima Scriptura: An Introduction to New Testament Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 133. Woodrow Whidden highlights however, that while *prima Scriptura* allows for the normative finality of biblical authority, “it realistically acknowledges that other factors (such as tradition, reason, and experience) play powerfully formative roles in interpretative and doctrinal development.” “Sola Scriptura, Inerrantist Fundamentalism, and the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Is ‘No Creed but the Bible’ a Workable Solution?,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 35, n. 2 (1997), 217. John Peckham also notes that *prima Scriptura* has been “prone to unfortunate misunderstandings and problems, including its use by some to posit Scripture as merely the first among equals, limiting the authority of Scripture to the realm of value rather than fact.” *Canonical Theology: The Biblical Canon, Sola Scriptura, and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 165.

⁹³ “It is the task of the Christian thinker to appropriate the information from both and to form a worldview that includes a theocentric interpretation of science, history, human beings.” Geisler, “Revelation, General,” 674.

⁹⁴ Curiously, Ellen White goes in the opposite direction, welcoming and motivating the scientific effort in obtaining knowledge about God. She writes: “In the study of the sciences also we are to obtain a knowledge of the Creator. All true science is but *an interpretation of the handwriting of God in the material world*. Science brings from her research only fresh evidences of the wisdom and power of God. Rightly understood, both the book of nature and

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

appear that theology doesn't need general revelation at all. However, due to the increasing influence and space that science, history, neurology and psychology have in normal life, Adventists need to grow in their discussions related to these fields and offer contributions that reflect their own theological understanding of revelation. Most of all, Adventists need to identify and clarify their biblical, theological and philosophical presuppositions concerning these issues in order to properly offer answers to the urging problems that are presently raging in society.

Much of what Adventism has done toward the integration between special and natural revelation can be summarized in our health message and our apologetic effort to defend Genesis creation and the biblical flood. While all of that is commendable and needs special attention, there is still much to be done and developed. I would like to call the attention to subjects such as quantum physics, astronomy, philosophy of science, bioethics, genetic engineering, neurology and consciousness studies. For instance, while Adventists believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ, a corporeal rapture to heaven, a physical and material new heaven and new earth, the importance of caring for nature and the benefits of having a healthy lifestyle, shockingly, not much has been done in the sense of linking these theological concepts with the current developments and discussions in science. These are only a few examples that show that Adventist theology needs to integrate its theology into other fields of study.

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the written word make us acquainted with God by teaching us something of the wise and beneficent laws through which He works." *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 599 (emphasis mine). Here, she wonderfully equates the hermeneutical task of the bible scholar to the scientific work of the physicist, chemist or biologist. Both fields are seeking to read, interpret and understand what these modes of revelation have to say about God. Both need tools, methods, and hermeneutical principles in order to correctly interpret what they are seeing. In other words, what the theological inquiry is to the Bible, science is to the universe. To reject true science is to forfeit part of God's revelation.