

THE PERSPICUITY AND PURPOSE
OF NATURAL REVELATION
AND ROMANS 1:20

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As in most eras of church history, the question of the final destiny of the unevangelized has been posed again in this generation. Some of those who do not believe there to be a settled answer to this question are from within the evangelical camp. Two of the more prominent evangelicals who are still in doubt as to the destiny of those who have never heard the Gospel are Clark Pinnock and Billy Graham, both of whom are dealt with in this thesis.

It is the belief of the writer of this thesis that the question of the final destiny of the unevangelized can be answered as one properly understands the perspicuity and purpose of natural revelation (as distinct from supernatural revelation). The three major views of natural revelation are discussed in order to better understand the variety of interpretation on the issue. These three are the Roman Catholic-Arminian position, the Calvinistic position, and the neo-orthodox position.

A proper interpretation of Romans 1:20 is crucial to the understanding of natural revelation and its bearing on the final destiny of the unevangelized. An exegesis of this verse yields the interpretation that indeed natural revelation is clear enough to render all men inexcusable. Based on the interpretation of εἰς to with the infinitive as expressing purpose in this verse, it is the assertion of the writer of this thesis that the rendering inexcusable of all men is the purpose for which God ordained natural revelation.

Also discussed in this thesis is the bearing of depravity upon man's perception of natural revelation. Man's ethical refusal to accept God's Self-revelation through nature does not negate the metaphysical perspicuity of that revelation.

Because of the conclusion that all men are indeed rendered inexcusable before God by natural revelation (for that is its God-ordained purpose), emphasis is given to the need for evangelism and apologetics. The Christian message is based on the special revelation of God's written Word, for it is only through this means that one can confront depraved man with the truth about himself and the truth of the Holy God against whom he has rebelled.

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the many centuries of Christianity a perennial question has been asked, "What is the final destiny of those persons who have lived and died unevangelized?" That such a question is still current can be seen in a recent article by Dr. Clark Pinnock.¹ In attempting to answer this important question Dr. Pinnock supports the position which claims, "We should just recognize our ignorance in this area. God has not told us what His arrangements are."² Not being satisfied with a purely agnostic approach to the issue, Pinnock seeks to find some evidence that God will act favorably to those who will stand before Him to be judged who have never heard the Gospel. He refuses to believe that God has "shut the door" on the unevangelized. He states, "Of one thing we can be certain: God will not abandon in hell those who have not known and therefore have not declined His offer of grace."³

As quoted in an interview that occurred late in 1977, Billy Graham, the famous evangelist, took a position that is very similar to that of Dr. Pinnock. Graham testified, "I used to believe that pagans in far-off countries

¹Clark Pinnock, "Why is Jesus the Only Way?" Eternity 27:12 (December, 1976): 13-15, 32.

²Ibid., p. 15.

³Ibid., p. 32.

were lost--were going to hell--if they did not have the Gospel of Jesus Christ preached to them. I no longer believe that." He continued, "I believe that there are other ways of recognizing the existence of God--through nature, for instance--and plenty of other opportunities, therefore, of saying 'yes' to God."¹

These two men quoted above, one an apologist and the other an evangelist, are representative of many evangelicals in their view of the final destiny of the unevangelized. Is such a position correct according to the authoritative standard of God's Word? It is the thesis of this writer that all men, even those who are unevangelized, will stand before the Eternal Judge without excuse for their sinful lives because of the perspicuity and purpose of natural revelation as explained in Romans 1:20.

For the purpose of the proper development of this thesis a distinction must be made between natural revelation and natural theology. The Bible teaches that God's nature is inaccessible to man's natural facilities (empirical and rational) for research and discovery. He dwells in unapproachable light (1 Tim. 6:16), and the world cannot know Him through wisdom (1 Cor. 1:21). Therefore, man must reply negatively to Zophar's question to Job, "Can you discover the depths of God? Can you discover the limits of the

¹James Michael Beam, "I Can't Play God Any More," McCalls 105:4 (January, 1978): 156, 158.

Almighty?"¹ One cannot find out God by starting from man and working upward to God (natural theology). If a knowledge of God were not given to man by an act of free and unobliged favor, there would be no possibility that man could ever achieve such a knowledge by an exertion of his own efforts.²

Knowledge of God originates in the Godhead and comes downward to man. This communication of God to man about Himself is purposeful. "Revelation is never an unconscious emanation or an involuntary reflection of God in his works: it is always a conscious, free, intentional making of himself known, a purposed self expression."³ This revelation of God is expressed both generally and specially. The concern in this thesis development is general revelation in which God communicates to man about Himself in and through His creation (natural revelation). It is the presupposition of this writer that one can better understand the soteriological culpability of the unevangelized as he better understands this cosmical revelation of God.

¹Ralph A. Bohlmann, "The Natural Knowledge of God," Concordia Theological Monthly 34:12 (December, 1963): 722.

²Herman Bavinck, Our Reasonable Faith, trans. Henry Zylstra (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1956), p. 32.

³Benjamin B. Warfield, Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield, ed. John E. Meeter, Vol. I (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1970), p. 26.

CHAPTER I

A SURVEY OF POSITIONS ON NATURAL REVELATION

The Roman Catholic-Arminian Position

Although discussion about the effect of natural revelation on the unevangelized can be found as early as Origen,¹ it is not until the Middle Ages that a widely-held position can be found that is yet extant. At a time when Roman Catholicism was at its height, one of its most celebrated scholars set a standard position on the knowledge of God through nature. From that time on nearly all Roman Catholics have proudly adhered to that standard, and nearly all Arminians have also followed that line of thinking either knowingly or inadvertantly. That scholar was Thomas Aquinas. He expounded with remarkable skill the view that maintains that proofs of God's existence may be gained a posteriori from inferences drawn from man's discursive reason from the sense-observation of the corporeal world.² Following the lead of the secular Greek philosophers that was developed centuries previous to his own day, Thomas held in principle that man's reason is able to prove God's existence. For such

¹Arthur M. Climenhaga, "Universalism in Present Day Theology," Wesleyan Theological Journal 2:1 (Spring, 1967): 43.

²Bohlmann, "The Natural Knowledge of God," p. 722.

teaching he was especially dependent on Aristotle, specifically the Aristotelian notion of the unity of science. According to this notion all knowledge is of universals.¹

Thomas Aquinas wrote at the beginning of his massive Summa Theologicae, "There is nothing to stop the same things from being treated by the philosophical sciences when they can be looked at in the light of natural reason and by another science when they are looked at in the light of divine revelation."²

Thomas attempted a synthesis of the Christian doctrine of grace and the Greek concept of nature understood as a unity of form and matter.³ According to this Roman Catholic view as developed by Thomas the natural man is already in possession of the truth. Although it is asserted in this position that the possession of truth is with respect to natural revelation only, consistency demands more. "If the natural man can and does interpret natural revelation in a way that is essentially correct there is no reason why he should need supernatural aid in order to interpret Christianity truly."⁴

¹Cornelius Van Til, The Defense of the Faith (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1976), p. 155.

²Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologicae, Vol. I (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), p. 9.

³Rousas Rushdoony, By What Standard (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1965), p. 4.

⁴Cornelius Van Til, "Apologetics" (Unpublished class syllabus, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1971), p. 52.

Thus, it can be seen that Thomistic thinking asserted that not only has God made Himself known in His creation, but that man can and does interpret this revelation correctly without necessarily resorting to supernatural revelation. Natural man has the ability to work his way inductively from effect to cause and can thus find "god." According to consistent Thomistic thinking it is possible for man to know God through the senses and through reason. With such a presupposition it is not possible to claim that all men are held inexcusable before God on account of natural revelation. Some men are not inexcusable, for, indeed, some men respond properly to natural revelation and so find God. Aristotle can then be called a "Christian before Christ."

Roman Catholicism has promoted Thomistic reasoning since the thirteenth century, and Arminians support such thinking when they appeal to the senses and rationale of unregenerate men in evangelism and apologetics in a manner which presupposes that such senses and rationale are capable of interpreting God's revelation correctly.

The Calvinistic Position

Those who hold to a theological position that is historically called "Calvinistic" have differed greatly from the Roman Catholic-Arminian position in their view of natural revelation and its bearing upon lost man. Cornelius Van Til, one of the most consistent and most well-known Calvinistic apologists of the twentieth century, has pointed out one of

the reasons for a non-Thomistic approach to the issue. He has written:

With no lack of appreciation for the genius of these great Greek thinkers, it must yet be maintained that they, with all men, inherited the sinfulness of Adam and, accordingly, had their reasons for not wishing to hear the voice of God. With all men they assume that nature is self-sufficient and¹ has its principles of interpretation within itself.

This view of the nature of creation is a radical departure from the scholastic view that is still found today. For Calvin and others in the same school of interpretation the creation has no meaning in itself, apart from the Creator. When Calvin admired creation's beauty, it was the opera Dei that he admired. He refused to accord a self-sufficiency to the universe, and was not satisfied with the creation in and of itself, but had to let it speak to him of its Author.²

Not only did Calvin reject Roman Catholicism's view of a self-sufficient creation, but he also rejected Rome's view of the nature of postlapse man. According to Calvin's view, the noetic effects of sin were devastating. After the Fall the conscience was warped, the intellect's apprehension of God in nature was blinded, the sensus divinitatis was corrupted by superstition and ignorance. Natural theology could no longer lead men to the true knowledge of God for which it

¹N. B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley, eds., The Infallible Word (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1946), p. 283.

²T. H. L. Parker, Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959), p. 17.

was intended.¹ Calvin did teach that the seed of the sensus divinitatis remained in man; indeed, it cannot be obliterated. "But," wrote Calvin, "this seed is so corrupted that by itself it produces only the worst fruits."² It cannot be denied that Calvin taught that God revealed Himself in His created works. He did believe in natural revelation, but because of man's total depravity Calvin rejected what has come to be called "natural theology." Depravity is a very crucial "but" which distinguishes Calvin and Calvinists from the natural theologians of the Roman Catholic-Arminian camp. Because of depravity "human reason . . . neither approaches, nor strives toward nor even takes a straight aim at, this truth: to understand who the true God is or what sort of God he wishes to be toward us."³

According to the Calvinistic position, then, God has revealed Himself in nature, but since the Fall man has been unable to correctly interpret that revelation. The fault of this blindness lies with man, and therefore he is without excuse even if he has not been evangelized. God has spoken clearly, but man has refused to hear because of his sin.

¹Gerald J. Postema, "Calvin's Alleged Rejection of Natural Theology," Scottish Journal of Theology 24 (1971): 428.

²John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Vol. I (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), p. 51.

³Ibid., p. 278.

The Neo-Orthodox Position

The most notable conflict over natural theology in the twentieth century has been the heated controversy (although later almost completely resolved) between Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, both of Neo-Orthodox fame. Brunner wrote first in his Natur und Gnade and Barth vigorously responded with "Nein! Antwort an Emil Brunner." This conflict between Brunner and Barth centered around the problem of the extent of the knowledge of God to be found in the revelation of God in nature.¹

Brunner, although Neo-Orthodox in theology, was not consistent with neo-orthodox presuppositions and wrote with a message that seems very close to historic orthodoxy so far as natural revelation is concerned. He claimed, "We therefore teach a general revelation, or a revelation in the Creation, because the Holy Scriptures teach it unmistakably, and we intend to teach it in accordance with Scripture."² According to Brunner, this doctrine of natural revelation is the basis of the responsibility of man before God, and it is at the same time the point of contact for the evangelistic call to repentance.³ Brunner also acknowledges that because

¹S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., "Paul and the Knowledge of God," Bibliotheca Sacra 129:513 (January-March, 1972), p. 63.

²Emil Brunner, Revelation and Reason, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1941), p. 59.

³Ibid., p. 65.

man is a sinner revelation does not issue in true knowledge.¹

Barth, however, denied strongly the existence of natural revelation. It can be determined that Barth was acting consistently with his Neo-Orthodox presuppositions. His rejection of natural revelation was motivated by his conception of God's revelation in Christ as the unique and exclusive revelation in the world. Barth did not believe that one first knows something about revelation and then learns to know the revelation in Jesus Christ as a special form of that revelation. On the contrary, one must know Jesus Christ in order to know anything about revelation.² Barth could therefore be called "Christomonistic" in his view of revelation. There is no other self-manifestation of God than in Jesus Christ. Nature and even the Bible are merely "witnesses" that point to the revelation found in Jesus Christ. They are not revelational in themselves.

Since Barth denies the very existence of natural revelation he therefore cannot teach that men are held inexcusable on the basis of God's manifesting Himself in creation. Rather, Barth works out a type of universalism in which all men (evangelized and unevangelized) are elect in Christ, or more specifically, Christ is elected unto wrath in the stead of all men. Evangelism, according to Barth,

¹Ibid., pp. 64-65.

²G. C. Berkouwer, General Revelation (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955), p. 22.

has nothing to do with man's culpability. "Evangelism" is merely making all men aware of the truth that they are already "in Christ."¹

¹Harold Lindsell, "Universalism Today," Bibliotheca Sacra 121:483 (July-September, 1964), p. 212.

CHAPTER II

AN EXEGESIS OF ROMANS 1:20

In studying natural revelation and its effect upon unregenerate men, the first chapter of Romans is often referred to as the primary text. S. L. Johnson indicates the popular usage of this passage when he writes:

Among unsophisticated students of the Bible the paragraph of Romans 1:18-23 is best known as the section that raises the perennial question, "Are the heathen lost?" And woe betide the Bible teacher or the minister who in his teaching or preaching sidesteps this issue.¹

The trained Bible student should not react against this popular usage of this passage, for it is indeed evident that this passage is a critical one for the understanding of the relation of the heathen to salvation.² The paragraph begins in verse eighteen with a causal γάρ, and the following verses, all the way to 3:20, contain the explanation of God's wrath toward all ungodly and unrighteous men.³ According to Romans 1:18-19 God is angry toward these men because God had manifested Himself and His truth to them, yet they are suppressing the knowledge gained from this manifestation. Verse twenty, which is connected with the preceding by an

¹Johnson, "Paul and the Knowledge of God," p. 62.

²Ibid., p. 63.

³Bohlmann, "The Natural Knowledge of God," p. 724.

explanatory γάρ, is crucial to the passage in that it provides a confirmation and amplification of this suppression of a possessed knowledge. Verse twenty proves that God does manifest Himself to men, shows how this manifestation is made, and draws the inference that, in virtue of this revelation, men are inexcusable for their impiety.¹ It is with verse twenty that the following exegesis is concerned.

The Object of Perception

When Paul wrote of that which was manifested to man and perceived by man, he was led of the Holy Spirit to use the neuter plural adjective ὁράματα in a substantival manner. The regular usage of neuter plural adjectives is in reference to a definite class of things.² The adjective used here comes from the verbal adjective of ὁράω and has the alpha privative prefixed. The concrete things referred to by this word then are those things which are "unseen" or "invisible."³ In verse twenty ὁράματα is made more specific by the context. It refers to the particular which follows, namely ἡ τὸ αἰδώς αὐτοῦ δύναμις καὶ θεϊότης.⁴ That this phrase stands

¹Charles Hodge, Epistle to the Romans (Philadelphia: James S. Claxton, 1864), p. 55.

²H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1955), p. 119.

³William Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, 4th rev. ed. (1952), s. v. ὁράματα.

⁴George Winer, A Grammar of the Idiom of the New Testament (England: Andover, 1897), pp. 234-35.

in apposition and not in addition to ἄρματα can be seen not only from context, but also from the grammar itself. The τέ, followed by καί, does not annex a new idea, but partitions the ἄρματα into the two ideas of δύναμις and θεϊότης. These two latter ideas, though more or less distinct from one another, are treated as a unit when considered in apposition to ἄρματα. This factor can be detected by the use of one article for both words.¹

The first of these appositional words, δύναμις, speaks of God's power, and as used here with the rare adjective ἄδιος, His eternal power. There is thus the implication that if God's eternal power is being manifested, the eternity of God Himself is also in view.² Power is so characteristic of the eternal God that ἡ δύναμις is sometimes used (Mt. 26: 64) as a periphrasis for the divine Name.³

Whereas δύναμις is specific in being a single attribute, the second appositional noun, θεϊότης, is a summary term. It is a hapax legomenon denoting the divine nature and properties; and is to be distinguished from θεός (deity) which denotes the divine personality (in the New Testament

¹A. T. Robertson, A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), p. 787.

²John Murray, The Epistle to the Romans, Vol. I (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959), p. 39.

³C. E. B. Cranfield, The Epistle to the Romans, Vol. I (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1975), p. 115.

found only in Col. 2:9).¹ Meyer indicates the breadth of this noun by ascribing to it "the totality of that which God is as a Being possessed of divine attributes, as θεῶν--the collective name of the divine realities. This comprehensive sense must by no means be limited."² It can therefore be stated that God has not revealed everything about Himself in natural revelation, but He has manifested great qualities about Himself.

The Act of the Perception

The main verb of Romans 1:20 is καθορᾶται. It is a compound word combining a common word for "seeing" or "perceiving," ὁρᾶω, with the preposition κατά. The prepositional prefix adds to the verb by intensifying it. The resulting meaning of the compound verb is then "are clearly seen," or perhaps, "are clearly perceived."³

The choice of the word καθορᾶται in this context is very interesting. τα . . . ὁράματα αὐτοῦ . . . καθορᾶται is a notable oxymoron, no doubt intentional.⁴ When the apostle characterized the eternal power and divine nature of God as being invisible, reference was made to the fact that they

¹Ibid.

²Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Epistle to the Romans (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, Publishers, 1889), pp. 58-59.

³Cranfield, The Epistle to the Romans, Vol. I, p. 115 note.

⁴Ibid., p. 114.

are not perceived empirically. When in the same verse they are said to be "clearly seen," an oxymoron is used to indicate that what is imperceptible to the senses is nevertheless clearly apprehended in mental conception.¹

The tense and mood of the main verb is also significant. It is a present indicative. Because of the present tense, there is no limitation of time with this natural revelation. God continues to reveal Himself in this way throughout all ages. Those things which He has manifested have been perceived and are being perceived presently. The indicative mood adds to the certainty of this perception. There is no intimation that perception is merely possible. According to this verb it is actual, and in fact, continually actual.

The main verb is first modified by the prepositional phrase ἀπο κτίσεως κόσμου. There is little doubt on the part of most commentators that this phrase should be understood to be temporal in nature. It should be taken to mean "since the creation of the world," ἀπο being temporal in sense and κτίσις in the sense of "the act of creating."² The phrase does not mean "from the created things of the world" in a source sense. If that were the meaning to be expressed one would expect to find "ἐκ κτίσεως κόσμου" or "ἀπο κτίσματος

¹Murray, The Epistle to the Romans, Vol. I, p. 38. Cranfield's defense of καθορᾶται as referring to physical sight is strained theologically. How can the divine nature of God, who is spirit, be perceived empirically?

²Cranfield, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 114.

κόσμου."¹ Indeed, the temporal force is germane to the thought of the passage in affirming that the manifestation of God's invisible attributes has been given continuously in His visible handiwork.²

Also modifying the main verb is the participial phrase τοῖς ποιήμασιν νοούμενα, which could be translated "being understood by the instrument of what is made." The present passive participle νοούμενα defines the manner in which the καθορᾶται takes place.³ It is derived from the verb νοεῖν, which denotes a mental act--a perception by the reason. It is rational and not empirical perception.⁴

The dative case of τοῖς ποιήμασιν is probably instrumental in nature.⁵ The eternal power and divine nature of God are invisible, yet they are clearly perceived in their created works. Phenomena disclose the noumena of God's transcendent perfection and divinity. God has placed the imprints of His glory upon His handiwork, and this glory is manifested

¹Henry Alford, The Greek Testament, Vol. II (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1894), p. 322.

²Murray, The Epistle to the Romans, Vol. I, p. 39.

³Meyer, Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Epistle to the Romans, p. 58.

⁴William G. T. Shedd, Commentary upon the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893), p. 21.

⁵James Hope Moulton, Wilbert Francis Howard, and Nigel Turner, A Grammar of New Testament Greek, Vol. III (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1963), p. 240.

to all.¹

The Implication of the Perception

It is over the last clause of this verse that much debate has occurred among grammatical commentators and among theologians. It is specifically the usage of εἰς το with the infinitive in this clause that has drawn such a wide variety of interpretations. Many have understood this last clause as expressing result or consequence. On the other hand, some have understood this clause to contain the usual force of εἰς το with the infinitive. These interpreters see purpose as the key point of this last clause.

Nearly all agree that the most natural signification of εἰς το with the infinitive is aim or purpose. There are exceptional cases, however, when this form can signify result, although such cases are admittedly rare.² In such cases it can express either intended or actual result. The context of Romans 1:20 would demand actual result, if indeed result were the proper understanding.³

The primary obstacle in the way of many commentators in accepting εἰς το with the infinitive as purpose is their

¹Murray, The Epistle to the Romans, Vol. I, p. 40.

²Dana and Mantey, A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament, p. 286. See also A. T. Robertson, A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research, p. 1002.

³R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), p. 99.

personal theological position. Lenski reveals how his theology played an important part in determining the nature of this clause. "For to say that by the very creation of the world it was God's intention to make men without excuse would be saying that men should fall into sin."¹ Such a position seems superficially correct, but upon closer examination, it can be seen to be lacking in a proper understanding of God's decrees. The passage at hand deals with divine action and decree under which Paul places the inexcusability of man. In dealing with sovereign Divine action how can one divorce God's purpose from the actual result? The comments of the late Professor John Murray are appropriate here:

The giving of revelation sufficient to constrain men to worship and glorify the Creator and given with the design that they would be without excuse, if they failed to glorify Him, cannot be worthy of God. Beside, even if we regard the clause in question as expressing result rather than design, we cannot eliminate from the all-inclusive ordination and providence of God the design which is presupposed in the actual result. If inexcusableness is the result, it is the designed result from the aspect of decretive ordination.²

If one can accept Dr. Murray's view of God's sovereign control (as does the present writer), it is natural to accept the normal usage of εἰς to with the infinitive in this clause--that of purpose.

In a summary of this verse it can therefore be asserted

¹Ibid., p. 100.

²Murray, The Epistle to the Romans, Vol. I, p. 40. See also Meyer, Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Epistle to the Romans, p. 60; Moulton, Howard, and Turner, A Grammar of New Testament Greek, Vol. III, p. 219.

that the invisible power and divine nature of God have been clearly perceived by means of that which has been made ever since the creation of the world. Man has suppressed revealed truth in his sinfulness (v. 19), and so God has purposed His natural revelation to render man without excuse. According to Romans 1:20 natural revelation is perspicuous and has as its purpose the rendering inexcusable of man.

CHAPTER III

THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF
NATURAL REVELATION

The Perspicuity of Natural Revelation
and the Depravity of Man

God reveals Himself in natural revelation that He may be known. This is axiomatic. The question must be asked however, "Is God therefore known by means of a consideration of the universe and history?" In answer, the Bible student must reply, "Ideally--or rather, originally--yes. In fact, no. For between the original and the actual stands the Fall, which alters the whole problem of knowledge and revelation."¹

Since the Fall and the momentous shattering of the harmony between God and man, man has become a sinner. His mind has become blinded, his will corrupted, and his heart hardened. Man has become the slave of sin, and he can see clearly no longer. Furthermore, the truth that he does perceive he represses. His knowledge gives him only a confused and indistinct picture of God.²

It is very important, in realizing the effects of the Fall upon natural revelation, to remember that sin is ethical

¹Parker, Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God, pp. 26-27.

²Johnson, "Paul and the Knowledge of God," p. 70.

and not metaphysical in nature. Sin did not lower man in the scale of being. Sin did not take away from man any of the natural powers that God had given him. The metaphysical situation was not destroyed by sin. Though depraved, post-lapse man was still man, God's image bearer.¹

Since the Fall, man, as an ethical being, has acted negatively with respect to natural revelation. As being made in the image of God he could not escape becoming the interpretative medium of God's general revelation both in his intellectual (Rom. 1:20) and in his moral consciousness (Rom. 2:14, 15).² Because of the sin and resultant ethical separation from God, man has willed to reject God's interpretation of the creation around him and has sought instead to reinterpret himself and nature without God. Sinful man has refused God's definition of man and has replaced it with an arrogant claim to autonomy in defiance of the sovereign authority of his Creator.³ Unregenerate man has not only reinterpreted himself, but also all other creation around him. He has used his logical powers to describe the facts of creation as though these facts could somehow exist apart

¹Van Til, The Defense of the Faith, p. 158.

²Cornelius Van Til, Common Grace and the Gospel (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1972), p. 53.

³E. R. Geehan, ed., Jerusalem and Athens (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1977), p. 136.

from God.¹ Natural man has sought to interpret all the facts of this world immanentistically. He has strived to attain meaning in the facts of this world without regarding these facts as carrying the revelation and claims of Creator-God.

Starting with the foundation of himself in a self-assumed autonomy, and by the use of human logic, depraved man has sought to determine what can and cannot be.² Ever since that momentous event in the Garden of Eden, sinful human nature has said that the objective argument for the existence of God is of doubtful validity. Sinners have always loved to speak of abstract principles of truth, goodness, and beauty. In their depravity they love to speak of the possibility of a god because they hate the God.³ This hatred of God poisons every concrete expression that sinners make about God and His revelation. Their epistemological reaction will invariably be negative, and negative along the whole line of their interpretive endeavor. There are no general principles or truths about the true God which they do not falsify.⁴ Sinful men, in their insolent refusal to accept the interpretation of their Maker, have turned the light of divine revelation into the darkness of human speculation.

Thus, in reviewing the effect of depravity on natural

¹Van Til, Common Grace and the Gospel, p. 43.

²Ibid., p. 142.

³Ibid., p. 62.

⁴Ibid., p. 57.

revelation, it can be seen that post-Fall men still have within themselves the knowledge of God by virtue of their creation in the imago Dei. The metaphysical situation has not changed. However, this idea of God is suppressed ethically by the false principle of man's autonomy.¹ In so far as men have fallen and are alienated from God, then, no amount of speculation or meditation on the wonders of nature will lead them to a knowledge of Jehovah God.² Calvin stated this fact very succinctly when he wrote:

Although the Lord represents both himself and his everlasting Kingdom in the mirror of his works with very great clarity, such is our stupidity that we grow increasingly dull toward so manifest testimonies, and they flow away without profiting us.³

Although man has chosen darkness rather than light, the situation of his ethical blindness is not hopeless. Man is indeed blind because of sin and can no longer properly perceive the general revelation of God in nature. God has responded in His grace, however, by providing special revelation for man. Such revelation is not natural but supernatural. Although fallen man is blind to the glory of God in nature, through the "spectacles" of Scripture man is again able to

¹Van Til, The Defense of the Faith, p. 170.

²Postema, "Calvin's Alleged Rejection of Natural Theology," p. 430.

³Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, Vol. I, p. 63.

recognize God the Creator in His creation.¹ It can then be stated that postlapse man can have a true understanding of natural revelation only as he is illuminated by the Holy Spirit and the Holy Scriptures. In His Word God interprets His works rightfully and fully. The Scriptures provide for man the meaning and right use of nature which otherwise would be misunderstood and misused.²

It is necessary to keep in mind the proper relationship between natural revelation and supernatural revelation. It is not a relation of contrast and opposition, but rather of supplement and completion. The purpose of supernatural revelation is not to correct, much less to set aside natural revelation. Natural revelation needs no corrections, for God has not revealed Himself falsely or misleadingly in it. Considered in itself, natural revelation is neither imperfect nor incomplete, because it is God's revelation, and God does all things well. The need for supernatural revelation does not arise in relation to the organism of natural revelation in itself, but lies in the necessity of meeting the altered circumstances precipitated by sin. The new condition induced by sin required a new method of revelation. It was not that natural revelation was no longer clear or useful in itself that supernatural revelation entered in, but that

¹Postema, "Calvin's Alleged Rejection of Natural Theology," p. 428. See also Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, Vol. I, p. 70.

²Parker, Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God, p. 39.

natural revelation might be adapted to the changed conditions.

"It is not to meet any failure in general revelation that special revelation is introduced, but to meet failure in man to whom the revelation is addressed."¹

Special revelation is needed not only to give depraved man a proper understanding of natural revelation, but also to give him a proper understanding of himself. Man, as a sinner, needs the grace of God, but there is no knowledge of grace in nature. It is only by supernatural revelation that man can learn of salvation, its condition, and who are its subjects.²

In an overview, then, of the perspicuity of natural revelation and the depravity of man, it can be asserted that depravity in no way detracts from the objective perspicuity of revelation in nature. The perspicuity of God's revelation in creation depends for its very meaning on the fact that it is a part of the total and totally voluntary revelation of the self-contained God.³ Van Til explains, "The revelation of God is always objectively valid. The greatest obscuration the sin of man can cast over the face of nature and his own consciousness, cannot destroy the validity of revelation."⁴

¹Warfield, Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield, Vol. I, pp. 27-28.

²Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology, Vol. I (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), p. 26.

³Stonehouse and Woolley, The Infallible Word, p. 277.

⁴Van Til, Common Grace and the Gospel, p. 90.

One cannot speak of probability when he is addressing the subject of natural revelation. The psalmist does not state that the heavens possibly or probably declare the glory of God. Nor does the apostle assert that the wrath of God is probably revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. Natural revelation stands out as a great beam of light in the blackness of night. Even though man has torn out his own eyes because of sin, the revelation itself is no less perspicuous. Even the act of blinding himself becomes revelational in depraved man's wicked hands testifying to him that his sin is against the self-revealing God, for there is no transgression if there is not One who is transgressed.¹ Evil man has attempted to choke out the voice of God ever since the Fall, but God continues to reveal Himself, and the sinner's suppression of revelation is never complete. He is never so blind that he can plead his ignorance as an excuse for his perverseness.² Every man knows God. All creation has the signature of Jehovah God stamped upon it. Therefore, all men know not merely that a God exists, but they know that God, the true God, the only God exists.³

Depraved men do not know God from nature in a salvific

¹Stonehouse and Woolley, The Infallible Word, pp. 278-79.

²John Calvin, Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans, trans. and ed. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), p. 71.

³Van Til, Common Grace and the Gospel, p. 130.

way, however. Men can know something of the folly of their sinful way of life from natural revelation but are ethically unable to do anything about it but walk that way to the bitter end. It is only through special revelation, that is soteric in nature, that man can learn of grace. Once the sovereign God regenerates one of His elect, that object of His grace has the blinders of sin torn off and can know God truly and can know God's revelation truly. Although it is true that even one who has been regenerated is unable to penetrate to the bottom of natural revelation, this does not mean that the revelation of God is not clear. Regenerated man may see clearly what is revealed clearly even if he cannot see exhaustively. Man does not need to know exhaustively in order to know truly and certainly.¹

Natural revelation is indeed perspicuous. Depravity has affected man and his willingness to accept that revelation, but not the revelation itself. Three facts can therefore be asserted about this mixed situation: 1) every man knows God through natural revelation, 2) every sinner is in principle anxiously striving to efface that knowledge of God, and 3) every sinner in this world is still the object of the striving of the Spirit calling him back to God by means of the continuing revelation.²

¹Stonehouse and Woolley, The Infallible Word, pp. 277-78.

²Van Til, The Defense of the Faith, p. 172.

The Purpose of Natural Revelation
in Relation to Man

The most obvious purpose of natural revelation is that it might reveal God. What is not so obvious, perhaps, is that this Self-revelation is, in and of itself, an act of mercy. It may be reiterated that saving grace is not manifest in nature, yet it is the God of saving grace who manifests Himself by means of nature.¹ This same God has chosen to act graciously to a limited degree to all men without exception. This act is most often referred to as "common grace." Van Til offers the following definition:

Common grace is an attitude of favor of God toward men as men, as creatures made by himself in his own image. Common grace is the giving of good gifts to men though they have sinned against him, that they might repent and mend their evil ways.²

Natural revelation is part of this common grace toward man. Every fact of creation is revelational of God and cannot be interpreted as if it exists in a vacuum. There is no such thing as a self-interpreting fact. Every created fact must therefore be held to express, to some degree, the attitude of God toward man.³ Though man tries to suppress and ignore this revelation, all nature around him speaks of God. This reminder of Jehovah God surrounding him calls forth a consciousness of guilt and acts as a restraint on the process

¹Stonehouse and Woolley, The Infallible Word, p. 266.

²Van Til, The Defense of the Faith, p. 165.

³Van Til, Common Grace and the Gospel, p. 70.

of sin.¹

One might argue that natural revelation is, in fact, not a part of common grace in the case of one who eventually turns out to have been a reprobate. In such a case the punishment is increased because of the refusal to accept God's revelation in nature. Is the fact of the increased punishment a proof against the idea that natural revelation is a gift of God in favor of the reprobate? On the contrary, it were impossible that the reprobate's punishment should be increased by his mishandling of the revelational facts around him unless the facts were evidence of the undeserved favor of God in relation to him.² It can be stated then, that natural revelation reveals God as an act of mercy toward all men, even those who should prove to be reprobates.

As was asserted in the preceding chapter on an exegesis of Romans 1:20, the rendering inexcusable of man by natural revelation should be accepted as the intended purpose of such a revelation. As the merciful revelation of God in nature as part of common grace might be considered the positive purpose, so the rendering inexcusable of sinful man might be considered the negative purpose. It was God's ordained plan to take away all excuse from sinful man by means of a deliberately perspicuous revelation of Himself in nature. The reason that man does not grasp this natural revelation and

¹Joseph Agar Beet, Epistle to the Romans (New York: Thomas Whittaker, 1883), p. 54.

²Van Til, Common Grace and the Gospel, p. 115.

mount up to a pure and clear knowledge of God is his own depravity. The fault lies with man and not with God.¹ Man has no excuse and that is what the just God has intended. Sinful man can have no excuse when he stands before the holy God of justice. Sin will not enter heaven because of ignorance. There is no ignorance, for God has revealed Himself in nature. Though some men might seem to have less light and means of knowledge than others, all have enough to leave them inexcusable.²

The Scriptures never claim that a purpose of natural revelation is to give man a knowledge of God which brings salvation. Those who would assert such go beyond the purpose stated in God's Special Revelation. Such a position actually goes against the interpretation of natural revelation as given in the Bible. According to the Word of God natural revelation is sufficient to manifest God and thereby render man inexcusable. It is not sufficient to give man salvific knowledge of God. It was never intended to do so. Thus, natural revelation is sufficient in its intended purposes.³

¹Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, Vol. I, p. 68.

²Matthew Henry, Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible, Vol. VI (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, n. d.), p. 370.

³Stonehouse and Woolley, The Infallible Word, p. 275.

CHAPTER IV

NATURAL REVELATION AND RAMIFICATIONS FOR EVANGELISM AND APOLOGETICS

The Motive for Evangelism and Apologetics

Certainly the primary motive for proclaiming and defending the Gospel is to glorify God, as such action is a fulfillment of His commandments to do so. Secondary to this Godward concern is manward concern. Surely the one who has been shown God's saving grace will have a concern for the plight of those around him. A proper understanding of the perspicuity and purpose of natural revelation causes one to realize the true spiritual culpability of all the people in the world. The Christian who understands that all men are inexcusable must heartily oppose the universalism that has enjoyed a substantial resurgence in the twentieth century.¹ With the growth of liberalism and neo-orthodoxy missionary leaders and major theologians, both Catholic and Protestant, have asserted rather explicitly that all will be saved, or at least that the question of their salvation should be left open to the scales of expectation tilted in the universalist direction.² Those who question the scripturalness of such

¹Lindsell, "Universalism Today," p. 209.

²James I. Packer, "The Way of Salvation: The Problems of Universalism," Bibliotheca Sacra 130:517 (January-March, 1973): 4.

a position are often looked upon with great disfavor.

The person who presupposes the truthfulness and authority of written revelation must oppose universalism, whether it be actual or potential. The Word of God has declared that all men are guilty and inexcusable because of God's revelation of Himself to all men through creation. Because God is just, sin must be punished. No man can plead ignorance. God is not unfair in punishing those who have not been evangelized. They have had enough revelation to take away all excuse. The situation of sinful men is not a case of insufficient light, but of evil hearts. Excuses that might be offered are vain, for the heart-darkness is criminal in nature. If one speaks of ignorance he must remember that it is a guilty ignorance, an ignorance that rests on the pride and vanity of a depraved heart and mind.¹

The Biblicist must reject the arguments of the religious rationalists who leave the final destiny of the heathen in a hopeful condition.² The unevangelized have no hope without the grace of the sovereign God as it is presented in His Holy Word. Christians must evangelize because the heathen are surely lost without knowing the Evangel. Surely recognizing that men are without excuse because of the perspicuity and purpose of natural revelation is a motivation for

¹Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, Calvin and Augustine, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1956), p. 46.

²Hodge, Systematic Theology, Vol. I, p. 25.

evangelism.

The Method of Evangelism and Apologetics

How can the Christian who takes the total depravity of man seriously find a point of contact with the unsaved for evangelism and apologetics? Is there something on which believers and disbelievers agree? "Is there an area known by both from which, as a starting point, we may go on to that which is known to believers but unknown to unbelievers?"¹ For the Roman Catholic and Arminian it is a predetermined conclusion that there are large areas of life on which the believer and the unbeliever agree without any difference.² For them, there is no problem of "point of contact." The believer and disbeliever have their reason and empirical senses in common. Both interpret self-defining facts in the same way.

The Biblicist realizes that to find a common area of knowledge between believers and unbelievers there must be agreement between them as to the nature of man himself. But because of total depravity, there is no such agreement.³ Depraved men think of themselves as ultimately autonomous, and therefore the revelation of a self-sufficient God can have no meaning to them. The whole idea of the revelation of the

¹Van Til, "Apologetics," p. 38.

²Van Til, Common Grace and the Gospel, p. 12.

³Van Til, "Apologetics," p. 38.

self-sufficient God of the Scriptures drops to the ground if men think of themselves as autonomous or self-sufficient.¹ The Biblicist must not agree with depraved man with his view of himself as do the Roman Catholics and Arminians. He must draw a sharp distinction between what depraved man says about himself and what Scripture says about him. If the Christian makes an appeal to the natural man without being aware of this distinction, he virtually admits that the natural man's estimate of himself is correct.² Such an admission is not for the welfare of the unsaved man. He may think that his spiritual condition requires only "a bottle of medicine" when the Christian knows by the Word of God that he needs "an immediate operation."³

The point of contact for evangelism and apologetics lies not with agreeing with what man says about himself. The point of contact does lie, however, with what man inwardly knows about himself. Because he is God's image bearer, every man knows in the depths of his mind that he is the creature of God and responsible to God. Since man is in the imago Dei he is metaphysically able to see God's self-revelation in nature and actually does see that revelation. That fact makes every man always accessible to God. For man to be man at all, he must already be in contact with the truth. In

¹Ibid., p. 54.

²Ibid., p. 57.

³Ibid., p. 39.

fact, he is so much in contact with the truth that much of his energy is used in the futile effort to hide this fact from himself.¹

The Biblicist can therefore rest assured that he does indeed have a point of contact with the unregenerate man. This point of contact does not come in agreeing with what depraved man says about himself, but with what is actually true about the depraved man, no matter how hard he strives to deny it. Man is God's image bearer and is aware of God through natural revelation. It is precisely this awareness of God as One to whom man is responsible which provides the point of contact for the Christian message.²

The Message of Evangelism and Apologetics

As the Christian studies natural revelation and seeks its implications on the message of evangelism and apologetics, he must stand with both feet upon the bed-rock of special revelation.³ Because of God's self-revelation in His Word, the Christian apologist and evangelist must have a message of the certainty of the existence and sovereignty of Almighty God.⁴ His message should never be founded on the same base as that occupied by the unregenerate mind. The unregenerate

¹Ibid., p. 58.

²Colin Brown, Philosophy and the Christian Faith (Chicago: Intervarsity Press, 1969), pp. 272-73.

³Van Til, Common Grace and the Gospel, p. 51.

⁴Geehan, Jerusalem and Athens, p. 136.

presupposes, and therefore thinks and speaks of uninterpreted facts of empiricism and the abstract universals of rationalism.

The Christian must have a message that departs radically from the message of the world. He knows from special revelation that, though man is still God's image bearer, he is depraved. The sinner has made himself, instead of God, the ultimate reference point. He will therefore make over all the facts and arguments presented to him by the believer according to his own presupposition of autonomy unless that very presupposition is challenged.¹

The Biblicist cannot present the Christian message assuming that the non-Christian will understand and believe. He knows the actual situation of unregenerate man by means of written revelation. He knows that sinful man does indeed know God through natural revelation, but also that the same sinful man is striving with all his might to suppress such knowledge. The Biblicist will therefore have a message that reminds the disbeliever of the revelation around him. He will tell the unsaved that this revelation is clear and plain and that he therefore stands without excuse before God.² Then the Biblicist can truly present the message of the only hope--the grace of the sovereign God.

¹Van Til, "Apologetics," p. 45.

²Van Til, Common Grace and the Gospel, p. 130.

CONCLUSION

To truly understand natural revelation one must reject the rationalism of the Roman Catholics and Arminians. He must also depart radically from the conclusion of Barthian neo-orthodoxy that there is no natural revelation. Barth began with the fallacious presupposition of Christomonism. One must depend upon special revelation to have a true concept of natural revelation.

In turning to special revelation, especially Romans 1:20, the Christian can know that natural revelation is indeed perspicuous. It is clear because it is the self-manifestation of a perfect, self-sufficient God who does all things well. Ever since God created the universe, everything which is made shines forth the radiance and glory of the Creator. The message of God's self-revelation comes through to all men loudly and clearly. It cannot be missed.¹

Although man has been surrounded on all sides by these objective evidences of God's eternal power and divinity, he has refused to acknowledge God and His natural revelation. Since the Fall man has been ethically separated from the Creator and has strived to actively suppress the truth of God's revelation. Nevertheless, the revelation still exists, still shines forth brightly, and is still known by

¹Geehan, Jerusalem and Athens, p. 135.

man. Try as he will to deny its existence, God's natural revelation is the "albatross" forever about sinful man's neck.¹ Man's suppression of the truth is against his better knowledge as God's image bearer. His basic problem is not ignorance, but rebellion. If the sinner should claim ignorance, it cannot be an ignorance based on a lack of knowledge, but an ignorance based on the suppression or perversion of knowledge.² Natural revelation is clear despite man's depravity.

What then is the purpose, or function, of God's self-revelation in nature? The only positive purpose of natural revelation is to reveal God, and thus to restrain the sin of His image bearers. According to special revelation, one does not gain knowledge of God's soteriological grace from natural revelation. In other words, the sinner can not come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ by means of natural revelation. He must go to the Scriptures to learn of the Savior. Therefore, it can be stated that the communication of the salvation message is not a purpose of natural revelation. Those who claim such speak against the Word of God.

The negative purpose of natural revelation is the rendering inexcusable of all men. It can be determined from an exegesis of Romans 1:20 that God designed natural revelation for this very function. It is not a coincidental

¹Stonehouse and Woolley, The Infallible Word, p. 275.

²Bohlmann, "The Natural Knowledge of God," p. 734.

result of natural revelation that all excuse is taken away from sinful man. The just and holy God determined that no man, not even the one who has lived and died unevangelized, could plead ignorance when he stands before his eternal Judge. God sovereignly took away all claims to ignorance when He revealed Himself in nature.

The Christian who realizes that all men stand before God without an excuse for their rebellion against Him should be further motivated to evangelize the lost and defend the faith from the arguments of those seeking to suppress the truth. There is no hope for the unsaved unless they hear the message of salvation from special revelation. Natural revelation does not provide a hope of salvation or even ignorance. It serves only to render them excuseless. That is the purpose of the very perspicuous natural revelation.

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