



## A Position on the Role of General Revelation and Special Revelation in Christian Education

The Christian faith affirms that there are only two starting points of knowledge, general revelation and special revelation.<sup>2</sup> The following document will expound on these two epistemic bases of knowledge and how they interrelate and support one another without compromising each other. The particular purpose for this discourse is to provide Christian educators with a succinct framework on the role and relationship of general revelation and special revelation so that *Christian* educational settings remain distinctly Christian educational settings. The focus will be on understanding the role of each mode of revelation, particularly how their discontinuity supports their continuity in maintaining a flourishing classroom and curriculum. The content will proceed as follows: (1) a definition of general revelation and its relation to a truth value of tentative truth will be explained, (2) a definition of special revelation and its relation to a truth value of absolute truth will be explained, (3) the witness of general revelation to a truth value of absolute truth as the basis of all inductive inquiry (even when suppressed in fallen humanity) will be explained, (4) the logical necessity of special revelation as the only plain and certain foundation of all inductive sciences will be elaborated, and lastly (5) conclusive practical implications for Christian education, educators, and students will be briefly given.<sup>3</sup> To reiterate, this position document is intended to layout crucial doctrinal and methodological distinctions between general revelation and special revelation to provide Christian educators with a framework for remaining distinctly and comprehensively biblical in all ways without losing the wealth of tentative knowledge claims derived from the inductive sciences.

<sup>1</sup> Written by R. Heath Robertson, reviewed and edited by Dr. BJ Condrey (PhD Ethics and Practical Theology, University of Edinburgh) and Robb Torseth (PhD Student, Systematic Theology, University of Edinburgh), reviewed by Dr. Yelena Solodyankin (PhD in Philosophy in Leadership Studies, Gonzaga University); all content is drawn from an unpublished working chapter in *A Biblical Systematic Theology* by R. H. Robertson.

<sup>2</sup> For a simple definition on general and special revelation, see "Revelation," "General Revelation," and "Special Revelation" in Stanley J. Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling's *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999). This document will define both terms, their objects of knowledge, their mode of inquiry, and how special revelation establishes general revelation.

<sup>3</sup> These proceeding 5 points will be helpful for Christian educators to position the scope of common grace and its relation to special or saving grace. Often the tentative knowledge operative for humanity by common grace is conflated with the deductive certainty operative by God's Word and saving grace and, in this way, educators inadvertently struggle to discern the difference between theory and truth, collapsing theory into truth or vice versa. See following paragraphs.

As the first statement highlights, general revelation is one of the two modes of revelation honored by the Christian faith. General revelation is the revelation of God in creation and concerns the indirect knowledge of God drawn from creation.<sup>4</sup> General revelation admits both absolute truth and tentative truth.<sup>5</sup> In starting with tentative truth, general revelation provides tentative truth when seeking to discover knowledge in creation beyond what Scripture plainly attests to concerning creation. That is, this mode of inquiry investigates into creation via the *inductive* scientific method, is controlled by the *subject* (whether individual or collective), and posits theoretical knowledge that, at its strongest measure of probability, admits a truth value of tentative truth.<sup>6</sup> The reason general revelation *beyond* what Scripture reveals about general revelation only admits theoretical models and tentative truth value is because (1) its method starts with the subject and thereto subjective observation, drawing inferences from selected data while a *priori* assuming the principle of the uniformity of nature; these interdependent aspects of the inductive method leave inquiries inconclusive in determining absolute truth; the method is established upon the subjunctive mood and not the indicative mood or certainty; (2) general revelation drawn through the inductive method seeks to plumb the inner depths of God's creation which have yet to be absolutely revealed; such inner depths will move from the tentative to the absolute, but not until the eschaton when Christ unveils all things.<sup>7</sup> The above distinctions, however, do not undermine the inductive method and its various fields of study established therein. Rather, it highlights the methods proper locus as secondary knowledge, which derives its basis and practical life from primary or foundational knowledge, that is, special revelation.<sup>8</sup>

Special revelation provides humanity with absolute truth from God's רמא (said) or Word and is particularly located in the 66 books of inspired Scripture, although special revelation includes all of God's redemptive acts over creation-history wherein He discloses Himself and

<sup>4</sup>Ps. 19:1–3, Rom. 1:18–21. Cf. fn. 1 above.

<sup>5</sup>This section will expound on the tentative truth value and return to general revelation's "absolute truth" value after discussing special revelation and engaging humanity's fallen condition. See below.

<sup>6</sup>For a basic primer on induction and deduction, see Patrick J. Hurley's *A Concise Introduction to Logic* 11th edition (Boston: Clark Baxter, 2012), esp. Ch. 1, 4, 9, and 13. See also *hypothetical or scientific reasoning in contrast with deductive reasoning*.

<sup>7</sup>1 Cor. 13:12.

<sup>8</sup>For further clarification on tentative truth, a tentative truth claim means a truth claim that stands true until proven otherwise and therefore the claim never enters the category of objective or absolute truth value; as will be discussed below, it is Scripture's objectively true truth value that gives all tentative truths their potential value. This upholds a fine distinction: while all truth is God's truth, all truth claims drawn from natural inquiry are tentatively truth until proven otherwise by further data or Christ's return. See following paragraphs for more.

<sup>9</sup>See Stanley J. Grenz's citation above and De S. Cameron's citation below. Cf. also the traditional theological categories of *providentia ordinaria* and *providentia extraordinaria*. Technically, all of God's providential acts are categorically one, but ordinary and extraordinary are helpful conceptual distinctions between God's normative action and God's freedom to act otherwise; both are the outworking of His perfect will and overarching plan.

His purposes in distinction from His normative or “uniform” providential acts over creation-history.<sup>9</sup> Scripture is God’s *special* revelation in the sense that it is the revelation of God communicated directly to humanity, unveiling and demonstrating God and His redemptive purposes to His image bearers in a manner suited to creaturely capacities (i.e., plain verbal human discourse). This means special revelation categorically provides a deductive mode of reasoning for all things based upon its truth certainty, a *God said* of certainty and not a *did God say?* of uncertainty.<sup>10</sup> This deductive mode of reasoning based upon God’s absolute authority is a gift for each believer wherein the Spirit indwells and guides the people of Christ in the inspired Word of Christ.<sup>11</sup> With inductive inquiry properly located as secondary theoretical knowledge and not conflated with the primary absolute knowledge of God’s direct revelation, inductive fields of inquiry (e.g., physical sciences, social sciences, etc.) are kept in their proper role, motivating image bearers to question, revise, and expand research in the rich and continuous discovery of God’s glory in creation and the continuous effort of maximizing creaturely shalom in life after the fall.

On the above basis, the various fields of science are necessarily dependent upon and subordinate to special revelation—the *said* of God’s Word—to *objectively* exist as sciences. To inquire into the known world is to already assume a known world and world to be known. This assumption, however, cannot be granted unless God has both (a) objectively created the world and has also (b) deductively or absolutely revealed that He has created the world such that it can be known. Namely, the inductive sciences are predicated upon a deductive claim or divinely revealed presupposition, which the inductive sciences themselves cannot scientifically establish by method.<sup>12</sup> This reveals quite clearly that even while persons suppress the *a priori* objective truth of God’s glory in creation and conscience (which undergirds the inductive task), they are still employing the scientific method from a biblical starting point. Specifically, inductive studies claiming a non-faith position or agnostic epistemic starting point are actually functioning on the assumption of the God revealed in Christ; whether in suppression or reverence, all of humanity functionally (in practice) presupposes God’s self-revelation in creation to establish world inquiry as a meaningful mode of *actual* discovery. To discover is to already be discovered, to find oneself already in a known and knowable situation. Any science suppressing the truth of God’s self-revelation in creation cuts off the very source that funds its object of study, the mode of inquiry, and the reality of knowledge and virtue sustaining the endeavor.

<sup>10</sup> Gen. 1:3, 6, 9, etc., 2:16–17, 3:1–7, cp. 1 Tim. 6:2–5; for the theme of revelation as God’s אָמַר (said), see De S. Cameron, Nigel M. “Revelation, Idea Of” or “The Idea of Revelation” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 679–82, Electronic ed. Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996). See also Martin Luther in *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 1, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 146–47.

<sup>11</sup> 2 Tim. 3:16–17, 2 Peter 1:21, Eph. 2:19–21, Jude 3, Jn. 10:1–5 ff., 14:16–17, 15:26–27, 16:13–15. For a rich historical protestant definition of the inner witness, see *internum testimonium Spiritus Sancti and related terms* in Richard A. Muller’s *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: drawn principally from Protestant scholastic theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Herman Bavinck’s 4th lecture entitled “Revelation and Nature” in *Philosophy of Revelation*, ed. Anthony Uyl (Woodstock: Devoted Publishing, 2017).

Christian education, therefore, simply recognizes that all notions of tentative knowledge derived from induction via general revelation are founded upon the truth certainty of God's Word, i.e., primary knowledge. God's Word is the basis and confidence of all inquiry into the knowable world and therefore it is scientifically impossible to coordinate, subordinate, integrate, or enmesh the secondary knowledge of extra-biblical findings into the fabric or foundation of the primary knowledge upon which the secondary tentative knowledge itself rests. Similarly, Moses writes: *The things that are hidden are for YHWH but the things that are revealed are for us and our children forever, to do all the words of this law.*<sup>13</sup> For these reasons, Christian education does not integrate or enmesh secondary knowledge derived from general revelation into the foundation of primary knowledge derived from God's encountering humanity by the Spirit in the perspicuity of His Word.<sup>14</sup> While God has given humanity the role of encountering His creation, establishing the wonderful task of inductive research, God has given Himself the role of directly encountering His image bearers, establishing truth certainty from which creaturely induction lives, moves, and has its practices. To reverse these roles or equalize them would be academic dishonesty, against the method of induction itself, and removing the truth certainty from the classroom upon which both the Christian faith and the inductive scientific method depend.<sup>15</sup>

As highlighted in the opening on general revelation, general revelation does admit to absolute truth; that is, creation directly and plainly witness to the truth of God's workmanship, although humanity suppresses this form of God's perspicuity or plain witness. The reason humanity suppresses rather than confidently upholds the various self-evident truths of God in the natural world, such as, but not excluded to, creation as creation (not happenstance or indeterminate "phenomena"), God's glory in creation, creatures created according to kinds, and humanity created male and female in the *imago Dei* is because of humanity's fall in the first Adam.<sup>16</sup> That is, there are plain absolute truths of the natural world that are in no need of induction or an inference of any kind, as the psalmist declares in 19:1–4 and 53:1–3. However, because humanity lost reverence for God, humanity lost its only foundation for attesting to this truth.<sup>17</sup> In turning from the Creator to creation, humanity lost the only basis for making immutable and authoritative claims about creation's plain speech attesting to the glory of God.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Deut. 29:29, trans. by R. Heath Robertson from the MT of the Hebrew Bible in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*.

<sup>14</sup> The "perspicuity" of Scripture simply means that the inspired 66 books (the Bible) are plain in their meaning and suited to human understanding; Scripture is clear in itself. Interpretive issues lie in going beyond the plain sense and our fallen condition or lack of one's conformity to Christ.

<sup>15</sup> For the priority of special revelation in education, even speech itself, see Robb Torseth's summary of John Webster in "The Sanctification of Our Speech: The Theological Function of the Truth and Falsehood in John Webster's 'Sins of Speech'" under subtitle "Reordering Speech in the Public Arena." *Themelios* (forthcoming, 2022). For related reading in the context of secular university education, see John Webster's *The Culture of Theology*, ed. Ivor J. Davidson and Alden C. McCray (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), esp. Ch. 4.

In this condition of irreverence for God and His Word, humanity by *common grace* might name a creature, learn mathematics/equations ( $3 + 3 = 6$ ), teach moral character, and observe micro genetic variation in a species, but such tasks and such claims are without any objective starting point and basis when suppressing God's revealed *said* from the onset. That is, recognizing distinctions such as classifying a thing as a thing (e.g., biology), mentally dividing material/substance into parts or unifying substantial parts into one whole (e.g., mathematics), making ethical judgments between good and evil and right and wrong (e.g., ethics), constructing a linear narrative (e.g., history), etc. only admits conceptions, perspectives, and theories that, in not recognizing their divine foundation, form at best unwarranted tentative truth claims. Thus, the sciences are always, both in principle and practice, properly divine sciences—theological sciences from the start. Further, the sciences are a redeemed gift of God for redeemed image bearers via God's *special grace* in the gift of the new heart; the renewed creature renews the sciences for loving God and neighbor—for awe and wonder of the Creator and strength and nourishment of the creature.<sup>19</sup>

In this way, Christian education does not integrate biblical presuppositions into the classroom precisely because biblical presuppositions were always *already* in the classroom. God's Word disclosed to humanity is the very objective truth establishing and sustaining the classroom. In terms of Christian educators, the recognition of special revelation as the foundation of all inquiry gives Christian educators the liberty and ability to constructively assess all extra-biblical theories, models, practices, etc. without assuming them and adopting them into the foundation of the absolute Word. Put another way, when Scripture is recognized as the necessary foundation and thus starting point of all fields of inquiry, Scripture naturally takes on its divine role of a plumbline—the standard of assessment—testing the strength/cogency of all general revelation that inquires beyond Scripture's plain witness concerning general revelation. This means God's Word is not only LORD over the Christian educator, but LORD over every jot and tittle of the Christian educator's field of expertise. Jesus is Alpha and Omega of the sciences, the epistemic rock upon which science always depends.

As a result of the above, both the Christian institution and Christian educator are provided confidence that their instruction will confidently remain founded upon God's Word while not rejecting the wealth of tentative truth claims established in any given field of study. Far too often Christian education has either (a) given too much strength to probabilistic knowledge thereby subjecting Scripture's authoritative God *said* to an unauthoritative *did God surely say?*

<sup>16</sup> Gen. 2:16–17, 3:1ff., Jer. 17:9, Rom. 1:18–23, 3:10–18, 5:12ff., 2 Cor. 4:4–6, Eph. 4:18, 2 Pet. 3:1–7.

<sup>17</sup> Prov. 1:7, Jn. 1:1–5, Col. 1:16–17, 2:3.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Bk. 2, Ch. 4, point 1.

<sup>19</sup> For a simple definition on common grace and special or effectual grace, see Stanley J. Grenz, et al. *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms*. For historically rich definitions on common grace and special grace, see Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: drawn principally from Protestant scholastic theology*, 140–45.

or (b) given no voice to probabilistic inquiry thereby leaving Christian education, educators, and students alike detached from God's wonder in creation and insufficiently equipped to serve one's neighbor well with the gospel of Christ.<sup>20</sup> The above distinctions also ensure the classroom does not inadvertently become a locus of falsehood where students are taught unauthoritative claims as though they were authoritative claims, unintentionally hampering the student's ability to think according to the truth with confidence in Christ or (far worse) hampering the student's ability to distinguish between Christ's living Word and the tentative word of another.

Lastly, the above distinctions between general revelation and special revelation, along with the role that sin nature plays in relation to natural revelation, preserves the Christian educational setting from losing its distinctive doctrinal register by keeping God's *said* from becoming a fluid *saying* or enmeshed with a *did God surely say?* of induction or worse, speculation. In this way, the given school's faith statement and values are kept in the indicative mood following Scripture's perspicuity and not the subjunctive mood following either life apart from the Word or life in its good mode of inquiry beyond special revelation. All forms of policy and practice beyond the school's faith and values remain subject to the scrutiny of the school's faith and values that derive their voice and life from the plumbline of God's Word alone. In this way, the assurance of truth moves upon education in one direction. The Word of truth constantly goes *forth* into education and constantly *returns* education sanctified by truth, including the educators and those educated.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> For the theme of revelation as God's רמא (*said*), see De S. Cameron, Nigel M. "Revelation, Idea Of" or "The Idea of Revelation" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 679–82, Electronic ed. Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996). See also Martin Luther's lectures on Genesis 1–3. This author builds out the themes further than the above sources.

<sup>21</sup> Ps. 19:7–9.



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