

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

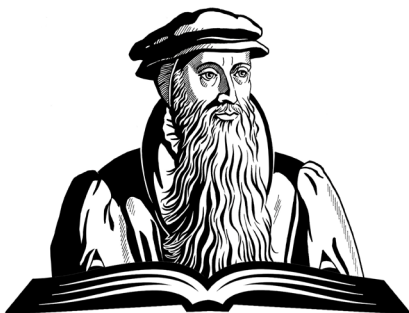
by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 1:

INTRODUCTION and THE DOCTRINE OF FIRST PRINCIPLES

Lecture 4

REVELATION



The John Knox Institute
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Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module 1 ~ Lecture 1

Introduction:

1. Methodology
2. Creeds and Confessions

The Doctrine of First Principles:

3. Scripture
- 4. Revelation**
5. The Inspiration of Scripture
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SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

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Module 1 ~ Lecture 1 REVELATION

Imagine walking into a large room with bright lights. In the middle of the otherwise empty room, you see in front of you a very large white sheet that has been draped over something, forming what looks like a large mound in the middle of the room. The sheet functions like a veil, covering what is hidden. Then two men walk into the room, and, grasping opposite ends of the sheet, they lift it off, thereby unveiling what is underneath. When they do so, you discover that hidden underneath the sheet are large tables full of gold, silver, and precious gems. You say to yourself, “Wow, who would have ever imagined?”

This illustrates the biblical idea of “revelation.” In English, the words “conceal” and “reveal” are opposites. The former means to hide something, whereas the latter, the word “reveal,” means to expose or to make something known. In the Bible, revelation refers to God unveiling and making known His truth to creatures such as ourselves. He takes what would otherwise be hidden from us and graciously condescends to show it to us. He is not silent. He opens up and discloses to us the knowledge of Himself and the way of salvation. If we wish to know Him, we must rely on what He tells us of Himself. Relying on any other speculation would only lead to greater ignorance.

In this first module on systematic theology we’re covering the doctrine of first principles. And turning our attention to the Scriptures, we must first begin with what the Bible teaches about the general idea of revelation. As in all our lectures, we will be expounding the topic of this lecture, the biblical doctrine of revelation, under four points. We will look at it scripturally, doctrinally, polemically, and then practically.

And so first of all, let’s consider this scripturally. We’ll begin by considering a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the doctrine of revelation. If you have your Bible with you, you can turn to Psalm 19. You’ll note that the Psalm can be divided into three parts. First, verses 1–6 teach us that God reveals Himself to us through the created universe. Second, in verses 7–9, it speaks of God’s revelation to us through His written Word. We learn, therefore, that God reveals Himself in two primary ways—in creation and in the Scriptures. The third section of Psalm 19, verses 10–14 address the practical implications in our response to God’s Word. Look more carefully at the two types of revelation that are described there. God reveals Himself first of all in creation. The Psalm opens, “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork.” We see in verse 2 that this revelation is constant—never ending, and without interruption. We also learn, in verses 3 and 4, that it extends to all men throughout the whole world. Everyone is exposed to this knowledge and has access to it. But God also reveals Himself more fully and more accurately through His Word. You’ll note that in verses 7, 8, and 9, we find six parallel

statements, each comprised of three parts. In the first part, you have a description of God's Word; so, you'll note the language "law," "testimony," "statutes," and so on. In the second part of each of those parallel statements, you'll see a characteristic of His Word. So it's described as "perfect" or as "sure" or as "right," and so on. And then thirdly, you'll note the personal impact of God's Word. It speaks about how it "converts the soul," "makes wise the simple," "rejoices the heart," and so on. David's words in Psalm 19, therefore, introduce the basic components of God's divine revelation, the unveiling of the knowledge of God to His creatures. It comes to us both through creation and, more fully and accurately, through His Word.

Secondly, we need to consider a doctrinal overview of the doctrine of divine revelation. Here we'll expound some of the more detailed distinctions and categories that Scripture provides for us. First of all, this doctrine is summarized in the Westminster Confession of Faith, in Chapter 1. If you look at that, you'll note that the first paragraph reads like this: "Although the light of nature and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God as to leave men inexcusable, yet they are not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and of His will which is necessary unto salvation." That first paragraph then goes on to speak of the necessity of the special revelation of God's Word, and really the remainder of Chapter 1, which is comprised of ten paragraphs, expounds then the whole doctrine of Scripture.

And so we begin by considering what we call general or sometimes natural revelation. It's called general revelation because, first of all, it provides general knowledge of God, though not about God as Redeemer. Secondly, God conveys that knowledge to a general audience, that is, to all mankind. It is sometimes called natural revelation—natural, because He reveals Himself through the natural world or the created order. We need to consider four components of this general revelation or natural revelation, and this will help elucidate or clarify our understanding of the doctrine.

First of all, I want us to consider the ways in which God reveals Himself in general revelation. As we've noted, He reveals himself through His works of creation and providence. Now this shouldn't surprise us, because both creating the world out of nothing, and His providential care where He is governing all of the affairs of the world, are the works of God, and so we should be able to see something of Him in them. We already saw this in Psalm 19; the created order bears witness to the Creator, and thereby serves as a medium of divine revelation. In addition to creation outside of us, God has also placed a witness inside of us as those made in the image of God. This is what John Calvin called the "sense of divinity" or the "sense of the divine" which God plants in our conscience. So if you look in your Bible at Romans 2:14–15, we read, "For when the Gentiles, which have not the law," - they don't have special revelation - "which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: which show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another." You'll see something similar when Paul is in Athens in Acts 17 and he addresses the Athenians at that time, Acts 17:22–31. So, first of all, the ways in which God reveals Himself in terms of general revelation are primarily through creation and through providence.

The second distinction that we need to make is what it is that God reveals. What exactly does He disclose or show to us? Well, as we learn in Romans 1:15–32, creation reveals specific, though limited, things about God. It manifests, for example, His wisdom and His goodness, His power and His wrath, and it shows Him to be the Creator, Governor, and Judge of the world. All of this is revealed to all men. So as you look at the created order, you can see the wisdom of God in how

all of the pieces fit together, His goodness in providing for His creatures, the power of it as seen in things like a tsunami or an earthquake or other things. We also see His wrath, so that all men have a cognizance, a recognition, that there is a Creator and a Governor, and what's more, that there is a Judge to whom they're accountable. So the second thing is what exactly is revealed.

The third thing is to whom this is revealed. To whom does this general revelation come? And the answer is that it comes to all men equally, and it comes to all men inescapably. Again, note Psalm 19, or look at Romans 1 and Romans 2. We discover that everyone—doesn't matter what part of the world you live in, what time of history you live in, what your language is, or anything else—men can look upon the works of creation and providence and see clearly these things.

The fourth distinction pertains to the limits of general revelation, and this is an important point, as we'll see more in a moment—the limits of general revelation. General revelation reveals enough to condemn men but not to save them. So in seeing the goodness, the wisdom, the power of God, knowing that He is the Creator, knowing that He is the Judge, all of that is sufficient to condemn men because of their sin, but in all of that, no matter how far you look or how deep you look, you'll never find the knowledge necessary unto salvation. There's no salvation found in general revelation. So that's the first general category, general revelation or natural revelation.

But then we need to turn, by way of contrast, to considering special revelation. And we're going to note these same four distinctions; they run parallel to what we've just said with regards to natural revelation. So special revelation comes to us—first of all, the ways in which it comes to us. How is it or through what means does God reveal things to us pertaining to salvation? Well, chiefly, it is in the Scriptures. Now we can say that there were many means culminating in Scripture. So in times past, He revealed Himself through visions and through dreams and through other miracles, through the voice of prophets that came, and so on. But all of that culminated in Scripture itself, and all that we have after the days of the apostles is our Bible. So special revelation is referring to the Holy Scriptures.

The second distinction answers the question, What exactly is revealed in special revelation? And while it is true that it also reveals things that we find in creation about God's wisdom and power and glory and so on, more specifically, the gospel is revealed in special revelation. God as a Savior and as a Redeemer is revealed to us in the Bible—Romans 1:16, "For the gospel is the power of God unto salvation." And so the thing that sets it apart is God coming and disclosing to us Himself as a Redeemer, along with the way in which He has secured salvation for His people.

Again, the third distinction answers the question, to whom does this revelation come? And we know that the Lord Jesus Christ commissioned His apostles, and the ministers of the Gospel that would follow them, to go and to "preach the gospel to every creature." And so this special revelation of the Scriptures is to be proclaimed freely to all men. Now it is only made effectual—it's only made savingly fruitful—in the elect. But all who sit under the proclamation of the gospel are given access to this special revelation.

And then fourthly, the fourth distinction relates to the limits. Whereas general revelation had specific limits—it was enough to condemn men but not to save them, we discover that with special revelation, it is fully sufficient, or to use the words of 2 Peter 1:3, "according as His divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue." And so the Bible is fully sufficient for all that we need for life and godliness. We'll consider this more fully in a future lecture.

Before we pass on from this point of looking doctrinally at this particular point of theology, we can make a further clarification, and ask how it is that general and special revelation relate to one

another. Well, we noted that general revelation is inadequate and incomplete, and that it necessitates special revelation. This is very important within the life of the Christian, and it's very important within the life of the church, because this is the driving Biblical impetus for evangelism and for missions. If men were left only to general revelation, they will perish. They will perish without a knowledge of God in Christ, as He is revealed in the gospel. But special revelation builds on general revelation; it builds on the innate knowledge that a sinner has of their need for salvation. They can see that this Creator has wrath against them, but they need the gospel. And so general flows to the special revelation, or reinforces the need for the special revelation of God. The natural man's problem is not a lack of information. All of creation, including every blade of grass, reveals God. The unbeliever suppresses—pushes down—that truth, in an effort to maintain his own alleged autonomy. We'll consider this more in a moment. So only Jesus Christ is the Savior of sinners, and only the gospel as revealed in the Scriptures tells us of Christ and the way of salvation. It alone, as we saw in Romans 1, is the “power of God” to that end.

Thirdly in this lecture, we need to consider the doctrine polemically. Many people will object to the doctrine that we are considering, and so we need to know how to answer some of the primary arguments against the biblical doctrine of divine revelation so that we're well-equipped to refute those errors and to hold fast to the truth of the Scriptures.

One has to consider two primary objections. First of all, some object that general revelation either does not exist, or that it is not inescapably clear, because otherwise there would be no atheists, or so people say. This objection fails to take into consideration what theologians call the noetic effects of sin, which refers to the influence of sin on the mind. A person can be shown something and yet refuse to see it. In that case the problem does not lie with what is outside the person but rather what is inside them—their character, their heart, and their belligerent attitude. Romans 1:19–21 teaches that the knowledge of God is manifested and shown to all men through the created order, but that natural men “hold the truth in unrighteousness” and “become vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.” In other words, they suppress the truth due to their depravity and their rebellion against God. And so this is a moral problem; it's a heart problem. It's not a problem of intelligence, which is why Romans 1 says that they remain “without excuse.” Despite all of their denials and despite all of their pontification, they remain without excuse. That's also why we sing in Psalm 14:1 that “the fool has said in his heart, There is no God.” That is not name-calling and it's not asserting that a person lacks intelligence or intellectual faculties. Psalm 14:1 is describing the sinful character of the atheist. They are acting in a way that is rebellious and foolish to say that there is no God.

But there's a second objection that we should consider. Others maintain that a person can rely entirely on natural revelation alone, without special revelation. This approach to a merely natural religion disposes of the necessity of the gospel in the Scriptures for understanding the way of salvation. But as we saw earlier in the Westminster Confession of Faith, general revelation is not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and of His will which is necessary unto salvation. You cannot find the name of Jesus, a revelation of Him as Mediator, or the knowledge of His atoning work, anywhere in creation. No, as Romans 1:16 says, the gospel of Christ is the power of God unto salvation, and that gospel is provided in the Scriptures alone. We learn in Romans 10 that “faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” And so not only is the knowledge of Christ found in the Scriptures not in creation, but also, when those Scriptures are proclaimed to us, it is necessary for us to hear them in order to believe them. So for example, we learn that young Timothy was made wise unto salvation through being taught the Scriptures by his mother and

grandmother. We read that in 2 Timothy 3:15.

Fourthly and lastly, we need to consider this doctrine practically. We can highlight some practical implications for ourselves that are derived from the doctrine of divine revelation. Let me provide a few. First of all, the place of the believer's study of creation and providence. What the believer discovers is that the whole world comes alive to the Christian because we find that it is God's world, that it's created and owned by Him for showing forth His glory. Revelation 4:11 says, "For thou Hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created." In other words, the universe is a theater for displaying God's glory, and the Christian has a keen interest in that. The Christian wants to see and wants to know more of who God is, and so it's a delight to discover that when we open our eyes, whether we're looking up into the outer reaches of the heavens through a telescope, or whether we're looking down into the unseen details of a human cell with a microscope, we are there studying the "handiwork of God," as the Psalmist says. You'll notice how often Jesus draws on illustrations from the created world in order to convey spiritual truths. This isn't by accident, and it's not just that Jesus looks at the created world and thinks, "Well, how can I teach some spiritual truth with this?" No, it's quite the opposite. God has Himself buried in the created world spiritual truth which Jesus is merely drawing out, so when He says, "Consider the lilies of the field," or when He's pointing to a sparrow, or speaking about the hairs upon our head, looking into the heavens, the stars, and so on, Jesus is actually bringing out for us to see truths with regards to God that He had placed there from the beginning. And so the Christian takes a keen interest in all of this, whether it be the study of botany and plants, or whether it be the study of animals, or the stars of the heavens, or many, many, many other things. Or it could be the study of history, the unfolding of God's providential dealings with men, the hand and finger of God is traced through all of these things, which brings tremendous blessing to the Christian.

A second practical area—while God's works of creation and providence lead us to worship the triune Creator, the believer recognizes that his or her chief priority is to study the Holy Scriptures above all else. It is in the Bible that we hear the voice of the Shepherd and follow Him. Jesus says in Matthew 4:4, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." So consider Job; Job says that he esteems the Word of God "more than his necessary food." Jeremiah speaks about how God's Word is the "joy and rejoicing of his heart." David refers to God's Word as something that is more valuable than gold and silver and precious stones; that it is sweeter to his taste than "honey and the honeycomb," and those examples could be multiplied throughout the Bible. The Lord has revealed the full, complete, perfect, and saving knowledge of Himself in the Scriptures, and since believers long to see and to know Him, they dig deep in the revelation of His Word. We realize how indispensable our Bible is to our spiritual well-being and to all that we consider important and precious. And so practically, this doctrine reinforces our attachment to the Bible.

A third practical area—we see the indispensable need for evangelism and missions. We've noted the gospel is the "power of God unto salvation." There is no other name given among men, "no other name under Heaven" by which men may be saved other than the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is that Name that is published, and it is Christ's person and work that has to be taken to the ends of the world, in order for sinners to be saved. Think of how Paul describes this in Romans 10:13–16, "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? and how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring

glad tidings of good things!” People all around the world are born and spend their whole life and then die without any knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, and therefore they perish eternally in their sins. Knowing this fuels the church’s drive to take the gospel to every Creature. The reason that believers engage in evangelism in their own community, and the reason that the church commissions and sends men as missionaries and preachers of the gospel to other parts of the world, is so that those who now dwell in darkness may be brought under the light of the knowledge of God in the Lord Jesus Christ, as it is revealed in His Word.

That brings us, fourthly, by way of practical application to the fact that the pinnacle of God’s revelation is seen in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word. Hebrews 1 opens with these words, “God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the world.” Saving knowledge of God revealed in the Bible leads the believer to worship and communion with God in Christ, and it thereby produces a deeper and closer and more intimate and sweeter walk with God. So you can see clearly the practical importance of the doctrine of divine revelation.

In conclusion, we have been noting that God has, in His condescension, chosen to reveal Himself and His truth to His creatures. That’s a mystery in itself. And understanding the biblical doctrine of divine revelation prepares us to then more fully appreciate the priority and place of the Holy Scriptures. In the next lecture, we will turn our full consideration to understanding what the Bible says about itself as the inspired word of God. Understanding the doctrine of scripture provides indispensable first principles for the study of systematic theology. Why? Because the Bible serves as the primary source for our whole study of theology.