

THE FIRST STEP IN MISSIONS TRAINING: HOW OUR NEIGHBORS ARE WRESTLING WITH GOD’S GENERAL REVELATION (PART 4)¹

Interlude on Contemporary Theology: representative distortions from the twentieth century that Christians must avoid in the twenty first century

In the first sections of this study we have engaged in a targeted exposition and application of selected themes from Romans 1:16-2:5 which elucidate the description of the condition of the human race as “wrestling with God’s general revelation.” There is no other option for people who do not know the gospel of Christ; God’s general revelation is truly central, honestly essential, to all of human experience, even though much of the human race is investing their time and energy into pushing their awareness of all the contents of God’s general revelation out of consciousness. This is the divine-human wrestling match that has continued throughout all of history since the fall into sin. But we are not the first Christians to think about and describe God’s general revelation. Much of what previous generations of Christians have said about God’s general revelation has been very good and has been included into our exposition of this theme from Romans. But in the 2,000 years of Christian history there have been various distorted directions related to thinking about and responding to God’s general revelation.

We will briefly examine three representative distortions from the twentieth century which are very different from each other and which illustrate the range of problems which can be

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expected to recur among Christians in the twenty first century. Many of the other misunderstandings of God's general revelation are similar to one of these three. Two of these distortions were represented by widely respected theologians, Karl Barth (Protestant) and Karl Rahner (Roman Catholic). Obviously the influence of Barth's ideas can be expected more widely among Protestants and Evangelicals, whereas the influence of Rahner's ideas can be expected more commonly among Roman Catholics, but their influence and the ideas they represented can be found far beyond their own churches. A third distortion is represented by a terrible mix of misguided ideas about general revelation with National Socialism and stands as a permanent warning for Christians in regard to political ideologies which combine isolated themes of Christian teaching (separated from other important themes in our faith and ethics) with racism or nationalism.

During the Nazi era in Europe (1933-1945), some Protestant theologians combined a confused theory of general revelation with aspects of the Nazi (National Socialist) ideology and thereby formed the foundation for the "German Christian Movement." While the deeply disturbing details of this movement are beyond our purview, the "German Christians" claimed there was a general revelation of God's law through the law of the "Volk," the Nazi-Germanic people, or, alternately, there was a revelation of God's grace in the work of Adolf Hitler. The different varieties of people and ideas within this movement agreed in claiming there was a revelation from God that came through their people, their nation, or their political party that was not given to other peoples, nations, or parties. Some of these people became the most enthusiastic promoters of National Socialism, saying that supporting Hitler and the Nazis was a duty for Christians or an expression of real Christian faith.² When I first read a book by one of these writers, already many years ago, I felt sick and could hardly believe my eyes. I hope your reaction is similar.

Very few Christians today will mix the biblical faith with the German National Socialist ideology from the 1930s and 1940s, but the tragic mistakes of these theologians (and the churches they served) stand as a warning for all time; we must be very careful about how we

² For more on this theme see Robert P. Eriksen, *Theologians Under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, and Emanuel Hirsch* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985).

think about general revelation and its relation to political ideologies and secular worldviews. It was a dreadful mistake to associate the demands of the Nazi state and political party with the real demands of God's natural moral law given to all people through general revelation. It seems to me that they interpreted and appropriated the message of the Bible in light of and on the basis of the Nazi ideology, which both filtered out themes from the Bible and distorted how they understood other themes from the Bible. This theological mistake contributed to the humanitarian disasters of World War II and the Holocaust. Bad theology has astonishingly wide social consequences. And if we do not consider the mistakes of the past, we can easily repeat them.

In reaction to the German Christian Movement, Karl Barth (1886-1968), a Swiss Protestant theologian, is properly famous for shouting "Nein!" with such volume that his voice is still echoing in many parts of the church, even when his name is not mentioned.³ Someone needed to say very loudly and very clearly that the Nazi ideology had to be rejected by Christians as vicious, evil, and contrary to everything that Christians affirm; the heroism of Barth and the other courageous people in the "Confessing Church," which opposed the German Christian Movement, should be noted and imitated. And Barth's rebuke of this terrible distortion should be remembered whenever people are tempted to join faith in Christ with one-sided nationalism or excessive loyalty to any political party or ideology. But Barth's theological explanation of his rejection of the Nazi ideology contained another theological problem. He was concerned that any talk about general revelation tends to reduce the biblical message to be merely a religious dimension of a particular culture, thereby reducing the church to be merely the department of religion of a nation or the religious dimension of a particular society. Too often, he thought, the church has lost the sharp edge of its prophetic criticism of society and secular ideologies and has conformed to the ideas and standards of the secular world. (We must agree with his claim that the church has often lost its prophetic sharp edge and become conformed to the world, without accepting all of his theological explanation of the problem.) He argued vehemently that Christians and the churches must only recognize God's one revelation in Jesus Christ which must be authoritative over all we say, do, and think; even our social and political ethics must be

³ One of Barth's influential essays was simply entitled *Nein!*, which means "No!" in German. Barth wrote numerous essays, letters, and books to criticize the Nazis and the "German Christians."

learned entirely from the one revelation in Jesus Christ. This means, according to Barth, that Christians should never discuss general revelation, unless one mentions general revelation only to deny it. On the basis of the one revelation in Christ, and only on this basis, Barth thought Christians can be true critics of all that is evil in society. This rejection of general revelation, saying there is only one revelation from God, the revelation in Jesus Christ, was enshrined in the key Protestant document written in opposition to the German Christian Movement, the *Barmen Confession* of 1934.⁴

We must agree with and enthusiastically applaud Barth's sharp critique of the German Christian Movement and National Socialism, including many of the theological and cultural streams that led up to these movements, but the German Christian Movement suffered from a *misunderstanding* of general revelation; this terribly misguided movement was **not** the result of a proper understanding of God's general revelation.⁵ The German Christian Movement was idolatry within the circles of the Christian Church. And as we saw in our studies of Romans 1:16-2:5, idolatry is one of the common responses to God's general revelation. A Pauline understanding of general revelation builds on the social criticism of the Old Testament prophets and enables believers and the church to become confident both as critics of society and also as heralds of a gospel that all people need. It was the God's general revelation of his moral law that enabled morally sensitive people from many countries (regardless of their faith or lack of faith) to see that National Socialism was evil. There is no reason to follow Barth in his rejection of any discussion of general revelation, as should be evident from our analysis of Romans. The fact that many of the morally sensitive people who resisted National Socialism and the resulting Holocaust were not clear about their own religious convictions can be explained by Paul's claim that God's moral law is known, at least in part, to all people and enables a socially needed

⁴ For more on this theme see Arthur C. Cochrane, *The Church's Confession under Hitler* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962) and Robin W. Lovin, *Christian Faith and Public Choices: The Social Ethics of Barth, Brunner, and Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

⁵⁵ Barth claimed that the church and theological movement of "Culture Protestantism" contributed to the cultural conditions which made National Socialism possible. I think Barth was right in this claim, though other cultural streams also contributed to National Socialism. The main varieties of Culture Protestantism rejected the idea of an objective moral law, whether that moral law given in general or special revelation, which left this movement vulnerable to simply conform to sinful movements in society.

process of mutual moral evaluation.⁶ Many people knew that National Socialism was wrong and had to be resisted because they used the general revelation of God's natural moral law as a standard of evaluation.

A distorted point of view of the opposite extreme from Karl Barth is found in the writings of a group of Roman Catholic theologians often called "Transcendental Thomists," of whom Karl Rahner (1904-1984) is the most well-known. Whether or not this is completely intended by Rahner, one receives the impression that God's general revelation is so complete that people do not truly need the gospel of Christ which only comes via special revelation. In a manner that implies that special revelation has approximately the same content as general revelation, Rahner wrote, "The expressly Christian revelation becomes the explicit statement of the revelation of grace which man always experiences implicitly in the depths of his being."⁷ Notice that, in his view, the Christian revelation of grace is the same as the grace which mankind in general experiences.

What we found in Romans 1 and 2 is that people without the gospel should be aware that they receive better than they deserve because of the richness of God's common grace. There is an awareness of common grace available to all people via God's general revelation, though many will suppress this knowledge. But Paul seems to carefully avoid any promise of forgiveness of sins, justification, and the resulting peace with God that is communicated to people by God's common grace and general revelation. Paul's teaching on general revelation and common grace shows the extreme importance of declaring the gospel to all people, a gospel known only by special revelation; Rahner's teaching seems to reduce the importance of declaring the gospel to all people and to reduce the distinction between common grace and special grace.

Rahner is surely right that God's general revelation forms the necessary precondition of human experience, with a result that human life always has a supernatural dimension, a claim

⁶ For more on this theme, the rejection of general revelation and natural law ethics in twentieth-century Protestant theology, see the second appendix to this study, which is forthcoming.

⁷ Karl Rahner, *A Rahner Reader*, ed. Gerald A. McCool, (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 213. This is from Rahner's essay entitled "Anonymous Christians." I think it is much better not to describe people who claim to be atheists or adherents of other religions as anonymous Christians because a proper respect for people requires that we take their descriptions of themselves very seriously, even if, as I claimed in a previous chapter, many people do not fully believe all the things they say they believe.

which we have noticed in studying Romans 1 and 2. This theme in Rahner's writings provides a needed corrective for all people, whether Christians or not, who talk as if God is not active in the daily life of every person. And I like his elaborate terminology of "the universal supernatural existential," a self-giving presence of God in general revelation which makes and keeps human life human.⁸ But Evangelicals should remind Rahner and his followers that according to the apostle Paul, God holds people accountable, without excuse, and without forgiveness outside of Christ, on the basis of what God has always been speaking and is still speaking through his creation. General revelation, as described in the Bible, is associated with God's law and wrath; God's general revelation, law, and wrath form the framework for understanding and proclaiming the special revelation of the gospel. That special revelation tells us about forgiveness of sins, justification by faith, and peace with God. A proper and serious understanding of God's general revelation will give us missionary courage to confidently and wisely proclaim his special revelation in the Bible and in Jesus Christ.

There have been and will probably continue to be more distorted understandings of God's general revelation within Christian circles. But these three distortions are representative enough that these very brief descriptions can equip thoughtful Christians to perceive other distortions when they appear. In summary, these three distortions are 1. Thinking one's nation or people is a recipient or means of God's revelation in a manner that makes it superior to other nations or peoples; 2. Rejecting the theme of general revelation, as if it were not an essential part of basic Christian teaching; 3. Thinking that God's general revelation makes the special revelation of the gospel of Christ less urgent or even unneeded, with the expectation that people will respond positively to God's general revelation without the special revelation of the gospel. What we have seen from the apostle Paul is that God's general revelation has several areas of content which together provide the conditions which make human life possible; we can continue to live as human beings only because of God's continuing general revelation. But the knowledge of God given through general revelation is constantly suppressed from consciousness because people are

⁸ I also like Rahner's term "transcendental" which he uses to discuss these questions. Whereas the term "transcendent" usually refers to something independent and separate from the material world, and therefore is one of the words we use to describe God, "transcendental" refers to a condition that must exist within the person who knows in order for that person to know something. In this sense, God's continuous general revelation is the transcendental condition of normal human experience.

hiding from God, even though everyone constantly uses this knowledge for daily life and to evaluate each other and our societies. This rejected knowledge of God can be transformed into the accepted and proper knowledge of God by faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Questions for study and discussion:

1. Has your previous understanding of God's general revelation been distorted? Was that distortion similar to one of the distortions briefly described?
2. Have you perceived distorted or one-sided approaches to God's two revelations, general and special, in your Christian circles? What can you do to move toward a more balanced and complete perspective?
3. When you think about "what God is doing," do you think mostly about what God is doing by means of his general revelation or by means of his special revelation? Is something lacking in your knowledge of God?
4. Try to describe the ways in which the distorted understandings of general revelation, which were briefly described, would influence or distort our approach to the mission God has given to believers in the great commission.
5. How would distorted understandings of God's general revelation influence our efforts as Christians in politics, business, and education? What influence would such distortions have on our approach to marriage, family, and parenting?