

## Bonus Chapter 2: God Reveals Himself

All Scripture is God-breathed.

2 Timothy 3:16

In the film *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, a tribe of Botswanian Bushpeople discover an empty Coke bottle that has been discarded from a passing plane. Thinking that any object dropped from the sky must be a gift from the gods, they give thanks to the heavens and set about to find many innovative uses for this throwaway piece of civilization. Some use its hard exterior to smash soft fruits and roots, some like its cylindrical shape for smoothing snake skins, while still others use it to carry water, stamp circles on cloth, or as every child knows, to make a primitive flute by blowing across its mouth.

The Bushpeople find so many uses for their Coke bottle that they begin to fight each other for their turn. After a couple of kids get bopped in the head, the Bushpeople decide that the Coke bottle—though “the strangest and most beautiful thing they had ever seen”—is not worth the turmoil it has brought to their peaceful society. Wondering why the apparently absent-minded gods gave them only one such spectacular gift, they designate one of their own to transport the bottle to the end of the earth and give it back to the gods.

This humorous tale illustrates why the existence of God is not by itself a sufficient starting point for the Christian worldview. The Bushpeople believed in the divine, but because they did not have access to his special revelation (even worse, they confused it with the trash of civilization), they did not possess a proper understanding of God and the world. A correct worldview must not only believe that God exists, it must also know where and what this God has chosen to speak to us.

The Bushpeople's empty Coke bottle, though obviously a more exaggerated form, reappears in various world religions as the Muslim Koran, the Hindu Vedas and Upanishads, and the Book of Mormon. Despite their belief in the existence of God (or gods, for Hindus), all these religions differs from the Christian worldview because of their reliance on alternate forms of revelation. Because they do not begin solely from the foundation of the Holy Bible, these religions are bound to misinterpret God and the world at key points.

Where we start really does determine where we end up. This chapter seeks to demonstrate that besides believing in the existence of God, Christians are also justified in beginning with his special revelation in the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Scriptures. Indeed, it is this ultimate belief in Holy Scripture that determines the distinctive outlook of the Christian worldview, for it is the Bible that teaches us the unique shape of our Christian thought. And unlike the Koran, Vedas and Upanishads, and the Book of Mormon, the Bible alone deserves our confidence as the Word of God.

However, before we demonstrate the reliability of Christianity's revelation, we should first grapple with modernity's widespread objection that revelation is not even possible. If, as many of our neighbors think, divine revelation by definition is impossible, it would be pointless to argue whether the Bible or the Koran is that revelation. So before we explain why Christians are right and Muslims are wrong for trusting their respective Scriptures, we must first describe and then refute modernity's argument against revelation in general.

### **The Double Whammy of Modernity**

As we learned in the previous chapter, because most modern people do not think that God is self-evident, incorrigible, evident to the senses, or logically implied from the same, they typically deny that he exists. To their minds at least, there is just not enough evidence to prove

the existence of an unseen, supernatural being. In the face of such withering criticism, it often takes much effort for us Christians to convince our modern neighbors, and perhaps even ourselves, that God does exist. Occasionally, as we saw with the work of Alvin Plantinga, intelligent and hard-working Christians have managed to overcome this obstacle to faith and persuade many people to believe in God.

However, encouraging people to believe in God is only half the battle. We may convince many people that God exists without leading them to Christ unless we are also able to persuade them that God has disclosed himself to us in the Christian Scriptures. This is more difficult than one might think, for just as modernity has long held arguments against belief in God, so it also has reasons for denying the possibility of divine revelation. It is not unusual to find modern people who, though readily conceding that God exists, adamantly deny that this God can communicate with us. So rather than accept what the Bible says about God, they feel free to create an image of God that satisfies their own whims and desires. Therefore, to penetrate this modern culture with the gospel, our Christian worldview must demonstrate not only that God exists (bonus chapter 1) but also how and where he has revealed himself to his creation (bonus chapter 2).

### **Sleeping With the Enemy**

To understand the modern objection to divine revelation, we need to understand a little bit more of modern philosophy. The next few pages may be a bit technical, but they are essential for understanding modernity's skepticism toward divine revelation. Why is it important to know this? Because, as we saw last chapter, once we understand the presuppositions behind modernity's arguments we may feel less intimidated by its objections to our Christian beliefs. Rather than think we are inferior for believing that God exists and speaks to us, we recognize

that it is modernity's arguments that are lacking. Thus, by studying the objections against our view we may increase our confidence in the Christian worldview.

Although most modern people today don't think that we can argue God's existence from beliefs that are self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses, those living during modernity's early years were not so sure. Most people in the eighteenth century thought they could demonstrate God's existence from things that were evident to their senses, thereby compelling the modern mind to believe in God.

For instance, they pointed out that just as every watch has a watchmaker, so every world must have a worldmaker. Since we cannot deny the existence of this physical world we also cannot deny the existence of the God who made it. Furthermore, the world we inhabit is ordered and beautiful. This indicates that it must have been designed and arranged by an extremely intelligent being. This world could not have been thrown together by accident; it must be the product of a purposeful plan, which of course implies a divine planner. With arguments like these, many Christians thought they could accept modernity's ultimate beliefs and still argue their way to belief in God. They could create a Christianity that even modern people would be obliged to accept.

Fortunately for future generations of believers, this cozy friendship between modernity and Christianity was disrupted by the brilliant philosopher David Hume (1711-76). Although his criticisms were devastating to theists in his day, they have since served to caution believers against grounding their Christian beliefs upon an alien worldview. Those who begin with inappropriate presuppositions (such as believing only what is evident to the senses) will eventually find that whatever they build upon this shaky foundation is equally unstable.

In his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Hume gives several reasons why theists cannot empirically prove the existence of God from within the modern worldview. For instance, against the argument that this physical world must be caused by an uncaused God, Hume suggests that theists are entirely arbitrary for halting the question of causation with God. If every watch requires a watchmaker and every world requires a worldmaker, then wouldn't every God require a Godmaker? If theists reply that nothing made God, for he just is, then why can't an atheist claim the same for the world? Both theists and naturalists agree that something must be uncaused; they merely disagree about what that thing is—God or the world.

Furthermore, Hume warns theists that this world may not be as well designed as they think. What about all the evil around us? Doesn't any of it count against God's existence? If this world was fashioned by an infinitely powerful and wise Creator, wouldn't it be a much better place? Perhaps this world was created by a committee; that would explain its numerous imperfections. Or perhaps it was created by a young God who was learning how to make worlds, or by an elderly deity who wanted to create one more world before he retired.

Hume's point is that if you're going to ground belief in God upon what is evident to your senses, you had better not forget to include all of the evidence. And when you do, you will realize that much of it points away from the infinitely powerful, good, and wise God that you thought you were arguing to.

### **Rescuing God from the Jaws of Modernity**

Hume's skepticism forced many theists to find new ways to argue for God's existence. One particularly radical and significant approach was put forth by the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).<sup>1</sup>

Kant meant well. He only intended to rescue God from Hume's criticisms, but the way he went about it has significantly damaged modernity's belief in God. Like rescuers who must perform multiple amputations to extract a victim from the wreckage, the God that Kant saved was merely a shadow of his former self.

Kant began by conceding to Hume the limitations of human reason. He agreed with Hume that all knowledge comes through experience and that we will never be able to prove the existence of God by this means. But rather than detract from the existence of God, all this does is demonstrate the weakness of our own intellects. It is no knock on God that we cannot prove his existence from the empirical world; rather, it is a reminder of our own ignorance.

Kant supported this claim by dividing the world into what he called the phenomenal and noumenal realms (figure 2.1). The phenomenal world consists of things as they appear to us, including whatever our senses pick up from our environment, such as the feel of a salty breeze blowing in from the ocean or the sound of seagulls searching for food scraps. Kant argued that this phenomenal world of appearances is knowable to anyone who uses his empirical senses. After all, this is what our five senses do—they report the world as it appears to them. Since this knowledge comes through empiricism, Kant logically claimed that the phenomenal world belongs to science. As modern people run experiments and record their observations, they acquire a deeper, more useful knowledge of the phenomenal world.

**Figure 2.1: Kant's Noumenal-Phenomenal Distinction**

**Noumenal World:** God, essence of things. *The World of Faith*

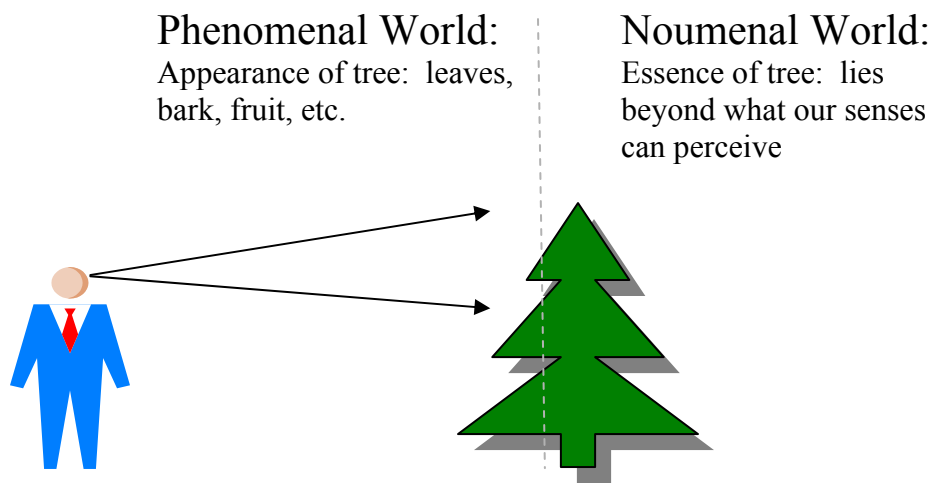
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**Phenomenal World:** appearances, sensations. *The World of Knowledge*

By contrast, Kant's noumenal world is an unknowable world of essences and other important ideas. The term "noumenal" comes from the Greek word *noumenon*, which means "concept" or "thought." The noumenal world contains those items which lie beyond what our five senses can detect yet seem to be necessary concepts or ideas to account for the phenomenal world.

For instance, although we have never directly perceived the essence of a tree, we assume that each tree has an underlying essence that unites within itself the fragrance of its blossoms, the texture of its bark, the taste of its fruit, the color of its limbs, and the rustle of its leaves. Although we have never directly observed "treeness" (and consequently, for an empiricist, can't claim that we know it exists), we find it helpful to posit such an essence to tie together the various parts of a tree that we do observe (figure 2.2).

**Figure 2.2: Noumenal-Phenomenal Distinction Within Objects**



Besides the underlying essence of things, Kant declared that another significant noumenal concept is our idea of God. We can't say that we know God, since no one alive has ever seen or heard him, yet his existence seems necessary to explain some important facets of our world.

Take morality, for instance. Kant observed that everyone in his day assumed that people should strive to do what is right—that is, they should seek the highest good for themselves and others. This highest good ultimately occurs when a virtuous person (someone who always does what is best) is rewarded with happiness for her efforts. However, in this life many virtuous people die unrewarded, never receiving the happiness they deserve for their moral conduct. If this life is all there is, many people may conclude that no highest good exists and so they may give up trying to achieve it. Why even bother to be good?

On the other hand, if people believe that there is an afterlife where a good God will reward people with happiness for the good deeds they have done in this life, then they can logically strive to do what is right, for they now believe that there will be a return for their efforts. They can now believe that there is a highest good toward which they can work in this life. Thus, Kant concluded that since everyone agrees that morality is necessary, and since morality is only compelling if a God exists to reward their efforts, then everyone must also believe in God.

In this manner Kant thought that he had found a way around Hume's attacks. Hume's criticism of philosophical arguments for belief in God couldn't touch Kant's practical approach, for Kant wasn't saying that he knows God exists. He was only saying that practically he must believe it in order to justify the moral life. Like everything else in the noumenal world, people are permitted to believe in God even though they can't know him.

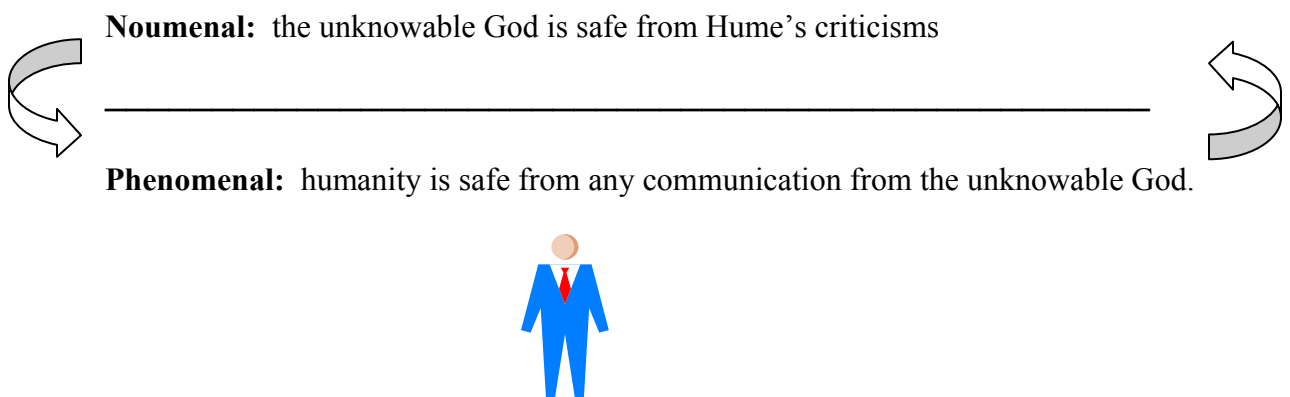
### **A Rescue Gone Bad**

Before we congratulate Kant for rescuing God from the objections of modernity, look at what he has given up. Unlike Plantinga, who defeated modernity and retained a robust view of God, Kant has defeated Hume's modern attacks by giving up the God he sought to defend. He

has protected God by placing him in the unknowable noumenal world. There God is sheltered from Hume's criticisms, for human reason is unable to argue for or against what it can't know. Hume's skepticism cannot touch God.

However, just as God is safe from Hume, so now Hume is safe from God. If the noumenal world is unknowable, then God cannot communicate with Hume. By definition, revelation is impossible, for if God could disclose himself, then we would know something about him and he would no longer belong in the noumenal realm. Just as our phenomenal world cannot penetrate the noumenal world, so the noumenal world cannot impinge upon our phenomenal existence (figure 2.3). Thus, Kant rescued belief in God by turning God into some unknowable, lifeless idea that we nevertheless posit in order to motivate people to live morally.

**Figure 2.3: Noumenal-Phenomenal Distinction Applied to God**



This Kantian move continues to produce enormous consequences in our modern world. In the absence of any possibility of revelation, many people who claim to believe in God also feel free to fashion an image of God to their own liking. So radical feminists imagine that God is female, liberation theologians worship a Latin American God whose main concern is to free their people from poverty, black theologians serve a black God who sympathizes with their history of suffering, wealthy white Christians create an indulgent deity who cares more about free

enterprise than social justice, and so on. If God is the unknowable X, then people are free to fill in the blank with whatever qualities they prefer.

Even worse, Kant's noumenal-phenomenal distinction discourages anyone from claiming to know anything at all about God. The phenomenal world is the world of facts; with the help of science we can know it. By contrast, the noumenal world is merely a world of faith. We may only have opinions, not knowledge, about this realm of religion. And since all we have are opinions, anyone's is as good as any other.

This is why our culture is more impressed with someone studying science than an equally bright student in seminary. Most people wouldn't think that a seminary education is all that rigorous, given that it only addresses matters of faith. As Marilyn Vos Savant, a columnist for *Parade* magazine, explains, "Religions cannot be proved true intellectually. They come from the heart—and your parents—not the mind."<sup>2</sup> So seminaries study emotions, the affairs of the heart. How hard can that be?

This Kantian denigration of theology has also infiltrated our churches. Why is it that the pastorate seems to be the only professional vocation for which education is largely optional? The same Christians who demand that their dentist, lawyer, and accountant complete the required degrees for their profession have no qualms about hiring a preacher who's got little more than a warm heart. If questioned, they typically respond that their pastor is a man of God who has personally read the Bible for many years under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This sounds like a pious response until one realizes that they would never settle for the same standards in any other area of life. For instance, would these people submit to a surgeon who had never been to med school but had read lots of books on appendectomies and had warm feelings about the surgery?

My purpose here is not to disparage any pastor's ministry. Many fine people have enjoyed fruitful ministries without the benefit of a seminary education (though one may wonder how much more productive they would have been with education). I only want to point out the double standard that too frequently exists in evangelical churches. Why is a warm heart and potentially empty head sufficient for pastoral ministry? Because as Kant taught us all too well, matters of God deal only with faith and feelings. If you want to use your mind, then choose a profession that deals with knowledge and facts, not mere opinions and emotions.

Finally, besides the practical problems with Kant's noumenal-phenomenal distinction (that is, theological study is discouraged and any religious opinion is as good as any other, so people are free to create their own ideas of God), there is a fundamental contradiction in his thought. Kant wishes to save God from Hume, but doesn't his rescue defeat itself when he places God in the noumenal world? If the noumenal world is unknowable, then how can Kant declare that he still believes God exists? To say that God exists is to suggest that we know at least one thing about God—namely, that he exists—and so he must not really be unknowable. But if he is not unknowable, then neither is he in the noumenal realm, safe from Hume's attacks.

Therefore Kant's rescue attempt is deeply flawed in its foundation. And since his noumenal-phenomenal distinction harbors this internal contradiction, rather than accept it and discard the possibility of divine revelation, we may rightly wonder why his thinking has captivated our culture and even our churches for so long. The modern world has thrown out the possibility of revelation without probable cause. Why should we follow its lead?

### **God Works in Many Ways but Only Speaks in Two**

Now that we have seen the problems with modernity's objection to the possibility of revelation, we may proceed and explain where and how the living God has chosen to reveal

himself to us. Theologians typically separate God's communication to humanity into two types, general and special, which help us to distinguish between the differing content and audience of God's revelation. Specifically, general revelation is God's non-redemptive self-disclosure that comes through creation and addresses all people as humans, while special revelation comes through God's special acts for the purpose of redeeming sinners.

For instance, God's power displayed in a thunderstorm would count as general revelation because most everyone has seen lightning and heard thunder but no one has ever come to salvation on its strength alone. It's true that a young Martin Luther decided to become a monk while trapped inside an unusually fierce storm, but he did so by incorporating the content of the special revelation that he already knew (that is, God wants followers who are completely devoted to him, which in Luther's case meant giving up law school for the monastery). On the other hand, Scripture would be an important form of special revelation, not only because it took a unique act of God to write the Bible but also because it instructs sinners how to become children of God.

With regard to these two forms of divine revelation, the rest of this chapter relies heavily on the thought of John Calvin. Most of Calvin's views on revelation are general enough to be widely shared by the rest of the Christian community. They are not sectarian, uniquely "Calvinistic" in a way that might offend Christians who don't agree with some of his other beliefs (such as divine predestination and efficacious grace). Instead, I think that most readers will agree that Calvin makes an important contribution here.<sup>3</sup>

## God Speaks in a General Way

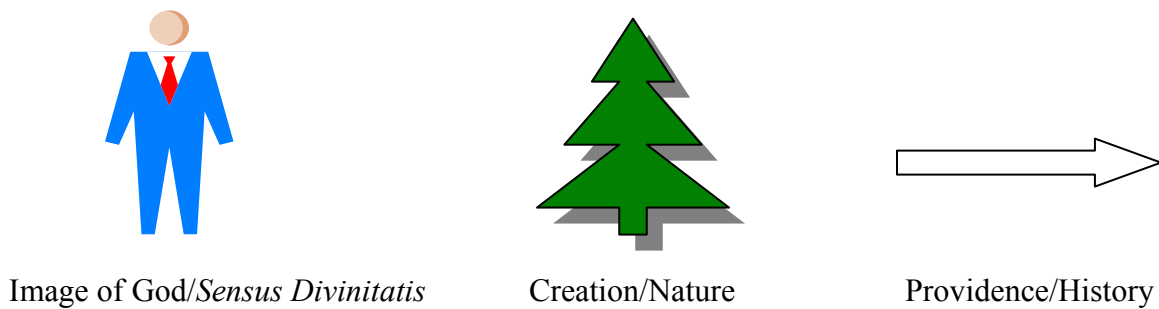
Calvin begins by observing that all people possess a general knowledge of God the Creator. This knowledge comes through three main forms, two of which we have already mentioned.

First, every person, perhaps because they bear the image of their Creator, cannot help but possess a *sensus divinitatis*, or awareness of deity (figure 2.4). In Calvin's words: "There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty. Ever renewing its memory, he repeatedly sheds fresh drops."<sup>4</sup>

Second, God reveals something of his existence and attributes through creation. Calvin frequently refers to nature as a theater in which the sparks of God's glory are evident. He writes that God "daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe. As a consequence, men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him." So that "wherever you cast your eyes, there is no spot in the universe wherein you cannot discern at least some sparks of his glory."<sup>5</sup>

Third, besides the sheer existence of the physical world, Calvin suggests that God also discloses himself through his constant provision for it. One need only "investigate the motion of the stars" to immediately discern that God the Creator is right now providing for his creation.<sup>6</sup> So history itself, as the record of God's provision across time, discloses much about our gracious Father who kindly cares for us.

**Figure 2.4: Three Forms of General Revelation**



Unfortunately, this threefold knowledge of God the Creator has been damaged by humanity's fall into sin. Objectively, the creation itself now bears the marks of evil alongside its original goodness. Thanks to sin, nature is now, in the poet Tennyson's words, "red in tooth and claw." The same polar bear that frolics with her cubs also chases down sea lions when it is time for dinner. The same weather patterns that shower our crops with refreshing rain also whip up mighty hurricanes and tornadoes. And though God's providence is still evident in the stars, it is not so apparent in the personal stories of heartache and rejection that many abused children could tell. God is still visible in nature and history, but sometimes we must stand on tip-toe and crane our necks to find him.

Even worse than sin's effects on God's world is how it has damaged the minds of the people who read it. Theologians call this phenomenon the "noetic effects of sin" (from the Greek term *nous*, "mind"), by which they mean that sinners don't think as clearly as they did before the fall. Besides being slower at math and remembering names than they'd otherwise be, sinful people tend to misinterpret God's presence in the world. So they downgrade the providence of God to "Mother Nature," the pangs of conscience to social conditioning, and the particularly flashy sparks of his glory to electromagnetic charges that sometimes arc between storm clouds and the earth. Although God's glory blasts them full in the face, they are able to

rationalize their way around him. (Recall last chapter's discussion of Romans 1.) In Calvin's words, "God has sown a seed of religion in all men. But scarcely one man in a hundred is met with who fosters it, once received, in his heart, and none in whom it ripens—much less shows fruit in season."<sup>7</sup>

Although hopefully not as severely, even Christian minds remain impaired by sin. We too often miss the glory of God in a ripening tomato, the voice of God in the moral tug-of-war within our minds, and the hand of God in events that could be construed as mere coincidence. All minds have been tainted by sin, and all need to be reopened by the redeeming grace of Christ.

### **God Speaks in a Special Way**

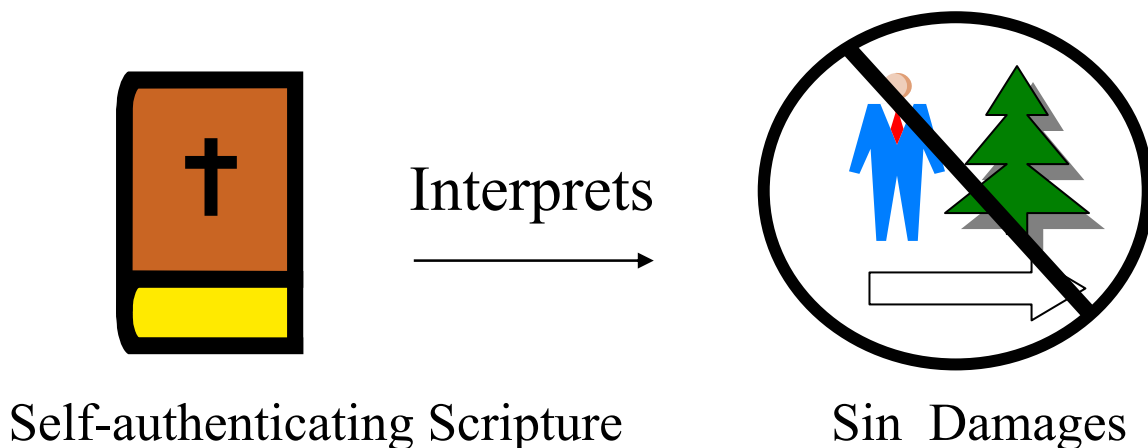
Fortunately, God has not left us to make do the best we can, but has given us additional, redemptive revelation. Historically this divine self-disclosure has come through God's acts of redemption (such as the Exodus from Egypt), theophanies (manifestations of himself in nature, like the burning bush), dreams, visions, miracles, laws, prophecies, and most of all through the person of Jesus Christ, who is the climax of God's special revelation. The book of Hebrews begins: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being."<sup>8</sup>

Of course, we wouldn't know much about these historical acts, theophanies, prophecies, and even Jesus Christ if we didn't read about them in the Old and New Testaments. So for Christians today, the Bible is the primary mode of God's special revelation. Everything we need to know about God and his plan for us is written here.<sup>9</sup>

In relation to general revelation, the special revelation in Scripture performs two important tasks. First, it enables us to overcome the damage of sin and correctly read God's witness to himself in nature (figure 2.5). Calvin compares the Scriptures to eyeglasses that bring the otherwise blurry revelation of creation into focus. He writes:

“Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God. This, therefore, is a special gift, where God, to instruct the church, not merely uses mute teachers but also opens his own most hallowed lips.”<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 2.5: Scripture Clarifies General Revelation**



Second, besides correcting our confused knowledge of God the Creator, Scripture also goes beyond what we could ever learn from general revelation and tells us about God the Redeemer. We could study nature for a thousand years and never suspect that God is a Trinity and that the Second Person became human to take away the sin of the world. Without the Bible we would never know the graciousness of God, his will for our lives, and how we might become one of his children.

### **Another Ultimate Belief?**

If Scripture is such a crucial component of the Christian worldview, perhaps it belongs in the very center of it, alongside the existence of God as another ultimate belief. It certainly is important to be at the center, but the deciding question is whether, like the existence of God, we are permitted to begin there or need to argue to it.

Many Christians seem to think the latter is true. They accept the foundation of the modern worldview—that we should only believe whatever is self-evident, incorrigible, evident to the senses, or inferred from the same—and then seek to demonstrate that Scripture is the Word of God from this foundation. They stack up impressive mounds of evidence, such as the superiority of Scripture’s wisdom, its antiquity, painful honesty, supernatural miracles, fulfilled prophecy, reliable manuscript tradition, universal consent of the church, and the numerous martyrs who willingly died for their belief that Scripture was the Word of God. Surely this list of important evidence proves that the Bible is a unique book, unlike any other ever written.

While these marks are helpful reminders of the distinctive power of the Bible, we may wonder whether they prove that it was written by God. Think about it. What criteria could prove to us beyond all reasonable doubt that any purported revelation came from God? The evidence mentioned above is a pretty good list. Certainly we would expect a revelation from God to be logically coherent, to make sense of our world, and to be accompanied by miracles, healings, fulfilled prophecies, and other supernatural displays.

But even if a book did meet each one of these criteria, would we then know for sure that it is authored by God? After all, many merely human books (hopefully this one) avoid contradicting themselves and shed new insights on reality. And as we know from various

Scriptures, even Satan and false prophets can perform impressive miracles to make their revelation seem as if it is coming from God.<sup>11</sup>

It seems that there is no list that mere humans can create to verify that any book, including the Bible, is from God. Certainly we are thankful for the evidence that supports the veracity and power of our Scriptures. Such evidence does indicate that the Bible is a unique book, and because the Scriptures are written by God, we should expect such signs to be there. However, the evidence itself may only point, it can never *prove* that the book we hold in our hands was written by the living God. Calvin calls such evidence “very useful aids” to our faith, though they can never produce “the certainty which piety requires.”<sup>12</sup> The evidence may support our faith but it can never be the reason why we know for sure that the Scriptures are the Word of God.

Well, then, how can we know that the Bible is the Word of God? Rather than resort to human arguments, Calvin suggests that since “God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word,”<sup>13</sup> the Scriptures, as God’s Word, must prove themselves to be divine. So Calvin concludes that the Scriptures must be self-authenticating. He explains this in the French version of his *Institutes*, where he tells his lay audience that the term self-authenticating means that “which rests in the Scriptures with direct steadfastness, and how that it carries with itself its own credibility in order to be received without contradiction, and is not to be submitted to proofs or arguments.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, rather than prove that the Bible is God’s Word, we may simply take God at his word.

Although “self-authentication” may be a new word to us, the concept is not. It’s the same idea that romantic westerners use for falling in love. What American teenager hasn’t wondered what it must be like to be in love? A girl asks her mother and married friends how she’ll know

that this man is “the one.” And what do they usually say? They seldom give her a checklist of criteria to authenticate her love; rather, they simply reassure her that when it happens “she’ll know.” Granted, this sensibility is based on emotion rather than knowledge (which may account in part for the surging divorce rate in America). Yet, even as young people are said to “just know” when they are in love, so Christians may believe without arguments that the Bible is the Word of God.

Calvin thinks this path of self-authenticating is the only safe way to approach the Scriptures, for evidence alone is too flimsy to ground our faith. He declares that “we believe neither by our own nor by anyone else’s judgment that Scripture is from God, but above human judgment we affirm with utter certainty (just as if we were gazing upon the majesty of God himself) that it has flowed to us from the very mouth of God by the ministry of men. We seek no proofs, no marks of genuineness upon which our judgment may lean; but we subject our judgment and wit to it as to a thing far beyond any guesswork!”<sup>15</sup>

In short, Calvin fears that if we ground our belief in Scripture entirely on human reason, what will happen when we run into arguments that oppose us? For instance, if we base our belief in Scripture on archaeology, how will we handle new discoveries that seem to contradict the Bible? If we rely on its reliable manuscript tradition, how will we respond to new scholarship that indicates the complexity of choices within the text? If we depend on fulfilled prophecy and miracles, what should we think about arguments that plausibly reduce the Bible’s supernatural stories to merely natural causes? Each new discovery and interpretation will cause us to hold our breath, suspending our complete reliance on Scripture until we have worked through the contrary evidence.

But what if our belief in the Bible does not rest on arguments and evidence? Then we need not fear that we are only one good argument away from apostasy. Instead, we may calmly sift through the evidence against our position, earnestly striving to clear God's good name but not working as though our spiritual lives depend on our success.<sup>16</sup>

### **Fideism Recidivus**

Aren't we back to fideism again? We avoided the charge of fideism last chapter by explaining that, on the basis of Romans 1, everyone knows that God exists. It is an inescapable fact of the human condition that every person possesses a *sensus divinitatis*, an awareness of divinity. But what about Scripture? Most of the world does not believe that the Christian Scriptures are the Word of God, so how are we not fideists when we say that we know the Scriptures are God's Word merely because "the Bible tells me so?"

First, we are not fideists because we are not discounting the use of evidence. We are not shutting our eyes to all arguments and evidence and blindly trusting our Bibles anyway. Instead, we find great comfort in the list of evidence listed above. It is vital that our Scriptures enjoy a reliable manuscript tradition, fulfilled prophecies, miracles, logically consistent content, and the support of archaeology. Many of these marks set our Scriptures above the holy books of other faiths, and we should delight to use them when discussing the uniqueness of our Bible with others.

Second, we are not fideists because the divine marks of Scripture are visible to anyone who reads it. When the living God speaks, there is little room for second-guessing; we should immediately recognize that it is he. Just as the Israelites knew that God was speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai and the disciples knew that God was speaking through Christ, so we should recognize the voice of God in Holy Scripture. The situation here is similar to what we saw in

Romans 1. Just as everyone knows that God exists but may fail to admit it, so everyone should recognize that the Bible is the Word of God, though many may fail to see it.

And why do they fail to see it? For the same reason many refuse to concede the existence of God: Their suppression blinds them to the truth. Calvin explains, “Accordingly, we need not wonder if there are many who doubt as to the Author of Scripture; for, although the majesty of God is displayed in it, yet none but those who have been enlightened by the Holy Spirit have eyes to perceive what ought, indeed, to have been visible to all.”<sup>17</sup>

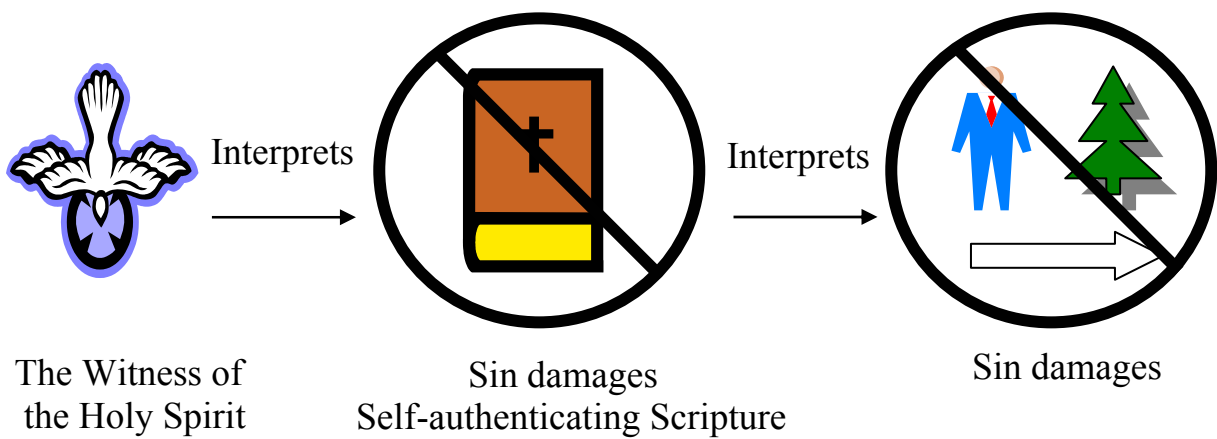
The existence of God and the divine authorship of Scripture are both objectively true but seldom subjectively embraced by sinners. And neither will be, apart from the intervening grace of the Holy Spirit, who compels us to acknowledge what we should have seen all along. In relation to Scripture, Calvin declares that this “testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason. For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men’s hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded.”<sup>18</sup>

Therefore sinful people like us can be certain that the Bible is the Word of God because the Holy Spirit of God assures us that it is (figure 2.6). Of course, it would be difficult to go public with this reason. If we tell people who haven’t received this witness of the Spirit that it is the primary reason why we know our Scriptures are written by God, they will know for sure that we are fideists. Why can’t we give them a more objective, public reason for believing the Bible?

This is why it’s important to cite the evidence we mentioned earlier. We do have reasons that we can share with others, reasons that support why we trust our Scriptures rather than the purported revelations of other faiths. But the deepest reason that grounds our faith is something

others will never understand unless the Holy Spirit illumines them. So rather than attempt to argue them into the kingdom, we would do well to invite them to read Scripture. Place them in God's hands and pray that the Holy Spirit would open their blind eyes, as he has ours, to recognize and submit to the truth that is staring them in the face—that the Scriptures are indeed the speech of the living God.

**Figure 2.6: The Holy Spirit Testifies to Scripture**



### *Expanding Your Worldview*

1. Is the existence of God and his revelation in the Christian Scriptures a sufficient starting point for the Christian worldview? In other words, can we trace everything we know back to these two foundational beliefs, or must we supplement these presuppositions with other ultimate beliefs? Asked another way, do we believe anything that is not grounded ultimately in the existence of God and/or his revelation? For example, is our confidence in our empirical senses an ultimate belief, or do we trust our eyes and ears because we believe that a sovereign God has created them with the ability to rightly interpret this world he has made?
2. Critique the following response from Marilyn Vos Savant, writing in *Parade* magazine (October 8, 2000), 22. What philosopher lies behind her answer? What is wrong with her response? How does knowing the origin of her thinking make her argument less intimidating?

Reader's Question: I am a Christian with a firm belief in God; I also believe in dinosaurs. But the Bible says that God created the universe and everything in it, including humans, in seven days. That leaves no time for dinosaurs to roam the Earth for 150 million years. Do you think that believing in dinosaurs makes me any less of a Christian?

Savant's Response: Not in my opinion. It's not hard to hold conflicting beliefs *if* one of them comes from the heart—like religion—and the other one comes from the head—like science. In other words, I'm sure you'll never believe in conflicting religions. (You won't be both a Christian and a Muslim). Likewise, I'm sure you'll never believe in conflicting scientific concepts. (You won't believe both that the Earth is round and that it is flat). That's because I think science arises from the intellect, and religion arises from the emotion.

I call these beliefs from the heart “emotional logic.” Here's an example: Can you imagine falling in love with someone for no reason at all? Of course you can!

3. After ABC-TV broadcast a Peter Jennings' special, *The Search for Jesus*, in June 2000, a local television station took a poll of its viewers, asking them to dial one number if they

- considered Jesus Christ to be fact and another number if they thought he was a matter of faith. What is wrong with this polarized question? From which philosopher does it spring? Can you make a case for dialing both numbers? (that is, can't Jesus Christ be both fact and faith—a real person that we also believe in, just because he is real?)
4. Which modern philosopher lies behind the episode of *Everybody Loves Raymond* in chapter 5? Raymond, Debra, and Ally all claim that God exists, but notice how they handle his revelation. How does their treatment of revelation help or hinder their search for the meaning of life?
  5. This chapter did not discuss alternatives to the Christian Scriptures, such as the Koran, Vedas and Upanishads, and the Book of Mormon. In view of the witness of the Spirit, the self-authenticating nature of Scripture, and the role of evidence, how might you approach a devout follower of these texts? Must our belief that the Bible is God's Word necessarily preclude their book from also being his word? Why or why not?
  6. Is the Bible the only place where special revelation occurs today? In other words, should we expect God to speak to us in other ways than through his inspired Word? If so, what might these other ways be, and how would their extra-biblical communication relate to our Christian Scriptures?

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter can only skim the surface of Hume's and Kant's philosophies. For further insight, see James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Vatican II* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 40-77; Diogenes Allen, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1985), 186-219; or any good survey of philosophy, such as Samuel Enoch Stumpf, *Philosophy: History & Problems*, 3d ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983), 270-79 and 289-309, or Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* Vol. 5, part II and Vol. 6, part II (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1964).

<sup>2</sup> Marilyn Vos Savant, *Parade Magazine*, 7 October 2001: 22.

<sup>3</sup> To read Calvin's thoughts on revelation in his own words, browse the first nine chapters of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book 1. The most popular translations of this work are one edited by

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John T. McNeill and translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), and one translated by William Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957).

<sup>4</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* I.3.1.

<sup>5</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* I.5.1.

<sup>6</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* I.5.2.

<sup>7</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* I.4.1.

<sup>8</sup> Hebrews 1:1-3.

<sup>9</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 1:3-4.

<sup>10</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, I.6.1.

<sup>11</sup> Deuteronomy 13:1-5; Exodus 7:10-13, 22; Matthew 24:24.

<sup>12</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* I.8.1; I.7.4.

<sup>13</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* I.7.4.

<sup>14</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* I.7.5.

<sup>15</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* I.7.5.

<sup>16</sup> For contemporary explanations of the self-authenticating nature of Scripture and the witness of the Holy Spirit, see Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1998), 194-219, and John M. Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1994), 119-47. For those who disagree with this view, see R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 137-79. For the entire range of opinions, see Steven B. Cowan, ed., *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on 2 Tim. 3:16*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 249.

<sup>18</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* I.7.4.