

Hermeneutics for General Revelation

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Abstract

Hermeneutics are at the center of Bible interpretation. With the aid of the Holy Spirit, they reveal the original meaning of the text. Like special revelation, general revelation is constrained by hermeneutical principles. The failure to practice them has resulted in some Christians appealing to general revelation as the basis for compromise with secular natural history. The Christian worldview acts as a constraint, defining the relationship between general revelation, science, and natural history—including Earth’s origin, age, and purported evolution. The authority, function, and power of general revelation are examined relative to both Scripture and science. Interpreting special revelation involves accurate handling of the text and its relation to language, meaning and exegesis. Interpreting general revelation involves significantly greater limits and precautions. Insight into these limits is shown in current understandings of the relationship between general revelation, science, and origins. Insight is also gained from historical analysis: the Copernican Revolution illustrates problems in the misuse of both general revelation and biased historical context. Special revelation must always constrain general revelation, and the supposed interchangeability between general revelation and contemporary natural history is shown to be false. -

Introduction

Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation and includes not just uncovering meaning (exegesis) but the application of meaning to the “here and now.” (Fee and Stuart, 1993) This task is an activity of normal Christian living as we seek to understand and apply God’s word. Since general revelation is a means by which God reveals Himself, it is necessary to understand how to uncover the meaning of and derive application from the natural world. Natural revelation is the revealing of God through His creation to everyone (cf., Romans 1:19-20).

There are clear differences between general and special revelation, so we would expect distinctions in interpreting natural and special revelation. Gordon Fee’s and Douglas Stuart’s book *How to Read the Bible for All It’s Worth* is a primer on biblical hermeneutics, and is a useful source for principles of biblical hermeneutics that can be applied to general revelation to better define its authority, function, and power. Additionally, the misused role of general revelation in justifying Christian old-earth interpretations will become clearer and problems with these interpretations exposed. It is obvious that poor hermeneutics for special revelation results in “anything goes” interpretation; caution must also be observed in interpreting general revelation.

Uncovering meaning in general revelation cannot be accomplished in the same way as it is with special revelation. They are distinct kinds of revelation. Special revelation is propositional truth

found in the 66 canonical books of the Bible; general revelation comes from an intuitive interaction between man and nature. Johnathan Sarfati points out that what constitutes data in both domains is different. (Sarfati, 2004) Regarding special revelation:

God supernaturally communicates his message to a chosen spokesperson in the form of explicit cognitive statements of truth, and these statements are recorded in sentences that are not internally contradictory. God has verbally communicated in a propositional form to humanity, not just truth about spiritual matters but also truth relating to history and science. If truth was not expressed in this way, the interpreter can never be sure of anything--even his own salvation. (Kulikovsky, 2005b, p. 15-16)

The task of interpreting the Bible is apparently much simpler and less error-prone than interpreting scientific data. Robert C. Newman admits that since general revelation is not a human language, 'it is more liable to misinterpretation than is special revelation.' (Kulikovsky, 2005b, p. 18)

General and special revelation are not epistemologically equal. The knowledge they convey is clearly different and received by people in a different fashion. But how do we grasp the meaning of each kind of revelation?

Meaningfulness

The first task of hermeneutics is exegesis, which is "the careful, systematic study of Scriptures to discover the original, intended meaning" of the text. (Fee and Stuart, 1993, p. 19) First, it is important to note the importance of the "original, intended" meaning. Otherwise, a text's meaning could vary with time and place. Just as several factors affect the meaning of a text of Scripture, so also the meaning of the natural world must be viewed in context. Just examining this simple starting point reveals an immediate conflict with interpretations of the natural world by the unbeliever.

a. Positivism and meaning

Religious language (speaking of the existence of or attributes of God in the created world) has been considered by modern philosophers as cognitively meaningless. Logical positivists promoting empirical science and disparaging metaphysics attacked such religious language with verificationism and falsificationism. (e.g., Flew, 1955) Both challenges proved to be self-refuting, ruling out positivism as an autonomous source of meaningfulness. In spite of this failing, positivists hold to the authority of science like Christians hold to the authority of revelation. Because evidence and reasoning are contrary to their view, positivists reveal their claims are cognitively meaningless. For example, when their science is found to be in error the tendency is to defend and qualify and not to question or abandon. Their polemic against religious discourse turned out to be a polemic against all "committed" discourse. Thus, meaningfulness of the natural world (natural revelation) is predicated on the privileged convictions at the center of

one's web of beliefs and not on the elevated position of natural science over/against religious language. (Bahnsen 1996, p. 205-219)

b. Web of beliefs

Acknowledging basic presuppositions is the beginning of meaning for both special and natural revelation. These basic beliefs can be pictured as a spider web (Figure 1); more important convictions are in the center and those less so are more peripheral. For example, Christians see biblical inerrancy near the center of their web. Less important are tangential beliefs and subjective opinions that have little or no impact on core beliefs, like the conviction that the Braves will win the World Series.

Interpretations of either natural or special revelation make more sense when core beliefs are not hidden. Positivists often hide the fact that the authority of natural science is such a belief, rather than a reasoned or empirical conclusion, but that belief drives all their thinking in the same way as a Christian's faith in revelatory truth:

...in the study of nature (that is, science), propositions must be formulated from the observations by interpreting them in a framework of *paradigm*. This framework depends largely on the axioms, or starting assumptions, of the scientist. (Sarfati, 2004, p. 41)

Despite key differences between the Christian worldview and that of naturalism, many Christians fail to link the latter with deep time. This is seen whenever Christians dodge the clear teaching of Scripture in favor of "science," which is always miraculously broadened to include the historical interpretations of secular scientists.

Original, intended meaning

a. Historical task

Identifying the original, intended meaning of a text is task that requires an historical context. Considering the time, culture, setting, occasion, original recipients, original author, and all other aspects of the historical context is critical to understand the original meaning of a text. Appeals

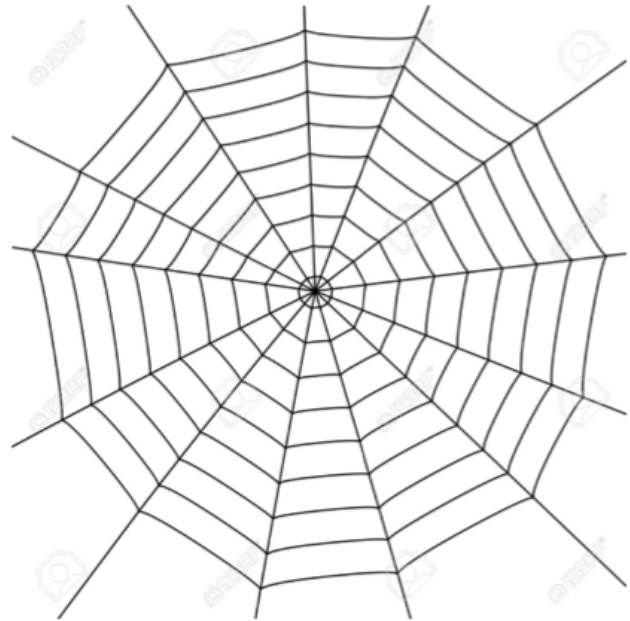


Figure 1. **Web of beliefs.** Core, privileged convictions are at the center of the web. Less important and subjective options are on the periphery.

to commentaries, can increase our understanding but Fee and Stuart warn that “consulting a commentary is the last thing one does.” To avoid misunderstanding texts requires original meaning in exegesis. (Fee and Stuart, p. 19-26)

In the same way, errors of interpretation in natural revelation can occur when meaning is not tied to original meaning. In practice, this means that distortions added by subsequent worldviews, such as naturalism, are a real danger:

Natural history as it is studied and taught today is the story of the natural origin and evolution of the earth and all its lifeforms. It pretends no relationship to man or God. (Reed, 2000, p. 165)

But a true understanding of the original meaning of creation requires a framework, which in turn requires special revelation—the Bible. Otherwise, “...only a morass of uncertainty and frustration outside of the boarders of revelation” (Reed 2000, p. 174) will be the result.

Christians have no excuse for accepting the priority of naturalist interpretations of limited physical evidence over a record that presents itself as God’s account.... The meaning of history is not found in a natural process of evolution...there is no place for history within the naturalist worldview that leaves room for consistency and coherence. The historical enterprise, including natural history, is only rescued by the assumptions granted and justified within Christian theology.

The naturalist’s *assumption* of deep time reveals his framework as his worldview. If the God of the Bible really is the Creator, then the Christian worldview is superior. To capitulate to deep time is to capitulate to naturalism, or to subordinate the Christian worldview to an inferior one. There is no ignoring the connection between naturalism and deep time:

Belief in an old Earth is a tenet of the worldview of naturalism. It fits the logic of that worldview in every possible manner, and is congenial to its underlying uniformitarian and evolutionary philosophy of history.... Logic requires that Christians give up their vain attempts at reconciliation with the tenets of secular natural history. (Reed and Doyle, 2013, p. 77)

Consistent Christianity requires rejection of naturalism. Failure to do so in all regards distorts any possible original meaning of natural revelation, since it requires a framework provided only by the Bible.

b. Limits from Psalm 19 and Romans 1

The Bible provides meaning for general revelation in Psalm 19 and Romans 1. Psalm 19:1 states:

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. (ESV)

The meaning could not be clearer; creation reveals God through his handiwork. There is no mystery or hidden meaning not related to this central fact. Rather, when men diverge from it, they find only error, as related in Romans 1:20:

For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. (ESV)

The meaning of the created, natural world is “clearly perceived.” There is no doubt what God intended to reveal through nature. He made it to show “his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature.”

It can be easy to lose sight of this simple truth. Fee and Stuart warn that the problem is not lack of understanding but that things are understood too well. As an example, they cite Philippians 2:14, “Do all things without grumbling or disputing.” (Fee and Stuart, 1993, p. 13) Some might want to reinterpret this simple truth to avoid conviction that they are complainers.

The exegesis of nature is already done with Psalm 19 and Romans 1. It only remains to apply that meaning in manifesting, not suppressing, the truth, thus avoiding judgment, per Romans 1:21-32.

c. Application-centric thinking

It is a common mistake in biblical interpretation to force a passage to fit a prior application. The same mistake can occur when interpreting general revelation when we fail to acknowledge God:

...proper ‘hermeneutics’ begins with solid ‘exegesis.’ The reason one must not begin with the here and now is that the only proper control for hermeneutics is to be found in the original intent of the biblical text. (Fee and Stuart, 1993, p. 25)

If God has chosen to reveal Himself through what He has made then that is an objective truth, not subject to change:

In the Christian worldview, theology, philosophy, mathematics, history, and science can all discover limited, fallible truth but only because they rest on revelatory, absolute truth. That is the classic Christian position; revelation upholds all disciplines. Science is justified by theology... (Reed and Klevberg, 2013, p. 245)

When a Christian bows to positivism, he impairs his ability to understand truth:

One of consequences of positivism has been an attempt to make sure and certain knowledge 'scientific.' But when science claims to explain everything, it actually explains nothing. (Reed and Klevberg, 2013, p. 240)

The subordination of revelation to science (e.g. Hugh Ross) warps Christian theology and ultimately destroys a Christian basis for truth in anything. (Reed et al., 2004, p. 42)

So, the hermeneutical error of forcing a meaning on a biblical text can also apply to forcing a meaning on nature, distorting the meaning (exegesis) of the created world through a pre-commitment to a naturalistic application of science. General revelation begins with acknowledging God's attributes and glory. Any "interpretation" that fails in this basic task misses the point.

d. Summary

Philosopher Greg Bahnsen (1996, p. 186) sums us this task of attaining original, intended meaning:

God created this world to reflect His glory and to be a constant testimony to Him and His character. God created man as His own image, determined the way in which man would think and learn about the world, and coordinated man's mind and the objective world so that man would unavoidably know the supernatural Creator through the conduit of the created realm. God Himself intended and made it unavoidable that man would learn about the Creator from the world around him. This amounts to God coming to man through the temporal and empirical order, not man groping toward God. This amounts to saying that the natural world is not in itself random and without a clue as to its ultimate meaning, leaving man to arbitrary speculation and metaphysical projections.

The careful study of general revelation should yield meaning and a clearer perception of God's nature.

Bringing 'baggage' to interpretation

Fee and Stuart (1993, p. 14) point out that "every reader is at the same time an interpreter." When we read a text of Scripture we bring to it "all that we are, with all our experiences, culture, and prior understanding of words and ideas." To be true to the text we need to acknowledge this with our interpretation. This requires the humility to examine our thinking and repentance when we force interpretation to meet our desires. The goal of interpreting

revelation is the Lordship of Christ in all things, and the renovation of our worldview to come into line with his. “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.” (2 Timothy 2:15, ESV)

This precaution is equally true for general revelation. Handling God’s truth in that arena also requires diligence and care.

a. Fallen nature

This difficult task for special revelation is even more difficult for non-propositional general revelation. The Christian interpreter of general revelation must be especially mindful of the fallen nature of man and its impact on understanding. Most importantly, although the believer and unbeliever share the same perception of nature, they interpret the world differently. The believer affirms the purpose of general revelation, and is consciously aware of trying to think God’s thoughts after him, but the mind of the unbeliever is blinded. (Reed, 1996) Nevertheless, the thinking of the believer and unbeliever are both affected by fallen nature of mankind.

i. Noetic effect of sin

This influence of the fall on human thinking is called the “noetic effect” of sin:

We must recognize the noetic effects of sin. The fall of man had drastic results in the world of thought; even the use of man’s reasoning ability becomes depraved and frustrating... the fall pertains to man’s mental operations as much as to his volition and emotions. The non-Christian thinks that his thinking process is normal. He thinks his mind is the final court of appeal in all matters of knowledge. He takes himself to be the reference point for all interpretation of the facts. That is, he has epistemologically become a law unto himself: *autonomous*. (Reed, 1996, p. 45-46)

The Bible says the unbeliever is not competent to judge because he is fallen in intellect. In order to understand this, the context of truth found in Romans 1:21 must be recognized:

The apostle Paul there describes the natural man as *gnontes ton theon*—“knowing the God.” The verb indicates an intellectual awareness and understanding. The definite article (the) indicates that this is not a vague awareness of ‘some kind of supernatural power or person somewhere out there,’ but rather a distinct awareness of a familiar or well-defined object of knowledge, namely, the living and true, one and only God. (Bahnsen, 1998, p. 180)

Thus, the God the unbeliever has an unacknowledged awareness of is not just an indeterminate God, but his Creator, *the* one and only God. Bahnsen emphasizes the significance of this truth:

Perhaps the foundational epistemological insight that is most significant for the practice of Christian apologetics, yet is most often ignored, is that all men already know God... and cannot avoid having such knowledge. (Bahnsen, 1998, p. 179)

As creatures made in God's image man cannot help but know God. It is this revelation *to* man through "nature" and through his conscious that Paul speaks of in Romans.

With this indwelling knowledge of God, then, it might seem that even an unbeliever would interpret nature correctly. However, the noetic effect of sin causes man to suppress truth about God rather than embrace it.

ii. Suppressing the truth

God reveals Himself in creation, but man suppresses that truth. Romans 1:18 confirms this process of evasion and suppression: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth." How can one suppress a truth or knowledge of something unless one had that knowledge to begin with? "Without first knowing God he could not seek to deny it." (Bahnsen, 1998, p.191) Bahnsen continues:

As made in the image of God no man can escape becoming the interpretative medium of God's general revelation both in his intellectual (Romans 1:20) and in his moral consciousness (Romans 2:14, 15). No matter which button of the radio he presses, he always hears the voice of God.... He cannot help being confronted with God if he is self-conscious at all. (Bahnsen, 1998, p. 191)

The solution of the unrighteous is to turn down the "volume of the radio." So, conclusions drawn by and the reasoning of the secular scientist must be viewed with this in mind.

iii. Is science general revelation

A common, but misguided idea is summed up in the statement, "The theologian interprets special revelation and the scientist interprets general revelation." If general revelation is provided for the express purpose of seeing God's attributes and glory in nature, and if secular scientists start by denying, suppressing, and exchanging this truth, then it is hard to see how such a person can be uncovering natural revelation. That does not deny the ability of the scientist to use the scientific method to find empirical truth in nature; science is, after all, the child of Christianity, but equating this truth to revelation in any but the broadest sense seems a stretch. We dare not ignore the language of Romans 1: those who suppress this knowledge "...futile in their thinking...did not see fit to acknowledge God... God gave them over to a depraved mind...filled with all deceit... they are haters of God... inventors of evil... without understanding, untrustworthy..."

Christians cannot surrender science, and accept the secular dichotomy between “faith” and “reason.” The two are unified in truth, not divided. At a minimum, secular scientists should not be exalted as authoritative interpreters of natural revelation. They discover truth by using (inconsistently) the borrowed capital of the Christian worldview. Bahnsen referred to such behavior as a child, who sitting on the lap of his father, slaps him. The child would not even be *able* to slap his father were he not held by the father:

...this truth which science has discovered is in spite of and not because of its fundamental assumption of a chance universe. Non-Christian science has worked with the borrowed capital of Christian theism, and for that reason alone has been able to bring to light much truth.... we cannot use modern scientists and their method as the architects of our structure of Christian interpretation.... Instead we offer the God and the Christ of the Bible as the concrete universal in relation to which all facts have meaning. (Van Til, 1975, p. 64)

Secular scientists assume truth, coherence, unity, intelligibility, and meaning in the natural world. These assumptions cannot be justified by their worldview, but are by Christianity. Thus, scientists, whether believers or not, have to think in terms of God:

The evolutionist must use biblical creation principles in order to argue against biblical creation... Evolutionists must assume the preconditions of intelligibility in order to make any argument whatsoever.... But the preconditions of intelligibility do not comport with an evolutionary worldview. (Lisle, 2009, pp. 45-46)

In addition, Romans 1 teaches a “natural revelation” whereby the created order is a medium of constant, inescapable, clear, and pre-interpreted information about God. All men, at the outset of their reasoning, possess knowledge of God and his character. (Bahnsen, 1998) Another reason to reject the equivalence of science and natural revelation is that God reveals himself to “all men,” not just to the scientist. General revelation is accessible to *all people*, in all places and in all times. (Kulikovsky, 2002, p. 42, emphasis added)

iv. Interpretation of the age of the earth

If this confusion were not problematic for modern man, Christians have made it worse by accepting the positivist re-definition of science and history, and affirming deep time and evolution as “general revelation.” The noetic effects of the fall are clearly on display in this tangle of error. The age of the earth is a question of natural history, not science, and one’s interpretation of the past is even more subject to bias than those of science, which at least have the advantage of repetitive testability. History is more closely linked to belief:

Almost all of the pioneers of deep time were antagonistic to biblical Christianity (Mortenson, 2004; 2006). The unbelievers of the 18th century may have been more understated and courteous than today's militant atheists, but they still opposed God. They included atheists, deists, and heretics such as Buffon, Lamarck, Hutton, Playfair, Werner, Cuvier and Lyell. Their work (particularly Lyell's) was fundamentally deceptive. The intrinsic deception, combined with Jesus' warning about trees and fruit, are sufficient to question whether their work was from God. (Reed, et al., 2014)

This bias is confirmed by the necessity of deep time and evolution for the atheist. That should be a red flag to any Christian who wants to adopt the same views as Hutton, Lyell, Asimov, Sagan, etc. Sadly, many Christians like Hugh Ross have embraced it and others think silence a virtue.

The contradictory foundations of naturalism must be exposed, not accommodated. It is not a battle of evidence as much as it is a battle of worldviews. When Christians allow the debate to rest on empirical data, general revelation is no longer relevant because the evidence is already interpreted by the hidden worldview. It is an error to assume that unbelievers are neutral. The weakness of this position for the Christian should be clearly seen:

If we take a more critical look at the presuppositions of modern geology, astronomy, biology, or any other area we would see the so-called evidence for millions or billions of years is really only a naturalistic interpretation of the observed data. If the naturalism is removed, no 'evidence' remains. (Crowe, 2009, p. 288)

Christians should examine the presuppositions of the men who advocate the secular positions. For example, Lyell disparaged the "scriptural geologists" who opposed the notion of millions of years because they identified his unproven old-earth theories as compromise. (Mortenson, 2004, p. 12)

b. Working up to God through reason

i. Man's inability

A second consideration when examining "baggage" brought to interpreting general revelation is the use of reason. Can man assume the autonomy and self-sufficiency of reason? Clearly not, in the sense that God provides a framework for truth through revelation. Nor can we assume that man is *willing* to reason properly about God and the world, that he can be neutral and always accurate in his use of reason. Another questionable assumption is that man simply needs more information; that the world can be understood apart from revelation, given sufficient data:

Once we grant to fallen man that his reason must judge the revelation of God in Scripture, how can we avoid putting Reason above revelation? Hodge's dictum, (theologian Charles Hodge) 'Reason must judge the credibility of a revelation' is an overestimate of the ability of fallen man's reason. (Crowe, 2009, p. 114)

The elevation of reason fails to acknowledge the source of reason:

Human reason must be seen for what it really is: created and subject to God's authority.... God's Word is not subject to correction by experience and coherence (though occasionally man's interpreting of God's Word might be), but logic and perception can be corrected by Scripture. (Bahnsen, 2008, p. 284-285)

As we interpret general revelation the failure of human reason to maintain authority becomes obvious when it is separated from its origin:

To attempt an interpretation of the world or its details 'on one's own' is to assume erroneously the non-createdness of facts... assigning meaning by the human mind will eventually issue in skepticism. Fate rules the day, and subjective arbitrariness is the quicksand of reasoning. (Bahnsen 2008, p. 286)

The logical limits of secular science are obvious; even secular thinkers understand that. It is what Christians have been saying for far longer:

The unbeliever will consider his thinking and interpretation to be normal and normative. But it must be pointed out to him that his 'neutrality' is but a token of his desire to be free from the all-embracing revelation of God—his thinking is not indifferent at all to the knowledge of God. Scripture provides the interpretive context within which fact and logic can be intelligible and used aright. Thus our standard cannot be autonomous—something independent of God's revelation. (Bahnsen, 2008, pp.18, 19)

Scientists are incorrect to think they are epistemologically autonomous. Without Christian theology, especially the doctrine of creation, science is logically invalid (Reed, 2001). Truth can only be guaranteed by an omniscient, honest God. Otherwise, we force our distorted and groundless categories upon misapprehended facts. (Bahnsen 2008, pp. 277-278)

ii. Man's ability-thinking analogically

In spite of the lack of autonomy, man with God has amazing abilities for knowledge, reason, and empirical discovery. Grounded on revelation, truth is possible. The Christian has an alternative to hopeless autonomous reasoning. By thinking God's thoughts after him (analogously) he begins with the certain truth found in the authoritative Word of God and bases all reasoning upon it.

Man depends on God's general revelation in nature and its corresponding revelation in his own self-conscious mind to bring principles of reason and facts of experience into fruitful contact.... Prepared by general revelation, man can

recognize the authority and self-attesting truth of Scripture, which gives him his standards of meaning, knowing, and truth. (Bahnsen, 2008, p. 283)

God accomplishes both revealing and apprehending. Secular reason can only lead to arbitrary “truth,” which in turn leads to nihilism. (Bahnsen 2008, pp. 115, 108)

Bahnsen (2008, p. 115, 108) examines what would happen if the world were self-explanatory:

If the world were self-explanatory and could be interpreted in terms of principles inherent in the world, then a non-Christian would gladly wield the law of parsimony and point out that Christians multiply entities (for instance, God) beyond need and justification. But the fact of the matter is that nothing could be understood on the basis of autonomous principles. Therefore, the Christian must use a dogmatic (not neutral) apologetic, incisively challenging the non-Christian on every point of knowledge and interpretation. God either rules as sovereign in over *all* areas or none. Our message must be that Christianity alone has the true and only adequate interpretation of nature and history *as well as* the God-situation.... If science proceeds autonomously, then the only thing that can be discovered in the world is man’s own interpretative and ordering activity; nature merely echoes back the thoughts of the autonomous man.

iii. Transcendental method

When reason is elevated over revelation, evidential arguments become the limit of knowledge. Therefore, the transcendental or analogical argument is superior. (Bahnsen, 1998, p. 615) The transcendental argument reveals embedded presuppositions and uncovers mistaken premises. (Carpenter, 2014, p. 105) This method is analogical in that it approaches interpretation by “thinking God’s thoughts after him” or assuming revelatory truth rather than approaching facts univocally. A method that shines light on the presuppositions of naturalism is inherently powerful, given the contradiction between their Christian origins and their anti-Christian results.

It is important not to be misunderstood regarding a correct perspective on evidential science. Reed (2000, p. 161) summarizes:

What then is the benefit of inductive science? Great in every respect—but impossible without the superstructure of theology and philosophy explicit in its formative states.

Other principles in interpreting general revelation

a. Good interpretation is not *no* interpretation

Fee and Stuart (1993, p. 17) explain that, “The antidote to *bad* interpretation is not *no* interpretation. The antidote is *good* interpretation.” A sad example of that principle in interpreting general revelation is found in the book *A Reformed Approach to Science and Scripture* by Keith Mathison (2013), who defends R.C. Sproul’s 2012 comment:

When people ask me how old the earth is, I tell them ‘I don’t know.’ I’ll tell you why I don’t. In the first place, the Bible does not give us a date of creation. It gives us hints that seem to indicate, in many cases, a young earth. At the same time, we hear about an expanding universe, astronomical dating, and other factors coming from outside the church that make me wonder. (Mathison, 2013)

Sproul’s reason for his “non-interpretation” of an issue critical to the modern church is the existence of “other factors outside the church.” He is apparently concerned that a young-earth position is *bad* because of these factors. One cannot interpret general revelation by “shifting into neutral,” especially in an issue of demonstrable negative impact to the Church. If Sproul had instead looked “inside the church” at the monolithic consensus of theologians prior to the taint of Enlightenment, and at the modern reservoir of work by the Creation Research Society, Institute for Creation Research, Answers in Genesis, Creation Ministries International and others these “other factors” could have been explained. Even examining the fruit of naturalism and its advocates should have been sufficient for such a learned theologian.

Mathison (2013) praises Sproul for his “no interpretation” stance in order to avoid “enmity and strife” and encourages others to follow: “Would that more Christians would take Dr. Sproul’s wise words to heart.” He commends others who have advocated a “no interpretation” stance:

This debate has played out in several Reformed denominations. In 2000, for example, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) issued a lengthy report on the subject. This was followed by a similar report from the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 2004. Both reports concluded that several views of the nature and length of the days of creation are within the bounds of biblical and confessional orthodoxy. (Mathison, 2013)

Whatever the benefit these statements provide for these institutional churches the fact is, only one interpretation of the age of the earth from general revelation can be correct, meaning that all the others are wrong. Such a stance is, in effect, advocating epistemological relativism.

b. Aim is *not* uniqueness

Fee and Stuart (1993, pp. 13-14) also warn that “the aim of good interpretation is *not* uniqueness; one is not trying to discover what no one else has ever seen before.” This is equally true about interpreting general revelation in its historic context. However: “Novel explanations of Genesis remain a cottage industry, each driven by the “latest finding” of science.” (Reed, et al., 2014) It is these “latest findings” of science that cause Sproul to “wonder.”

Instead “uniqueness” in interpreting special revelation is what is accommodated with the stances of Ligonier, the PCA and OPC. Reed (2001, p. 90) explains the outcome:

Christians who desire a Biblical worldview, but wish to accommodate the fads of modern natural history must recognize their own inconsistencies. The age of the earth does matter, because link by link it reaches into every corner of the origins debate. Ultimately, it impacts such fundamental issues as the existence of God and the possibility and veracity of revelation.

Mathison worries about evidence being “expertly evaluated:”

...those of us who do not have the training to expertly evaluate the evidence ourselves are dependent to one degree or another on those who are trained in order to help us understand the evidence for and against the different claims. (Mathison, 2013)

This view is not value-free. The interpreter brings his own bias (and worldview) into such interpretations, in addition to whatever noetic effects are present:

All the facts of this creation are preinterpreted by the counsel of God, and they reveal the person and divine attributes of God, their Creator, in an authoritative, necessary, sufficient, and clear manner. Consequently there are no ‘brute,’ neutral, uninterpreted, or non-revelatory facts. God’s revelation in man and in man’s environment is so certain that men who refuse to believe the truth about God are without excuse. (Bahnsen, 2008, p. 282)

The only way to ensure correct interpretation is to examine facts in the framework of revelation. Man desires to be his own authority. Ironically, unbelievers:

...reject revelational-epistemology and its insistence on beginning with the Word of an absolute and authoritative God. Not tolerating an appeal to sheer authority, the autonomous thinker turns out also to make final appeal to sheer authority—his own! (Bahnsen, 2008, p. 101)

c. Science is not natural revelation

Just as literary context is crucial in understanding a text of Scripture, so also the context of natural revelation in our scientific world must be considered. Mathison (2013) is a good illustration. He correctly notes: “Scientific theories are not the same thing as general revelation.” However, Sproul is quoted as saying:

But I believe both spheres are spheres of God's revelation, and that truth has to be compatible. So, *if a theory of science—natural revelation—is in conflict with a theological theory*, here's what I know for sure—someone is wrong. (Mathison, 2013, emphasis added)

These contradictory statements demonstrate the importance of keeping natural revelation and science in context. Natural revelation may overlap empirical discoveries, but there is no warrant for equating scientific theories and revelation. Robert Thomas (1998) explains:

1. Knowledge of general revelation should be common to all people.
2. Modern science is not general revelation, since scientific knowledge is of recent origin, and only comprehensible to those with advanced training in the various scientific disciplines.
3. The subject of general revelation is God Himself (cf., Psalm 19:6; Rom 1:19-21; Acts 14:15-17; Acts 17:24-28; Rom 2:14-15), not the physical world.
4. Humanity's invariable response to general revelation is negative (cf., Rom 1:18-21). (Kulikovsky, 2005a, p. 25)

Neither Psalm 19:1-4 nor Romans 1:20 support the idea that general revelation includes science.

...the dual revelation theory fails to acknowledge the inherent limitations of scientific knowledge and method, especially in relation to the study of origins. (Kulikovsky, 2005a, p. 26)

This is the context needed by Sproul and Mathison. Thomas's last point defines how the unregenerate man handles science and general revelation. Our view of science and our interpretation of general revelation must always take account of the fallen nature of the interpreter. This is especially critical when evaluating conclusions "outside the church." Mathison (2013) fails to acknowledge the atheism of many leading scientists. How can atheists interpret revelation from a God they refuse to acknowledge? Paul is more accurate, noting that unregenerate man, "...futile in their thinking...did not see fit to acknowledge God... God gave them over to a depraved mind...they are haters of God... inventors of evil...without understanding, untrustworthy..." This context cannot be overlooked or minimized when interpreting general revelation.

Superiority of special revelation

a. The sufficiency of Scripture

Pastor and author John MacArthur (2001, p. 61) comments on Psalm 19, especially verses 7 to 9:

...the whole point of Psalm 19 is to underscore the necessity, the absolute sufficiency, and the preeminence of *special* revelation—Scripture. Nature simply puts God's glory on display in a mute testimony that declares His majesty, power, divinity, and existence to all—and leaves them without excuse if they ignore or reject the God of the Bible. In other words, natural revelation is sufficient to condemn sinners, but not to save them.

This undercuts any attempt of Christians to accommodate the conclusions of deists and atheists:

The psalm plainly underscores the superiority of Scripture. Its whole point is that the revelation of God in nature is not *as powerful, as enduring, as reliable, as clear, or as authoritative* as Scripture. (MacArthur, 2001, p. 61, emphasis added)

b. Kuyper “a principle is totalitarian”

The relative roles of special and general revelation must be understood to see the correct perspective for interpreting general revelation. Discussing Abraham Kuyper, Cornelius Van Til provides an important perspective:

Kuyper speaks of the *principium naturale* and the *principium speciale*. Creature worshipers seek to live by the natural principle alone.... On the other hand the idea of the special principle presupposes that the natural principle has, because of sin, disqualified itself as judge of the special principle.... It is the nature of the special principle that it cannot submit its claims to a principle that would require its own abdication. (Bahnsen, 1998, p. 723)

It should be clear to Hugh Ross, Ligonier Ministries or anyone who grants interpretive primacy to scientists that there is no compromise with anyone who rejects God. He is determined to take no prisoners:

Over time, many denominations accepted deep time and evolution under the guise of ‘tolerance,’ only to learn that tolerance is a one-way street (Bergman, 2008).

In that context, the PCA and OPC declarations touted by Mathison take on a different meaning. (Reed, 2014)

Kuyper recognized the heart of the problem:

It is the nature of a principle, argues Kuyper, to be the presupposition of all interpretation. A principle is totalitarian in its nature. Two totalitarian principles

stand over against one another; no compromise of any sort is possible between them. Van Til concludes: How then can unity of knowledge and of science be accomplished? By the fact, that the special principle is bound to be victorious. (Bahnsen, 1998, p. 723)

With this perspective, therefore, great caution should be exercised when accepting science, much less natural history scenarios masquerading as science. Naturalists are committed to their worldview not because of its intellectual supremacy but because they are committed to its opposition to Christianity.

Reed et al. (2004, p. 224) noted a hierarchical relationship between science and Scripture:

The Christian view of truth is essential for science. That being so, science must accept the entire package, and learn to respect its place within Christian epistemology, submitting itself to special revelation and limiting itself to proper boundaries.

c. General revelation is limited and obscured

General revelation is limited in its intention, scope and purpose:

Psalm 19, the seventh verse alone states, ‘The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.’ Notice that this is far more specific and powerful than any claim made for general revelation. (Sarfati, 2004, p. 60)

In this context, Sarfati echoes Kuyper’s concern that special revelation cannot be judged by “fallible theories:”

Scripture is the only source of revelation not tainted by the Fall. So a biblical Christian should not interpret the perfect, unfallen Word of God according to fallible theories of sinful humans about a world we know to be cursed. (Sarfati, 2004, p. 44)

Sarfati clarifies this view of general revelation by quoting theologian Louis Berkoff:

Since the entrance of sin into the world, man can gather true knowledge about God from His general revelation only if he studies it in the light of Scripture, in which the elements of God’s original self-revelation, which were obscured and perverted by the blight of sin, are republished, corrected and interpreted.... Some are inclined to speak of God’s general revelation as a second source; but this is

hardly correct in view of the fact that nature can come into consideration here only as interpreted in the light of Scripture. (Sarfati, 2004 p. 44)

The general revelation of God, clouded by the “blight of sin,” must be interpreted through this haze, but God promises it is clearly perceived (Romans 1:20) if not suppressed (Romans 1:18). Appealing to Psalm 19, MacArthur states:

Scripture is a sufficient revelation; nature is not. Scripture is clear and complete; nature is not. Scripture therefore speaks with more authority than nature and should be used to assess scientific opinion, not vice versa... the perspicuity and the comprehensiveness of Scripture are vastly superior to that of nature. And therefore Scripture should be the rule by which we measure science, rather than the reverse approach. (MacArthur, 2001, p. 61)

d. God is a linguistic god

God, in line with His nature, reveals himself primarily through verbal revelation:

Moreover, given the intellectually corrupting effects of man’s fall into sin and rebellion against God, man’s mind has not been left to know God on the basis of man’s own unaided experience and interpretation of the world. God has undertaken to make Himself known to man by means of verbal revelation---using words (chosen by God) which are exactly appropriate for the mind of man (created by God) to come to correct conclusions about His Creator, Judge and Redeemer. (Bahnsen, 1996, p. 186)

That this is intrinsic to God cannot be overemphasized:

God is portrayed as linguistic being. God is identified as a speaking god. He spoke the heavens and earth into being. He controls by the Word of His power. God has a plan called His counsel or decree. Jesus is called the Word of God. He gives us Commandments. He wants to speak to us as part of His relation to us and He wants us to speak to Him. (Bahnsen, tape 1440)

To equate general and special revelation is to lose this insight into God’s nature. For that reason, and others, general and special revelation cannot be epistemological equals. The superiority of special revelation is shown not only by God’s linguistic communication, but also by His demand of a linguistic response from a convert.

Thus, Hugh Ross’s claim that “the facts of nature may be likened to a sixty-seventh book of the Bible” is clearly wrong (Ross, 1994, p. 56) Ross does more than try to justify naturalism’s tenets; he attempts to redefine God’s nature. To a lesser extent, Mathison (2013) falls into the same

error. He distinguishes the two revelations, but omits this intrinsic aspect of God as a communicator. Although he allows that “Special revelation is the revelation of the way of salvation,” (Mathison, 2013) his elevation of general revelation reduces that relationship by minimizing God’s inherent means of communication with His creation.

e. Science subordinates to special revelation

Sarfati (2004) cites theologian Dr. Noel Weeks in explaining the errors of Ross regarding general revelation:

How can a science that ignores the existence and attributes of God be called a valid study of God’s general revelation.... Since science, as we know it today, could hardly be said that it should be regarded as an authority by a Christian.

Weeks (1988, pp. 16-17) showed how the gospel is weakened by the positivist view of secularism:

This leaves open the possibility that there could be a very different science which would ignore the revelation of God himself through his creation. What could that science be expected to learn from creation.... Compared with all that the Bible teaches, it offers very little information. Many people have wanted to solve controversial questions like the nature of creation, the causes of homosexuality, etc. from a study of creation rather than the Bible. Clearly they expect to learn something very certain and definite other than the nature of God. What right have they to expect more definite answers to such questions from a study of creation rather than from the Bible? (Weeks, 1988 as quoted in Sarfati, 2004, p. 46)

Reed (2003, p. 42) saw a similar problem:

The subordination of revelation to science (e.g. Hugh Ross) warps Christian theology and ultimately destroys the possibility for establishing a Christian basis for truth in anything.

Ignoring the clear teaching of Scripture to accommodate the theories of secular natural history, particularly its deep time, is a dangerous road for the Church.

d. Summary: authority

Sarfati (2004, pp. 41-42) explained the problem created by mishandling of general revelation, noting that:

“...the difference in interpretation is not the main issue.” It is that, “there is another source of authority... bringing ‘science’ to bear on hermeneutics is bringing a completely foreign context to the passages.... This body of knowledge with its changing character to the same level as the Bible should alarm all Christians who are committed to the authority of Scripture.”

He concludes by demonstrating this danger:

Now, long-age ideas also say that Scripture is insufficient—nature is now a 67th book the Bible, as Ross put it. And we allegedly need ‘science’ to help us understand biblical history. In practice, where there is a perceived conflict with the scientific consensus and the Bible, it is always Scripture which is made to give way. This places ‘science’ in a greater authority over Scripture, so instead of *sola scriptura*, it becomes *scriptura sub scientia* (Scripture below science). (Sarfati, 2004, p. 389)

The Bible is truth’s ultimate authority. If it can be defined by science, and by interpretations of men who suppress truth in unrighteousness, then its message will become arbitrary and impotent:

If Christians retreat from the authority of the Bible they are swept into that endless philosophical morass. If men depend upon God for knowledge, then acquiring knowledge is not an exploration of the unknown, but the discovery of God’s creation that is already known by God. (Reed, et al., p. 225)

Christians cannot retreat from the authority of the Bible. Instead, it needs to be reasserted, protected, and honored.

Copernican Revolution

Secularists since the Enlightenment have distorted the history of the Copernican Revolution, making it an anti-Christian morality play, and using its “lessons” to advance their agenda via “science.” Sadly, the Church has allowed this, and theologians continue to be ignorant and fearful of this episode. There is little comparison between heliocentrism and deep time. Science cannot provide certainty for unobserved, past events, or the time they supposedly occupied. Yet Christians fall for this tired tale again and again.

Even Sproul used this episode to avoid taking a position on biblical history. He thought such a position could prove harmful because:

...historically, the church’s understanding of the special revelation of the Bible has been corrected by students of natural revelation. One example is the Copernican revolution. (Mathison, 2013)

This statement proves only his vincible ignorance of repeated refutations of the secular myth. (Bergman, 2003, 2015, Crowe, 2009, Faulkner 2001, Mortenson, 2004, Reed and Doyle, 2013, Sarfati, 2004) It also implies other conflicts between Christianity and science; these are largely imaginary. Faulkner explains:

...the Church [the Roman Catholic Church] did support the wrong side of a scientific issue four centuries ago.... Being based upon real history, creationists in theory could be accused of repeating this mistake by evolution... the Church's response to Galileo (1564-1642) was primarily from the works of Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) and other ancient Greek philosophers. (Faulkner, 2001, p. 111, brackets mine)

Sproul and Mathison (2013) fail a consistency test in this regard. Mathison (2013) calls Charles Hodge "the giant of nineteenth century Reformed Theology." Yet on this point, Hodge stated:

The church has been forced more than once to alter her interpretation of the Bible to accommodate the discoveries of science but this has been done without any violence to Scriptures or in any degree impairing their authority. (Hodge, 1999, vol. 1, p. 573 as quoted in Crowe, 2009, p. 115-116)

And Crowe takes it even further:

What Hodge meant by the 'more than once' the church was forced to reinterpret the Bible is unclear. Actually, he seems to have only one time in mind, the time of Galileo. (Crowe, 2009, p. 116)

Despite the geocentric view being the creation of pagan philosophy, and despite the historical distortions by secularists, the Church has chosen to swallow that interpretation and to remain embarrassed for a crime it did not commit. Worse, there is little comparison even between even the myth and Earth's age and past. (Sibley, 2013)

Regarding the hermeneutics of general revelation, the Galileo affair shows: (1) that the interpreters of the Bible in the Church then did not assert the Christian foundations of science (which were widely accepted then), (2) that the Bible was distorted by accommodation of the Ptolemaic system, and (3) that science was beginning to be seen as independent of Christian theology.

Sibley (2013, p. 76) provides a proper perspective, insisting that Christians stand strong and "not be intimidated by the demands of secular science and institutions." Would that Christians would do so!

Conclusion

From God alone comes all knowledge and truth and when drawing application from the world around us we must recognize our fallen nature, the autonomous desires of our mind, and that the results of failing to be directed by our Creator in all our interpretations can only lead to arbitrariness and distortions.

The Christian principle of interpretation is based upon the assumption of God as the final and self-contained reference point. The non-Christian principle of interpretation is that man as self-contained is the final and self-contained reference point. It is this basic difference that has to be kept in mind all the time. It will be difficult at times to see that such is actually the case. (Bahnsen, 1996, p. 302)

There are clear hermeneutical principles that apply to the Bible. If ignored, problems ensue. The same is true of general revelation. It must be interpreted in the context of its meaning. God supplies that context in Psalm 19 and Romans 1, showing that it is primarily a means for men to know God exists, and something of His attributes. As such, it holds them without excuse for suppressing the truth. Used properly, natural revelation can exalt God to His high and rightful place. God reveals, but has chosen the propositional, linguistic medium of Scripture as His primary revelation. When expanding our finite knowledge using science, history, philosophy, or any other discipline, we must remember our finiteness and our fallen nature and its implications. Science blossomed in the Christian West because it was built on a foundation of revealed truth. Only when it is set back on that foundation can it provide insight into our environment. Since Scripture provides severe constraints against an old Earth, then secular natural history must be rejected and natural history rebuilt on a biblical foundation.

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