

“By Two Means”

An Exposition of Article Two of the Belgic Confession.

Article 2: The Means by Which We Know God

We know him by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe, since that universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book¹ in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God: his eternal power and his divinity, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20. All these things are enough to convict men and to leave them without excuse. Second, he makes himself known to us more openly by his holy and divine Word, as much as we need in this life, for his glory and for the salvation of his own.

¹Ps 19:1-4 ²Ps 19:7-8; 1 Cor 1:18-21

According to the Apostle Paul, there is no such thing as an atheist, there are only people who attempt to suppress the knowledge of God in unrighteousness. Atheists may claim they do not believe in God, yet Scripture tells us that they suppress the knowledge of God deep within. I am reminded of the atheist’s quip, “there is no God, but I hate him.” This internal contradiction comes about because God reveals himself to all people in such a way that everyone knows that God exists and that he possesses divine attributes. Since God has made himself known to all, people are without excuse for failing to worship and serve the Creator. But the revelation of God in and through the created order cannot lead people to a saving knowledge of God in Jesus Christ. God reveals this through his word, both in the historical record of his mighty acts in redemptive history, and through the divinely-inspired explanation of those saving acts recorded in Holy Scripture. It is through these two divinely-appointed means (Creation and Scripture), but only through these divinely-appointed means, God makes himself known.

In Article One, the Confession makes the point that the biblical pattern found in Romans 10:8-10 of believing certain doctrines and then confessing them before the watching world is one of the divinely appointed means by which Christians are to respond to unbelief and idolatry. In the previous article, we made the case that we currently live in a post-Christian age and find ourselves confronted with secularism, paganism, false religion, and what may be called the “Great Awakening” at every turn.

What are we to do in such a situation? We do as Paul instructs us to do. We believe those doctrines revealed in Scripture. As a church and as individuals we confess these doctrines before the watching world. This is why these basic doctrines are defined and spelled out for us by our Reformed fathers in documents like the *Belgic Confession*, which summarizes the Bible’s teaching on those doctrines which we must believe, but also expresses them in such a way that we can confess these doctrines in an intelligent manner before the unbelieving world around us.

In the first article of our confession, we dealt with the way in which we believe and confess our faith in

the one only true God. Our confession identifies God's attributes which reveal something important to us of his nature and essence. Having confessed our faith in the one true God and then identified several of his essential attributes, questions associated with our knowledge of God now become very important, especially those questions associated with the quality and extent of such knowledge. How does God reveal himself to us? What do we know about God? Is the knowledge of God universal? If so, what do people do with this knowledge of God? These are important questions, especially as we interact with unbelievers around us. These are addressed in Article Two of our confession "The Means by Which We Know God."

What we as Reformed Christians believe about our knowledge of God and what we confess to the world around us serves as the background to a number of other important doctrines.

Before we go through Article Two and define and compare the two ways in which God reveals himself, there are several things we need to keep in mind. First, in identifying the two ways in which God reveals himself (Creation and Scripture), we are laying the groundwork to bear witness to the unbelieving world around us. We are confessing that God can be truly known in response to those secularists who deny that such knowledge is even possible. We are also saying that since God reveals himself through two specific means, all those who claim to have knowledge of God apart from these means are either self-deluded or idolaters, self-deceived or deceivers. Contra secularism, we believe and confess that God truly can be known. Contra paganism and non-Christian religions, we believe and confess that God reveals what we need to know about him through creation and Scripture. Through these two means, we know him as he is, and we can worship him as he demands.

Second, the ways in which the non-Christians distort the knowledge of God, and in which secularists attempt to deny that such knowledge is even possible, are described by Paul in Romans 1:18-25, a passage we considered in the previous article. As Paul sees it, all men and women know that God exists, yet because of human sinfulness, people inevitably attempt to suppress this truth in unrighteousness. Paul describes how this suppressed knowledge of God manifests itself in false religion and paganism (vv. 21-23).

The notion that God reveals himself in such a way that all men and women know him, but that they inevitably attempt to suppress and distort what they know to be true (v. 25), should tell us something profound about the nature of unbelief and how deep-seated it truly is. If God is truly known by all those created in his image, yet people still refuse to worship and serve him as their creator. This is why all men and women are guilty before God and subject to his just judgments. No one will be able to stand before God's tribunal on the day of judgment and proclaim their innocence on the grounds that God did not sufficiently reveal himself. On the contrary, God makes himself known so thoroughly that all are without excuse (Romans 1:20). This is one purpose of God's revelation in nature.

The universal guilt of humanity before God is important to keep in mind as we proceed, precisely because this is so different from the categories that most Americans bring with them to theological discussions. In most cases, people are the product of their culture and the ideology of the age in which they live. Influenced by democracy (i.e., we all have one vote) and egalitarianism (everything should be equal), Americans frequently and erroneously assume that everyone is born in a state of neutrality toward God, and that they are not condemned until they self-consciously reject God. But this is far from the way Paul presents the matter.

Paul contends that because of the fall of the human race into sin (a subject we will address when we

come to articles Fourteen and Fifteen of our confession), all men and women are guilty before God because in Eden Adam sinned as the representative of the entire human race. Since all people are born with a sinful nature, without fail, from the moment they begin to interact with the world around them, they attempt to suppress the knowledge of God, continuously revealed to them through that which God has made.

People are not in any sense neutral towards God. Quite the contrary, we are born hostile to God. Furthermore, we are guilty before God because of Adam's sin. Each of us will continually attempt to suppress what we know to be true about God, unless and until God opens our eyes to his revelation. If we deny that any knowledge of God is even possible, we take the secularist/atheist option. If we distort the knowledge of God, and do not worship God as he reveals himself, but instead, think of God as we think he ought to be, we take the pagan/false religion option. In either case, there is no such thing as an innocent person, who, because they have not heard the gospel, are exempt from the judgment of God. Paul states that all are without excuse because of the fact of God's revelation of himself through the created order. This not only makes the missionary and evangelistic tasks of the church imperative (since the gospel of Jesus Christ is the only thing which can save us from our sins), it also shows us the importance of the church professing the Christian faith to a world in which people are suppressing the truth in unrighteousness. Truth will cast out error.

When we believe and confess *how* God is known, we are reminding those around us who are suppressing the truth in unrighteousness, that this is precisely what they are doing. God reveals himself through that which he has made, and everyone knows that God exists, whether they admit it or not.

While our confession does not specifically address the subject of the creation of Adam (and humanity) until Article Fourteen—when our confession points out that Adam was created good, just, and holy, and with the natural ability to conform to the will of God—it is clear from the nature and character of God's revelation, both in creation and through his word, that people are created in such a way as to be able to receive and understand the revelation God gives. God created the world in such a way that it continuously reveals his perfections to his creatures through the creation itself. God created us as rational beings who can understand his speech to us recorded in Holy Scripture. Therefore, we are able and do receive God's revelation because he has made us capable of doing so.

It is because of human sin we suppress or distort what we know about God through creation. In fact, human sinfulness so distorts the revelation that God gives, Paul can say in Ephesians 4:18-24, that human understanding is darkened and our thinking about God is utterly futile. The problem is not with God's revelation. Nor is the problem that we lack the faculties to perceive it. Our problem stems from human sinfulness. We all know that God exists. We all know that he possesses divine attributes. Because of human sin, it is inevitable that we will suppress the truth in unrighteousness. We are all without excuse.

As our confession sets forth in Article Two, there are two ways God makes himself known to us, the general revelation of God in nature and the special revelation of God in the Bible.

In the face of unbelief around us, we believe and confess that God is known by two means. The first of the ways in which God is known is the revelation of God through that which God has made (i.e., through creation). Our confession puts it this way, we know God “by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe, since that universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God: his eternal power and his divinity, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20.” The revelation of God through creation (general revelation)

has a very specific purpose which is also spelled out in our confession: “all these things are enough to convict men and to leave them without excuse.”

The content of general revelation is identified in a number of places in the Bible. Following the lead of John Calvin,¹ the Reformed contend the Bible provides us with God-given spectacles so that we can understand creation properly. While this might seem a bit backwards (looking at the Bible to find out what we learn about God in nature), we can turn to the Bible in order to find out what God reveals about himself in nature. This is because the primary author of the Bible is also the author of the Book of Nature. In his word, God explains all of his deeds, including how we should view creation.

One place where we find the Bible’s perspective on God’s revelation in nature is in the Book of Job. “When faced with the grim reality of suffering and the gnawing suspicion that God may be neither omnipotent nor just in His government of the world, Job was directed to the natural world where the power, majesty, and beneficence of the Creator are plainly displayed.² (See Job 36:24-33; 37:22-23; 38; 39; 42:5-6).

This is also taught throughout the Psalms. In Psalm 19, we read that nature is revelatory for all who are capable of beholding the creation. God’s revelation of himself is continuous and perpetual through that which he has created. “It is cast in the language of common experience.”³ The same emphasis is found in Psalm 29. Other Psalms, such as 8, 93, and 104 describe the glory of God as manifest through that which God has created. While the context of these Psalms is that the faithful are to praise God for what he has done, the implication is unbelievers see the same things as believers do, but do not worship God as they should. They are guilty before him.

As noted above, we also find this point being made in the opening chapter of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans (1:18-25), where The Apostle makes his most important statements about the effectiveness of general revelation. Humanity both receives and perceives truth about God (defined by Paul as God’s invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature), from rational reflection upon the creation. This knowledge of God is acquired through interaction with the created order. Paul, however, goes on to indicate that this knowledge of God is sinfully suppressed, although the force of the verb (*κατεχόντων*) indicates an unsuccessful attempt at suppression of what is known to be true.⁴

This latter point of information is helpful, especially when we think about some of the implications of believing and confessing our faith to an unbelieving culture. This attempted suppression of the truth means that all people have a sufficient knowledge of God to render all without excuse. This suppression of the knowledge of God is attempted but never completed. Even before we begin the task of confessing our faith to those around us, by turning to the “back of the book,” we know that there can be no such

¹ Calvin, Institutes, I.vi.1.

² See Demarest, General Revelation, 234.

³ Demarest, General Revelation, 236.

⁴ For exegetical information regarding the term and its usage in the overall context of Paul’s argument see: John Murray, The Epistle to the Romans, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), 37-42; and C. E. B. Cranfield, Romans, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1980), 112.

thing as a true atheist, only what the Bible calls “a fool” who says in his heart that there is no God. An atheist is someone who is sinfully attempting to suppress the knowledge of God. Believing and confessing our faith is, in part, reminding people of many of the things they already know to be true, but will not admit. Within every unbeliever is a “Trojan Horse” of the suppressed knowledge of God.

There is a surprising amount of information in the Bible about our knowledge of God acquired through interaction with the creation and it is useful to summarize it here:

- (1) God exists (Ps. 19:1; Ro. 1:19) and is Himself uncreated (Acts 17:24).
- (2) God is the creator (Acts 14:15), is all-wise (Ps. 104:24) and is good (Acts 14:17).
- (3) God is the sustainer (Acts 14:16; 17:25), is righteous (Ro. 1:32) and has a sovereign will (Acts 17:26).
- (4) God is the Lord of all men (Acts 17:24) and has absolute standards of right and wrong (Ro. 2:15).
- (5) God is self-sufficient (Acts 17:25), immanent (Acts 17:26-27), eternal (Ps. 93:2) and should be worshiped (Acts 14:15, 17:23).
- (6) God is great (Ps. 8:3-4), majestic (Ps. 29:4), all-powerful (Ps. 29:4; Ro. 1:20) and will judge all men (Ro. 2:15-26).

From this list of what can be known about God through interaction with the creation, general revelation fulfills the purpose for which God gives it. General revelation leaves all people without excuse. Creation is a beautiful book which reveals its creator. But after the fall of the human race into sin, general revelation is insufficient to lead Adam’s descendants to a saving knowledge of God. The Book of Nature does not disclose to us the person and work of Jesus Christ. General revelation was never intended to tell the whole story, only to give the story of redemption its proper context.

Since general revelation does not give us a saving knowledge of God, God must make himself fully known elsewhere if any are to be saved from the consequences of Adam’s fall. God does this in his word. Our confession speaks of this as follows. “Second, [God] makes himself known to us more openly by his holy and divine Word, as much as we need in this life, for his glory and for the salvation of his own.”

This second means of revelation is known as “special revelation.” It is God’s revelation given to us in the Scriptures. Special revelation takes a much different form from general revelation. In the words of one writer,

Special revelation concerns the activity of God in human affairs. It is therefore historical, and it proceeds in stages. The mode of revelation is thus suited to the epoch and the stage of redemptive history, but has its culmination in the ‘fact of Christ.’ God has spoken, finally, in His Son, in His teaching, His work of atonement, and in the interpretive apostolic activity. The OT revelation prepares for Christ. Christ does not repudiate the OT, He fulfills it. The historical character of revelation makes clear its uniqueness....By calling revelation ‘historical,’ stress is laid on the actuality of the events recorded in Scripture. The events are not simply the

projections of the religious consciousness onto history. The testimony of the Christian Church is that God revealed himself in human history, and now, in Scripture - in the very words and propositions of Scripture - God reveals Himself.⁵

Special revelation is a subject we will take up in some detail in Article Three of our confession (which deals with the inspiration of Scripture), articles Four and Six (which deal with the canon of Scripture), Article Five (the authority of Scripture), and Article Seven (which covers the sufficiency of the Scripture).

One helpful way to understand these two means by which God reveals himself is to compare and contrast them. As B. B. Warfield does so in his magisterial essay on divine revelation,

There is the revelation which God continuously makes to all men: [general revelation] by it His power and Divinity are made known. And there is the revelation [special revelation] which He makes exclusively to His chosen people: through it His saving grace is made known. Both species or stages of revelation are insisted upon throughout the Scriptures. They are, for example, brought significantly together in such a declaration as we find in Ps. xix: 'The heavens declare the glory of God...their line is throughout the earth' (vers. 1.4); 'The Law of Jehovah is perfect, restoring the soul' (ver. 7).⁶

These two means of God's revelation are distinct but wonderfully complementary. General revelation is addressed to humanity as divine image bearers (cf. Article Fourteen). It is given through nature and history, and is "natural" in the sense that it is given continuously. This is Paul's point in Romans 1:18-25. Special revelation, on the other hand, is addressed to people as sinners in need of redemption. It is necessarily supernatural in that God enters human history to speak and act so as to save people from their sin and the consequences of Adam's fall.

The Bible is the redemptive-historical account of God's revelation of his saving purposes for sinners, beginning with the creation account, moving on to the Fall (with the proto-*evangelium* of Genesis 3:15), to God's call of Noah, Abraham, the creation of a covenant people (the nation of Israel) and so on. This revelation culminates in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, which, in turn, serves as the basis for the promise of our Lord's Second Advent, when he will return to raise the dead (1 Corinthians 15:50-55; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11), judge the world (Matthew 25:31-46), and make all things new (2 Peter 3:1-13). In the Old Testament, special revelation was given primarily to Israel, and to the church in the New. Christ's church was then entrusted with the task of taking the gospel to the ends of the earth (Matthew 28:18-20). In this sense, special revelation is particular and to be proclaimed, unlike the revelation God gives to all in nature (and which is continuously given).

Warfield points out,

Revelation, therefore, in its double form was the Divine purpose for man from the beginning.... Without special revelation, general revelation would be for sinful men incomplete and ineffective, and could issue, as in point of fact it has issued wherever it alone has been

⁵ H. D. McDonald, *Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. J. D. Douglas, (Grand Rapids: The Zondervan Corporation, 1981), s. v. "Revelation."

⁶ B. B. Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, 73.

accessible, only in leaving them without excuse (Rom. 1:20). Without general revelation, special revelation would lack that basis in the fundamental knowledge of God as the mighty and wise, righteous and good, maker and ruler of all things, apart from which the further revelation of this great God's interventions in the world for the salvation of sinners could not be either intelligible, credible or operative.⁷

The two modes of revelation work in harmony to fulfill the ends for which God has given them. General revelation provides the framework for God to reveal himself so as to redeem sinners. It declares that God exists to all people through that which has been made so that they are without excuse. God reveals to all that he is eternal and possesses divine perfections, and because fallen, all people are under the sentence of death and deserving of his wrath. Due to humanity's sinful nature, however, this revelation of God is inevitably suppressed (Romans 1:18). General revelation provides the framework for special revelation, which is God's activity whereby he reveals his plan for and method of, the salvation of sinful men and women.

As we believe and confess that God reveals himself in these two ways, Creation and in the Bible, we know that both the secularist (who denies such knowledge is possible) or the pagan (who supposedly finds knowledge of God everywhere *but* in the Bible) are guilty before God for suppressing the truth in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18), and for exchanging God's truth for a lie (Romans 1:25). It is general revelation which renders all people without excuse and but which provides the necessary context for God's special revelation in the Scriptures.

While the Book of Nature reveals nature's God (the Creator of all things), the Book of Nature does not reveal the gospel. It is only in God's revelation of himself in the Bible (special revelation) that we learn about the Triune God, the incarnation of his Son (Jesus), and the message of law and gospel which tell us that we are guilty for our sins and that God delivers us from the guilt and power of sin through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Because of human sin, general revelation can only condemn us. But in his word (special revelation), God reveals how he saves sinners through the perfect obedience and sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. In the opening verses of John 17, Jesus makes this very point. He speaks about the relationship between the knowledge of God and eternal life. While praying for his disciples Jesus looked toward heaven and prayed:

“Since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:2-3).

To possess eternal life we must know God as he reveals himself to us in the person of his son. The only place we will find God's son and know God as we ought (in the sense of trusting in his righteousness and death to save us from our sins) is in God's word written (Holy Scripture).

This is why we believe and confess that God reveals himself through the things and the creatures he has made, but also that God “makes himself known to us more openly by his holy and divine Word, as much as we need in this life, for his glory and for the salvation of his own.” To know God, we must know his son, Jesus, the central character of God's holy and divine word. To possess eternal life, we must know that God is, and that Jesus Christ is the only Savior of sinners.

⁷ Warfield, Inspiration and Authority of the Bible, 75.