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General and Special Divine Revelation

G.C. Berkouwer

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Anyone who reflects on divine revelation in the world, and permits himself to review the history of the Church and theology, quite naturally encounters a frequently expressed differentiation between general and special revelation. This differentiation has played an important role in eras of all kinds, and has even precipitated much discussion and strife. Quite understandably the question has often arisen whether theology, in pressing this distinction, has not gone beyond "what was written," and whether or not this differentiation permits a proper view of the wonder of the one divine revelation.

I. THE PROBLEM

Can we distinguish between various types of revelation? If so, do we do justice to God's revelation in its greatness and indestructible unity? Is this perhaps a subtle differentiation that can be reached only when the revelation of God has become merely an idea, and we are no longer under the overwhelming impression that divine revelation is always special, surprising, new and wonderful? Have we perhaps thereby arrived at that stage of scholastic thought which in every area distinguished between "general" and "special" and that now applies this distinction also to the revelation of God?

To the question of terminology we must add still others. Must we not acknowledge that especially in the last centuries the special revelation of God has been attacked from the viewpoint of a much wider general revelation?

Especially when the so-called "history of religions" school in the second

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half of the nineteenth century called particular attention to the non-Christian religions, a plea was made for general revelation; scholars did not wish to cast aside these religions as false religions, but rather, wished to view them in connection with a general revelation of God. From this vantage point the so-called absolute character of Christianity was called more and more into question. The Christian confession of a special revelation in the history of Israel, in the person of Jesus Christ, and in the witness to Jesus Christ (the Holy Scriptures), was increasingly criticized from the viewpoint of "general" revelation.

Thus the concept of a "general" religion arose, corresponding to a "general" revelation; on this basis the teachings of the Church were subjected to sharp criticism. Christianity, it was argued, set far too many boundaries to God's revelation by calling it "special" and by

localizing it. Did not all religions contain elements with hidden indications of a revelation of God? Was it still possible to accept the specific of God's revelation in Israel and in Jesus Christ?

In this manner—as an attack on the Church—the plea was made for a general, universal revelation of God in the world. Of course, one can say that in speaking of a general revelation, the Church and Christian theology mean something quite different from this universalism. But the fact remains that historical circumstances have brought about a serious and almost hopeless confusion. And so the question has arisen whether or not adequate reason now exists to discontinue speaking longer of a "general" revelation so that the term's meaning will not be misunderstood in the Church and theology.

There is, finally, still a third problem. Is not the danger evident that via the route of general revelation we may find ourselves companion to Roman Catholic theology that has always ascribed such great value to the natural knowledge of God? This natural knowledge of God, so it was taught, came forth not from the special revelation of God in Jesus Christ; rather, it preceded this by way of the natural light of reason, through which it was possible to know God. This teaching is found not only in Roman Catholic theology as such; it was also declared an infallible doctrine of the Church at the Vatican Council of 1870, when it was announced that God could be known with certainty from that which had been created through the natural light of reason. Over against those currents in the nineteenth century Roman Catholic Church, which taught that God could be known only through and by a special revelation in Christ, the Council maintained the possibility of a true even though incomplete knowledge of God apart from the revelation in Christ. Inseparably linked to this teaching was the Roman Catholic doctrine of the proofs for the existence of God. This was apparent from the interpretation of the words of 1870 by the anti-modernistic oath of 1910 to mean that God not only could be known but indeed could be proved by the natural light of reason.

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These three difficulties (the question of terminology, the modern attack on the absoluteness of Christianity, and the natural theology of Rome) furnish good reasons for a closer consideration. Is the present situation in which the Church and theology find themselves perhaps of such a nature that it would be better to ignore the distinction between general and special revelation? Or does this distinction preserve a religious and theological necessity, so that we cannot and may not abandon it, but must explain and darify it amid and despite the confusion of these days?

II. NECESSARY CLARIFICATIONS

Because of the twentieth century situation, it is certainly not necessary to abandon the doctrine of general revelation; but to clarify and to guard it against misunderstanding is urgent.

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First of all, we must insist that "general" revelation does not and cannot mean an attack upon the special revelation in Jesus Christ. The modern interpretation of general revelation had led to such an attack. But in so doing it came into direct conflict with the holy Scriptures which declare the absoluteness of God's revelation. The debate over the absoluteness of Christianity always recalls those words from John's Gospel that Christ is the way, the truth, and the life (14:6) and that no one comes to the Father but through him. In the modern view, Christ himself was not the revelation of God; rather, Christ invited decision regarding his teaching. But this teaching is inseparably connected with his person: "Blessed is he who is not offended in me" (Matt. 11:6).

Therefore, neither the Church nor theology can ever speak of general revelation if in so doing it fails to do justice to the absoluteness of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, who was "God revealed in the flesh" (I Tim. 3:16). Scripture speaks much too plainly to allow such error, for it points us to the great mystery revealed at the end of the ages, which had previously remained hidden (Rom. 16:25; Heb. 9:26). Whenever the Church and theology speak of general revelation, no shadow whatever must be cast over special revelation. Certainly such shadowing has never been the purpose of the Church's exposition of general revelation.

When the Belgic Confession in Article 2 affirms faith in general revelation, it in no wise opposes the absoluteness of God's revelation in Christ, which this Confession emphatically expresses elsewhere. In this harmony of the special and general lies the touchstone for any legitimate discussion of general revelation.

In the second place, it is necessary to clarify the term "general revelation" in order to distinguish it from the Roman Catholic idea of natural theology fixed in 1870. It is clear that the Christian Church, in speaking of general revelation, never intended to assert that true knowledge of God is possible through the natural light of reason.

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Assuredly, in the time of the Reformation men believed in the general revelation of God, but not with the understanding that through this revelation they could arrive at the idea of a natural, true knowledge of God. Moreover, the rupture between God's revelation and the human heart was pointed out.

That Romans 1 is cited in Article 2 of the Belgic Confession is no accident, nor the fact that special reference is made to men's guilt (Rom. 1:20). The purpose of this record was to indicate the existence of a revelation of God in all the works of his hands, but that man, who comes in daily contact with this revelation, in his unrighteousness wards off this truth. This is exactly the import of Romans 1. But this gulf between revelation and true knowledge of God does not come to expression at all in the Vatican pronouncement, although it too cites Romans 1.

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Right here we reach a central point in the discussion of general revelation. To speak of the general revelation of God does not in any respect mean doing less than justice to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Rather, it emphasizes the guilt and lost condition, the darkness and the blindness, of fallen man, who sees the works of God's hand no more, and no longer can discover God therein.

So also for the Apostle Paul in Romans 1, the idea of the revelation of God "since the creation of the world" does not conflict with what he writes of Christ Jesus. Romans 1 points to the *anger* of God (v. 18): the light of the gospel shines into the darkness of unfaithful human life that holds back the truth in unrighteousness (v. 18), that substitutes the image of a perishable man for the majesty of the eternal God (v. 23), and that honors and worships the creature above the Creator (v. 25). Because the general revelation of God is placed in Romans 1 in this uncontradictable context, it ever remains impossible to speak of the general revelation of God without considering also the anger of God (v. 18), which condemns man's suppression of the truth in unrighteousness.

And herein is established the impossibility of rivalry or competition between the confession of the general revelation of God and the special revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The confession of God's revelation in all the works of his hands does not demean the revelation in Christ to relative or to lesser importance, but, on the contrary, *serves rather to point toward* that revelation in its saving character amid human estrangement from God.

From all this it also becomes clear that confession of the special revelation of God does not make the general revelation superfluous. From Paul's teaching in Romans 1 on the anger of God, and his indication that the heathen will not be held guiltless (v. 20) because they suppress the truth in unrighteousness, it is apparent that human life, even in deepest depravity, *does not stand out of connection with the revelation of God*.

Man is not situated in a silent, purposeless and senseless world in which no voice whatever addresses him. Much rather, over against nihilism it must

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be asserted that human life bears an answering character. Although man is not conscious of it, his whole life is a reply, even to the deepest aspects of his religion. This religion is not an automatic instinct rising out of the depths of the human heart, but rather, constitutes the depraved answer to the revelation of God. In innumerable variations it reveals the unrest of the heart, which does not come to rest until it rests in God (St. Augustine).

From this we can illuminate the fact that Reformation theology called attention to the revelation of God in the works of his hands and at the same time confessed the necessity of the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ. The reality of general revelation does not lead to the knowledge of God, but is *misunderstood and denied*. It is true that man—sinful and fallen man—is still surrounded by the light, but—to speak in the terms of the Canons of

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Dort—this same man pollutes the light of nature and holds it back in unrighteousness (Canons of Dort, III, IV, 4). This relationship of holding back and pushing away the truth cannot be denied or abandoned. Bound up in the general revelation of God is a fact that makes plain and certain how seriously man is estranged from the life of God (Eph. 4:18) : Man is... not to be held *guiltless*.

When Article 2 of the Belgic Confession asserts this general revelation of God, this does not mean a “natural theology” in the sense of Rome. For in this natural theology conclusions are drawn from this revelation to the true knowledge of God, whereas for Article 2 of the Belgic Confession that is precisely where the problem lies. Over against this “true knowledge,” Reformation thought understandably posited the corruption of the estrangement, and naturally took a critical stand toward the proofs of the existence of God in Roman Catholic theology. These proofs prompted the impression that isolated human reason must lead to the conclusion of the existence of God. But such isolation is impractical and impossible because man’s thinking exists and functions only in relationship to the whole man. In this totality the matter of human decision falls within the realm of the heart and of faith.

It is impossible to deny that the proofs for God’s existence in general have wielded but little influence. For they stand—especially in our times—in the shadow of a great many “proofs” *against* the existence of God. That God can be proved as the first cause or prime mover of all things finds less agreement these days among modern men. Even in Roman Catholic circles some voices say that the Roman Catholic proofs mean little or nothing *for those who do not already believe*. And in our times, in opposition to the proofs for the existence of God, a deep agnosticism elaborates the conviction of the absence of God; no longer recognizing the world as purposeful, this agnosticism abandons it to senselessness and absurdity and sees the existence of man in the world as a meaningless and purposeless jest.

The Church of Jesus Christ does not idealize the world. It is aware of the curse of the Fall (Gen. 3:17) and with Paul it knows the creation as subject to vanity and subjugated to the temporal (Rom. 8:20 f.). It hesitates

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to fraternize with every convenient theodicy that tries to justify God’s direction of the world to the judgment bar of human reason.

But at the same time the Church confesses that God maintains and rules the world. Thus we confront the fact that it is precisely the believer who becomes conscious once again of the universality of the acts of God in the world. It is striking that Article 2 of the Belgic Confession contains no mention of “nature.” Often the general revelation of God is called the revelation in nature. But Article 2 speaks of God’s creation, providence and rule “in which these are before our eyes as a beautiful book, in which all creatures, small and large, are like letters, which allow us to view the invisible things of God.”

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Herein we are not offered an optimistic view of life, in which the curse, suffering and terrors of life are denied. Rather, we gain an outlook on the universal dealing of God. In the so-called nature Psalms (e.g., Ps. 8, 19, 65, 104) we are not presented with a natural theology, but we have here Psalms of Israel, lifted out of the sanctuary. Faith in Israel's God again opens up the windows to the world, and man once more discovers the works of God's hands. For this world, for the sun and the moon and the stars—for all that God has made—there arises renewed interest and importance. Certainly it is not accidental that the Reformation acted as a stimulus to the development of the study of nature and science. How could "the believing" have no interest in nature and in history? Yet at the same time we discern that our eyes are opened for this world only through the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, or, as Calvin has said in a striking simile, that the special revelation is as a glass through which we are once more in a position to read the book of the general revelation of God. Through the special revelation we understand again the *purpose* of the creation of God and we discover—in justice and in grace—the works of God's hands.

In this connection we must note the fact that in our time sharp criticism has been leveled at the doctrine of the general revelation of God. For instance, Karl Barth especially has aligned himself emphatically against Article 2 of the Belgic Confession because in this he detected a second source of divine revelation alongside that in Christ Jesus. From the history of the Church and of theology it can be demonstrated, Barth asserts, that acceptance of a second source of the knowledge of God—for example, Scripture and tradition, Scripture and reason, Scripture and emotion—has always led to devaluation of the first source. Now indeed, it is undeniable that tradition (Rome) has often jeopardized Scripture, that reason and emotion (rationalism and subjectivism) also have jeopardized the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

But the consideration of general revelation need not involve us in a theory of sources of equal value existing adjacent to each other. The relationship between general and special revelation is actually of an entirely different

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nature. It is not to be likened to the view of Rome, which puts Scripture and tradition next to each other.

In this relationship between general and special revelation lies the crux of the problem. More and more the fact is clear that the general revelation of God does not stand next to the special revelation, but that special revelation opens our eyes to the greatness of God's works and points the way to the Psalmist's song of praise: "O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!" (Ps. 8:1).

The Barthian criticism of the idea of general revelation is an impressive reaction against the jeopardizing of special revelation in Jesus Christ by other sources of the knowledge of God. That Barth especially sensed this threat is understandable when we recall that, under

the influence of national socialism, Christianity in Germany seemed to identify the voice of God in history with the seizure of power by Hitler in Germany in 1933. This menace was very real and exceedingly dangerous; even in the Church many persons were misled by this correlation.

But the Church doctrine of the general revelation of God moves on an entirely different level. Its level is not that of Trent, nor of rationalism, nor of national socialism, but that of Psalm 8 and Romans 1—the level of the revelation of guilt, and of the discovery of the dealings of God through eyes made to see anew through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Only when it becomes fully clear that the doctrine of the general revelation of God poses no threat to the special revelation of God in Jesus Christ does it become possible for this doctrine to resound throughout the world of our time. General revelation remains a reminder of the guilt of closed eyes. Precisely this doctrine, therefore, uncovers for us the absoluteness of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

III. MEANING OF GENERAL REVELATION

In the foregoing comments we have laid emphasis upon the fact that the general revelation of God must not be delineated without attention to the connection of guilt and the anger of God (Rom. 1). From this some might infer that general revelation has no significance for life beyond establishing the impossibility of man's guiltlessness. It would then point to the guilt of the closed eye, but have no effect in actual life. Therefore, it is necessary here to penetrate further into its significance.

For it is clear that, while the Word of God points with emphasis to the relationship between general revelation and guilt, it indicates also that fallen man in his practical life is not freed from the revelation of God.

When the Apostle Paul, after pointing out in Romans i the guilt of estrangement, is then fascinated in Romans 2 by the life of the heathen, we touch this fact in a clear and unmistakable manner. He has indicated the

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serious consequences of this estrangement from God in the moral life, and has directed attention to the judgment of God revealed therein (Rom. 1:26 f.). But he does not shut his eyes to the fact that phenomena other than uncleanness and immorality are oft-times also to be noticed in the lives of the fallen and the estranged.

He calls attention to the heathen who, while they lack the Law (i.e., the Law of Moses), nonetheless by *nature* do the things that are contained in the Law (Rom. 2:14.). Apparently life even in estrangement from God has not passed totally into nihilism and anarchy and lawlessness: "which show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness" (Rom. 2:15).

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Paul indeed does not say that the *Law* is put in their hearts as we read of this Law in the prophecies of the new covenant (Jer. 31:33; Heb. 10:16). But he does discover a conformity with what God has commanded in his Law, and he sees its reality in their consciousness of norms, namely, in their *conscience* (Rom. 2:15). In connection with his warning (of judgment against proud Jewish self-exaltation above the Gentiles), Paul does not delve deeper into this noteworthy appearance of conformity with the Law, but nevertheless by pointing to it, he emphasizes that even in estrangement some connection remains between man and God.

Men have sought to explain conscience in all kinds of ways—sociologically, or psychoanalytically, or also as the voice of God in man. Paul does not propound any theory of conscience. But he calls attention to it as he sees that even in the heathen world people in one manner or another are preserved or held back from the *full* consequences of estrangement from God.

In Acts 17 also we find a similar estimate of heathendom. Upon the Areopagus Paul calls for repentance (Acts 17:30), but he points out at the same time that, even in his apostasy, man is not loose from God and that this connection is evident in his life. It is one of the heathen poets who, himself has said: "For we also are his offspring" (Acts 17:28). Surely this is something other than a confession of creation after God's image, and likely the heathen poet had intended "his offspring" in a pantheistic way. But Paul seized upon this word to remind them of the dealings of God, that it had been established that men should seek God, if haply they should find him, though he was not far from every one of us (Acts 17:27). Man—also heathen man—is in all circumstances and thoughts of his life not freed from God. He is involved with God, and this fact is apparent also in his religion and his morality. He cannot be freed from the revelation of God, even less from the command of God—from the (for him) not *entirely* hidden goodness of God's command and ordinances.

Certainly everywhere and often we see manifold evidences of departure from God's Law (Rom. 1), but defection from God does not always mean radical nihilism. Life on this earth does not yet disclose the full consequences of sin. Calvin speaks of "common grace" and, in this connection, he dis-

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cusses virtues to be seen also in the lives of unbelievers. He did not wish to ascribe these phenomena to a left—over goodness in nature—as if the apostasy from God were not so serious—but rather he discerned here the power of God in revelation and in grace preserving life from total self-destruction.

While this "morality" does not justify man, it must not on that account be denied. There is a working of conscience that has significance in the tensions of human life. This conscience, however, is not an unchanging contest, an unthreatened morality. A man can

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become what we may call a "conscienceless" being, consciously trampling God's Law under foot. And in the latter days, we are told, there will be people without natural affection, turning away from the good, with more love for self-satisfaction than for God (II Tim. 3:1 f.). One cannot build upon this type of conformity with the Law!

But this does not diminish the fact that life is not yet wholly fragmented in chaos. A relationship to God remains even in man's estrangement from him, a *work* of the Law that is written in the hearts of men. There is still *contact* with the works of God's hand even though men do not look to the Fatherhand of God. That does not mean that human corruption is not serious, but it does mean that man never is fully severed from connection with God and that—even though he does not recognize the Lawgiver—in many respects he still comes under the influence of the Law and the ordinances of God.

In sin itself lies a driving power that estranges man from God and from his neighbor. But in the preservation of human life there is still community, marriage, love, justice, mercy. *Because of the existence of sin*, because of apostasy, these are wonderful phenomena in the fallen world. Here God still holds fast the world and human life, even in the Fall. He does not abandon it, because he has loved the world—in Christ (John 3:16). Over against sin, he still holds life in being, and makes room for the preaching of the gospel. He still allows fallen man his place in the world, and he does not disallow himself a witness, through the goodness of rain and harvest time. He blesses with an overflow of food and happiness (Acts 14:17) and he lets his sun rise over the evil and the good, and allows the rain to refresh the just and the unjust (Matt. 5:45). And all of this does not stand alongside the plan of salvation in Jesus Christ, but is built thereon. His general revelation is not concurrent with the special revelation in Christ. This general disclosure puts the world in the middle of the glorious works of God's hand; it does not detach and disengage the world. For God still binds man to his neighbor and preserves human life even in its most extreme individualism.

True, sometimes we see the power of sin carried to the very borders of nihilism. Talk about demonization of life is widespread especially in our time, when one man turns another over to destruction and death without mercy (do we need more evidence than concentration camps and anti-Semitism?). But there still arises a protest, and then comes a reaction.

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Following nihilism comes the resurgence of humanism. Certainly life is not safe in this haven of humanism, but nonetheless life is still preserved.

Because of man's involvement with the goodness of God's command, it is clear that the Church may not abandon its doctrine of general revelation. It may not proclaim this revelation as a second source of knowledge next to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, but it may and must use it as a reminder of the God who does not abandon the world and who sets man in the midst of greatness and majesty. The message of the general revelation

of God rings out the accusation (not the excuse) of man, yet simultaneously the gospel sounds out to the world (the Areopagus, Acts 17:30), so that life once more may be turned toward the living God who has displayed his love for the world. This God and his message stand forth against all devaluation of the world that he has created.

All nihilism is evidence of the pride of man who forsakes God and surrenders himself to criticism of the works of God's hands. In this tendency we stand before what in many respects is the most dismal image of our times. Man sees his own life in the world as senseless and absurd. But the Church that preaches the gospel refuses to accept this senselessness and absurdity. It cries out against the spirit of the times with the message of repentance.

Upon the path of conversion the light shines again and the promise of restoration comes to view. For this entire creation sighs in birth pangs until it shall be free of the bondage of corruption (Rom. 8:21). Then shall come the new heaven and the new earth (II Pet. 3:13). These form the contents of God's promise. Upon this new earth justice shall dwell. Then the glory of God shall be manifested, when God himself is the Light (Rev. 22:5) and the Lamb is the Lamp (Rev. 21:23).

Then the distinction between general and special revelation shall be removed: when God dwells "with men" (Rev. 21:3), when night is banished (Rev. 22:5), when God himself shall wipe all tears from our eyes.

For us humans this future is beyond imagination. But it remains the object of the promise. It consists not only in the salvation of the soul, but in the renewing of all of life. Before this future there still hangs the curtain of God's last revelation: "It is not yet revealed what we shall be" (I John 3:2). But "we shall see him as he is" (I John 3:2) when the veils of secrecy shall be taken away, and the windows are open to all the works of God's hands. Then the full meaning of Psalm 8 will be revealed in the resurrection from the dead and in the new presence of the King of the ages: "O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!"

IV. HUMAN LIFE AND THE GENERAL REVELATION OF GOD

We have seen that the distinction between general and special revelation does not concern a subtle or scholastic difference. Neither is a rivalry intended between general revelation and the revelation of God in Jesus Christ,

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like that of modern theology, which attacks and perverts the absoluteness of the revelation in Christ. The meaning of the distinction is otherwise.

It is all too evident, however, that in exhibiting this distinction, we must express ourselves in faulty language. The words "general" and "special" are borrowed from earthly human

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relationships and do not appear in Scripture. Still, it is good to call attention to the fact that many attempts to arrive at a new terminology have fallen short of expressing the underlying reality. In most cases either the general *or* the special revelation was not done full justice. And in view of this, we must emphasize that the decision involves rot merely a matter of terminology, but rather, of the basic issues designated by the terms employed.

The distinction between general and special revelation does not posit a rupture in the unity of God's revelation, but points out rather the revealing acts of God in history in the way of creation, fall and redemption.

In the revelation of God in Christ Jesus—saving and propitiating—the Light rises once more *over the world*. Jesus Christ is Saviour of men, but be is also Light of the *world* (John 8:12) and he has come as a Light in the world (John 12:46). The world has come into existence through Christ (John 1:10) and without the Word, without him, was nothing made that was made (John 1:3) . But the world knew him not (John 1:10), even though the Light shone in the darkness. Because of this Light, however, the world and human life are still possible.

Despite nihilistic tendencies, modern man still evidences continuously a violent interest in the world. In many respects this interest is not an interest in the Creator of heaven and earth. The cosmos is isolated and abstracted from the Creator. But neither in scholarship nor art has man ever yet done away with what faith sees as the work of God's hands. And if the revelation of God in Jesus Christ opens the eyes, then the abstraction is broken, and fife in the world becomes the *service* of God and of one's neighbor. Then the weaning of life and the world is revealed once more, and supplies the believer with the power of the promise that one day shall be fulfilled.

Then at last the shortcomings of human language are to fall away in *worship* and a *song of praise*. And then we shall understand also how firmly the distinction between general and special revelation is connected with goat and *estrangement*.

Consequently, in all our considerations of this distinction we must be careful that the guilt is not denied. The special revelation of God in Jesus Christ is the divine answer to this guilt as the surprise of God's love, as the new spring of God's mercy. Therefore the way to the works of God's hands leads always by the way of the *Cross*. Here the windows are opened and the Light shines forth. Here sympathy is awakened for the world and here the world is seen in God's light. Here all egocentric piety is broken and man once again finds his proper place as the image of God.

And because the way to the works of God's hands leads by the Cross, we

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are taught lifelong by the Word of the Cross. This very special instruction teaches us our place in the world: in order to serve every day, we are to give all our thoughts over as

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captive to the obedience of Christ (II Cor. 10:5). And in that full life in the world we are warned to pay attention to the light of the Word: "We have also a more sure word of prophecy, whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts" (II Pet. 1:19).

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