

Introduction to Christian Theology

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Week 1: Revelation

Before we ever start talking about what we believe about God, we need to answer a serious question: *are these just our opinions that are true for us, or are they objective facts that are true for everyone?*

You hear people say sometimes, “I think God is like this” or “I think God wants me to have or do this” or “I don’t think God would do that.” Usually it’s the belief that God just wants me to be happy and he would never judge me or do anything to hurt me. *But how do we get past having opinions and ideas and know what is actually true about God?*

God must reveal himself to us. Revelation means God revealing something to us. We talk about natural revelation and special revelation.

Natural revelation is what we can learn about God through nature. *What do you think we can learn about God without a Bible, just by observing the world?*

God is powerful and creative, because everything came from him; he is eternal because he must be the beginning that has no beginning; he has a sense of beauty and morality because we have a sense of beauty and morality; he is alive because he gave everything life; he provides for the things he creates; etc.

But there is a problem with natural revelation, because the world is not always clearly understandable. Is God good? If so, why is there evil? Is God one or many? Is God really in control? If so, why is there chaos? So many questions like this can’t be answered just from nature, which is why there is so much disagreement between religions. That is why we need special revelation.

Special revelation means that God chose particular times and people to show more of himself to. The Bible is the written record of God’s special revelation. If we believe the Bible, God actually spoke to the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, God spoke to Noah, and Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and for the first time God’s word was written down when God spoke to Moses. Moses wrote down what he saw at the burning bush when God spoke to him out of fire, and when God sent plagues on Egypt, and parted the Red Sea to bring a chosen people out of slavery, and on top of Mount Sinai. God was revealing himself in history to Moses and Moses wrote it down, which is exactly what the books of Genesis through Deuteronomy are. These aren’t people’s opinions, these are things God revealed to people.

Now there is a little snag: *that’s what the Bible says, but how do we know it’s true?*

- The historical facts of the Bible hold up to archaeology. They are frequently challenged based on theories we have about history, but many times in the past, those theories have been adjusted as new discoveries show that what the Bible says is actually accurate.
- The resurrection of Jesus is an extremely well-attested historical event. The evidence is reliable, which makes Jesus and those who heard him worth listening to. Jesus says the Bible is true.

- The Bible claims to be God's Word, and at the end of the day we have to decide whether it rings true. Compare it with other books like to Qur'an; it comes off very different. It is factually verifiable, it makes sense of the world, it powerfully changes lives. God confirms it in us.

This then is what we conclude about the Bible:

- It is a revelation from God to us (2 Tim 3:16-17).
- It is absolutely true (inerrant); though sometimes we need to understand genres (like the Proverbs) and metaphors and imagery. (John 10:35; Prov 30:5)
- If every part of the Bible is true, we can't take one part and make it say whatever we want; any interpretation that is at odds with the rest of the Bible can't be correct.

In conclusion, God reveals himself in many ways, both through natural revelation that anyone can see, but which leaves us in some doubt about the particulars of who God is, and through special revelation to different people in different times, and the final authority we have to check every other belief against is the Word of God written in the Bible.

Week 2: God – How is he different from us?

What do we know is true about God? There are many ways that God is like us, or we should really say, ways that God has made us like him. We'll talk about those next week. Before we talk about how God is like us, we really need to understand that in many ways God is not like us. There are ways that God is qualitatively different than any created thing: it's not a difference of quantity where he has what we have, only more; it's a difference of quality, where we have nothing like it. Since these things are so different from us, it is easier with our language to describe them as things God is NOT.

- I. God is not like us.
 - A. God does not need anything. He is Independent.
 1. Exodus 3:14 "I AM that I AM."
 2. Ps 50:12 "If I were hungry, I would not tell you."
 3. John 5:26 "As the Father has life in himself..."
 4. The thought that God created us because he was lonely or saved us because he couldn't live without us is wrong. There is nothing we can give he doesn't have, even mutual love.
 5. Yet he values us and takes delight in us (Isa 62:5 "For the LORD delights in you..")
 - B. God does not change. He is Constant.
 1. Ps 102:27 "you are the same, and your years have no end."
 2. James 1:17 "who does not change like shifting shadows."
 3. Isa 46:9-11 "I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning."
 4. God's character is the same today as in the OT; his promises are always trustworthy.
 5. Yet he feels and acts according to a situation—he doesn't change but the situation does.
 - C. God is not bound by time.
 1. Ps 90:2 "from everlasting to everlasting you are God."
 2. John 1:1-3 "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God..."
 3. Cf. Is 46:9. God knows the end as well as the beginning. He has no beginning or end and he doesn't change in the middle. He sees all of time at once. He is eternal.
 - D. God is not bound by space.
 1. Ps 139:7-10 "Where can I go from your Spirit? ..."
 2. 1 Kings 8:27 "Even the highest heavens cannot contain you; how much less this house I have built!"
 3. God isn't physical, so he doesn't have physical coordinates; it is silly to say God came in through the window. But he can be present spiritually, not in a place but near to a person or group of people. He also shows himself in physical ways to physical beings.
 - E. God does not have different parts.
 1. 1 John 1:5 "God is light."
 2. 1 John 4:8 "God is love."
 3. Rev 4:8 "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who is and was and is to come."
 4. God doesn't sometimes set aside his love in order to be holy; he doesn't set aside his holiness in order to be loving. Every single thing he does is loving and holy.

Week 3: God – Like us yet unlike

Last time we talked about how God is different from us. Who remembers some way God is unlike us? He has no needs, he doesn't change, he is outside of time, he is not bound by space, and he is completely unified in his person. But there are also ways in which he is similar, or ways in which he has made us to be like him. Can anyone think of things that are true of God that are also true of us, if very imperfectly?

- I. God is spirit (John 4:24)
 - A. Not physical, invisible, though sometimes revealed in visible ways (Ex 24; Isa 6)
 - B. Personal, relational, volitional
 1. We also are personal in this way. We make choices, we relate to other people. We also have a spirit that is invisible, yet interacts with the visible world.
 2. God is tri-personal; all three persons are one in quality and being, but interact with each other and with us as three separate persons.
- II. God knows
 - A. Omniscient (Ps 139:1-4, 16; John 21:17). There is nothing, present, past, or future God doesn't know.
 - B. All wise (Rom 11:33-36). All his plans and choices are best.
 - C. We also have knowledge and wisdom; we learn and make right choices. We never compare with the QUANTITY of God's knowledge or wisdom, but we share similarity in QUALITY.
- III. God is good
 - A. Love (1 John 4:8-10). God gives of himself for the benefit of others. All other love comes from the love God gives.
 - B. Justice (Deut 32:4). God never wrongs another person or gives them worse than they deserve. He is also a judge who fairly rewards or punishes others for what they have done.
 - C. Holiness (2 Cor 7:1; Isa 6:3). Holy means clean and pure and separate from anything evil or twisted. We are to be holy because God is holy, set apart as pure for him, but he is altogether holy in himself.
 - D. Jealous (Ex 34:14). Only God is God, and it would be wrong to worship or honor anything more than God. This doesn't mean God is insecure but that he knows it is inappropriate for his creatures to worship something other than him.
- IV. God is sovereign
 - A. Free will (Rev 4:11). We all make choices as personal beings, but whereas our choices are all influenced by something outside ourselves, God can make choices merely out of his eternal plan that he decided outside of time, like making the universe and saving us, without being influenced by anything else.
 - B. Omnipotence (Luke 1:37). God is able to do what he plans. We can sometimes do what we plan, but some things are out of our control. Nothing is out of Gods. What he plans he does.
- V. God is perfect
 - A. Blessedness/Happiness (1 Tim 6:15). God is joyful, at peace, happy just in himself.
 - B. Glory (Ps 27:4; Ps 104:1-2). Glory/beauty has a visual aspect, but how when God is invisible?

Week 4: Creation

Where did everything come from and what is its relationship to God? Answer these questions:

1. From ancient Greece, many people have believed that the material universe has always existed. What does the Bible say about this? Is it possible that the universe is coeternal with God, and God shaped the world out of matter that has always existed? (See Hebrews 11:3; Colossians 1:16-17; Revelation 4:11; 21:6)
 - a. If something else exists eternally with God, it can't rightly said to be his or that he has a right to rule over it. We might just as well honor the matter of the universe as God, since both would be eternal.
 - b. Other "invisible" and spiritual beings were also created by God. Satan is not coeternal with God. Every other being has its existence from God.
2. My former next-door neighbor believed that we are all a part of God, an idea that Buddhists and some other philosophies also believe (pantheism). Is the world part of God or distinct from God, according to biblical Christianity? (See Numbers 23:19; Isaiah 31:3; 55:8-9; Ezekiel 28:2; Romans 1:25; 1 John 1:5-6)
 - a. God forbids idolatry exactly because the creation is not the same as the Creator and cannot be worshiped. God is set apart, transcendent, above all things.
 - b. God does not have bad parts, which the world certainly does. We get a tainted, ugly picture of God if we think everything bad is part of him.
3. Many founding fathers of our country, like Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, believed in a Creator God but that he does not intervene in his creation, like a watchmaker who winds up the watch but then lets it run on its own. Is God still involved in creation, or does he leave it to run on its own? (See Psalm 104:14-15, 27-30; John 1:14; Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:3)
 - a. God continues to care for the creation he has made. The world is not self-sustaining; it relies on him every moment for its continuing existence.
 - b. Deists do not believe in miracles, which is why Jefferson cut all the miracles out of his bible. If we believe in any of the numerous miracles of the Bible, we believe that God continues to intervene in his creation.
 - c. The most extreme example of God interacting with creation is when he became a man and lived on the earth he created as a part of his creation.
4. People who desire to be spiritual sometimes suggest that the material world is bad and that we would be better to be free from the physical world altogether and not have bodies. What does the Bible say about this? (See Genesis 1:31; 1 Timothy 4:4-5; Romans 8:19-21; 2 John 7)
 - a. God made his creation good, and it is not to be rejected. Physical pleasures like food and sex are not bad. They can be abused, but God made them to be good things for us to enjoy.
 - b. Jesus himself had a physical body, which some early Christian heretics denied. God did not despise the material world, but took it on himself.
 - c. The creation will be transformed so that all the brokenness will be healed, just like Jesus' body and our bodies will be raised from the dead, but it will still be material.

5. If God doesn't need anything, why did God create anything at all? (See Psalm 19:1-2; Isaiah 43:7; Romans 1:20; 11:36; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Revelation 4:11)
 - a. God created to display his glory, just as an artist takes what is inside of them and makes it visible for others to see. God was expressing his creativity and his goodness and beauty.
 - b. Nothing in creation exists for its own sake, nor can one person find their reason for living in another person or in any created thing. All things exist for God; we belong to him and we find our reason to live in him.

In conclusion, then, God is before all things, he created all things good to be enjoyed but not to be worshiped. All things come from God and God must come first for us. We are not part of God—he is far above any created thing—yet he continues to love and sustain his creation.

Week 5: Man

Read Genesis 1:26-28

What is man's relationship to creation?

What can we observe already about his relationship to God? (Image, similarity, representative, co-ruler; we will find out more about what that means as we go)

What do we observe about male and female human beings here (cf 5:1-2)?

Read Genesis 2:7. What do we see about man that is similar to how the animals were created (cf. 1:24)? What is distinct? What is the relationship between our bodies and souls (cf. Matt 10:28)?

Read Genesis 2:15-17. What is important about the responsibilities God gave Adam? (He is morally culpable, he is meant to be in a relationship of obedience with God, he has good work to do that is inherent to his nature)

Read Genesis 2:18-25. What kind of relationship were men and women meant to have? (Marriage and sexuality are good, unity without shame; equal in essence, complementary in role)

Read Genesis 3:1-6. What is sin? What leads to it?

Read Genesis 3:7-24.

What changes did sin bring to our human relationships?

What changes did sin bring to our relationship to God?

What changes did sin bring to creation?

Does sin change the image of God in us? How much?

How should we treat other people based on what human beings are?

How should we relate to God?

Week 6: Christ and Redemption

Review: In what ways is God like us (rather, we are like God)? In what ways is God different from us? What is our relationship as human beings to God? To creation?

Jesus the Son of God

- I. Jesus is God (John 1:1-3; 14:7-9; Hebrews 1:3)
 - A. All the nature of God; everything true of God is true of Christ. In that way he is not 50% God; he is 100% God. If he were only 50% God, he wouldn't be God at all, because God can't be reduced to pieces. He either is or he isn't. He is eternal, self-sufficient; all the things that make God different from us.
 - B. One with the Father and yet "with God," in relationship to the Father. The Son loves the Father and the Father loves the Son (John 14:31; 17:24). One in being, yet relate to each other as distinct Persons.
- II. Jesus is human (John 1:14; Matt 4:1-2; 26:46-50; Hebrews 4:15)
 - A. Jesus didn't just LOOK human, he BECAME human. He got hungry and tired and thirsty and died. He wasn't just 50% human; he is 100% human. He has two natures, one in which he has all the nature of God with his perfections, one in which he has all the nature of a human being, yet he doesn't have multiple personalities—he is one Person with two natures.
 - B. He not only has a human body but a human soul. He was tempted to sin in his humanity, which God cannot be. He experienced what it is to be forsaken by God in his human soul.
- III. Jesus is our (only possible) sinless sacrifice (2 Corinthians 5:21; Romans 3:23-25; 5:19; John 1:12-13)
 - A. Jesus was the only human being without sin. Every human being since Adam has been included in Adam's sin, but Jesus, who was born of the Holy Spirit to a virgin, didn't inherit our sin. He could be a brand new Adam who got it right, so that by birth we are all under Adam's sin, but by new birth we can be under Jesus' righteousness.
 - B. We can receive his righteousness because he received our sin. A sinner cannot die for someone else's sin—if he dies it is only justice for his own sin. Since Jesus was sinless, he didn't deserve to die or be "forsaken" by God as we do, so he could take our penalty in our place.
 - C. As a man he could die for the sins of men. As God, he could forgive sins against God.
- IV. Jesus is what he is making us to be
 - A. Resurrected (1 Corinthians 15:49-53). As God, he conquered death in his human body so that we also could share in his resurrection.
 - B. Ruler of Creation (Hebrews 2:6-9; Revelation 3:21). Human beings, made in the image of God, were appointed to rule over creation. Jesus takes up that rule and allows us to rule with him.
 - C. Holy Fellowship with God (John 17:3, 20-21; Colossians 3:1-4). Knowing God is what we were made for, which Jesus has always had; he came to reconcile us to God so we could share in that. Our lives are defined by that fellowship.

What are we to do? We are all sinners estranged from God, but God came to earth as a man to take away our sin and reconcile us to him. What must we all do? Repent of our sins and trust in Christ.

Week 7: The Holy Spirit

Listen to Newsboys: Spirit Thing

Who can tell us what the Holy Spirit actually does?

Broadly put, the Holy Spirit is the presence of God at work in the world. He is called the Spirit of God or the Spirit of Christ or many other names besides. He is one with the Father and the Son, and yet he is distinct in person because he is sent by the Father and the Son and Jesus says “he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak” (John 16:13). Note also that Jesus uses masculine pronouns to refer to him, so that we do better to call the Spirit “he” rather than “it.”

So then what God does on earth he does through the Holy Spirit. If God works in you or speaks to you or is present with you, he does all this through the Holy Spirit.

- I. He makes us spiritually alive. (Rom 8:11) Jesus says for us to enter the kingdom of heaven we have to be born again, or “born of the Spirit.” Everyone is born living according to the flesh. That’s why everyone is selfish by nature and no one knows God until we are “born again,” “baptized in the Holy Spirit.” Jesus talks about giving the Samaritan woman at the well water that will become a spring welling up to eternal life; and John comments for us that that spring of living water he was talking about is the Holy Spirit. He is not secondary to “getting saved”—he is the way we receive eternal life.
- II. He makes us holy. (Rom 8:13) The technical word for this is sanctification. There is an initial sense in which Paul says the Spirit washes us clean when we first put our faith in Christ so that we are holy to God. Then there is an ongoing process by which the Spirit gives us power to overcome the sinful habits and desires of our old nature and replaces them with his own characteristics, called the fruit of the Spirit.
- III. He guides us. (Rom 8:14) Have you ever felt a sense of responsibility or burden to go out of your way for someone? Have you felt a sense of resistance to doing something God didn’t want you to do? The Spirit teaches us and prompts us to do God’s will. This is both revealed things like the things scripture tells us to do or not to do, and also specific actions, like doing a favor or saying something to a particular person at a particular time. In Acts 8, the Holy Spirit tells Philip, “Go up to that chariot over there.” Then when he’s done, he actually picks him up and physically moves him somewhere else.
 - a. You can fight with the Spirit in this process.