

BETWEEN TWO WOR(L)DS: WORLDVIEW AND OBSERVATION
IN THE USE OF GENERAL REVELATION
TO INTERPRET SCRIPTURE, AND VICE VERSA

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To his great dismay, Harald Alabaster was caught between two worlds. A. S. Byatt's novella "Morpho Eugenia," from which the recent film *Angels and Insects* was made, is set in Victorian England in the decade following the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. Globe-trotting naturalist William Adamson has been cast into hard times by a shipwreck, and Alabaster, with a dilettante's interest in insects but no organizational skills, becomes Adamson's patron. He takes him into his household to bring order to his chaotic collection of rare specimens. Yet the real burden of Alabaster's heart is the writing of a book that will prove scientifically that his romantic brand of Christianity is compatible with Darwin's new theories. Adamson is to help with this apology by arguing against its thesis—a task that he undertakes most willingly since, despite his surname, he long ago abandoned the fundamentalist belief that he is Adam's son, embracing instead a coldly consistent Darwinian naturalism, a view of "nature red in tooth and claw," purposeless and amoral. In one of their discussions Alabaster admits his distressed confusion:

The world has changed so much, William, in my lifetime. I am old enough to have believed in our First Parents in Paradise, as a little boy, to have believed in Satan hidden in the snake, and the Archangel with the flaming sword, closing the gates. I am old enough to have believed *without question* in the Divine Birth on a cold night with the sky full of singing angels and the shepherds staring up in wonder, and the strange kings advancing across the sand on camels with gifts. And now I am presented with a world in which we are what we are because of the mutations of soft jelly and calceous bone matter through unimaginable millennia—a world in which angels and devils do not battle in the Heavens for virtue and vice, but in which we eat and are eaten and absorbed into other flesh and blood. All the music and painting, all the poetry and power is so much illusion. I shall moulder like a mushroom when my time comes, which is not long. It is likely that the injunction to love each other is no more than the prudent instinct of sociability, of parental protectiveness, in a creature related to the great ape. . . . I began my life as a small boy whose every action was burned into the gold record of his good and evil deeds, where it would be weighed and looked over by One with merciful eyes, to whom I was walking, step by unsteady step. I end it like a skeleton leaf, to be made humus, like a

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mouse crunched by an owl, like a beef-calf going to the slaughter, through a gate which opens only one way, to blood and dust and destruction.¹

Alabaster is torn between two worlds, in a twilight zone between the theocentric universe of the Bible, imbued with meaning by its Creator, and the anthropocentric empiricism of modernity, yielding a mechanistic, senseless view of the universe and humanity.² As the story unfolds, Alabaster's own household is seen to resemble ever more closely the ant colony that Adamson is researching: Both are ruled by pampered, fecund queens and populated by all-but-useless male drones and all-but-faceless servants.

I. BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

At the distance of over a century from the 1860s, evangelicals still live between two worlds. My title is borrowed from that of John Stott's book on the challenge of preaching in the late twentieth century, but it is not only the preacher who stands *Between Two Worlds*.³ We all live between the ancient world in which the Bible was given and the modern world, which has been molded by the Enlightenment's faith in reason and scientific experimentation. Therefore we confront the challenge of expressing what God revealed long ago and far away in terms intelligible to modern and postmodern people.

What is the difference between these two worlds? There are obvious changes in the observable surface culture: language, clothing, political structures, means of production, art, architecture, information technology—from papyrus to the Internet.

But the canyon between the two worlds is deeper than these surface features. The Bible and modernity present two different worldviews, two paradigms for making sense of experience and the universe. Toward the beginning of our century Rudolph Bultmann saw this and spoke of the distance be-

¹ A. S. Byatt, "Morpho Eugenia," *Angels and Insects: Two Novellas* (New York: Vintage, 1994) 68–69.

² Even at the end of the twentieth century, when naturalistic, purposeless evolution is widely assumed to explain adequately the origin of life on earth, of the diversity of species, and of human consciousness, thoughtful secularists still recoil at the moral implications of such an evolutionist worldview. Note, for example, L. Biemiller, "Breakfast with Darwin: Morality, Mortality, and the Genetic Imperative," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (October 20, 1995) A55: Reflecting on N. Wade's assertion in the *New York Times* (January 29, 1995) that "the central purpose of evolution is the survival of DNA, not of the beings that are the DNA's temporary expression," Biemiller expresses esthetic and moral discomfort with an evolutionary system that cherishes Mozart no more than a mosquito. If our sole purpose for existence is "merely to serve a dumb chemical's need for replication," why get up in the morning? For that matter, if the "purpose" of it all is the mere survival of DNA, there is no reason for sexual fidelity, or morality in general. Yet Biemiller recoils at such starkly inhumane conclusions, as does his friend S. Montez, whom he quotes: "I want there to be a divine plan. Sometimes I walk around and think I'm supposed to be meeting the people I'm meeting."

³ J. R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982).

tween the Bible's ancient mythic-supernaturalistic picture of reality and the modern naturalistic worldview that had made scientific and technological advance possible:

This conception of the world we call mythological because it is different from the conception of the world which has been formed and developed by science since its inception in ancient Greece and which has been accepted by all modern men. In this modern conception of the world the cause-and-effect nexus is fundamental. . . . Modern science does not believe that the course of nature can be interrupted or, so to speak, perforated, by supernatural powers.⁴

For people living in the Bible's world, events could result from interventions in human life by God or angels or demons. For people living in the modern worldview, said Bultmann, events result inexorably from unbroken chains of naturalistic causation, without divine or demonic meddling from outside the space-time continuum.

At our end of the twentieth century, modernity's sanguine confidence in naturalistic science, its illusion of objectivity, and its sense of superiority over myth-benighted "primitive" cultures have come under attack from postmodernism. No longer do all cutting-edge intellectuals speak blithely of objective science and its assured results.⁵ Postmodernism's multicultural pluralism challenges modernity's claims to objective perception of truth. Admitting what modernity conveniently ignored, postmodernism faces head-on the reality that presupposition, worldview and culture mold every human observer, influencing both what and how we perceive, the questions that we bring to experience, and the answers that we take away. So it would seem that postmodernism could be, if not an ally, at least a cobelligerent joining evangelicals in our protest against naturalistic modernity's dictatorship of the academy. If postmodernism's protest against scientism legitimizes diverse communities of meaning, opening a place at the table for nonwestern, non-rationalistic, nonnaturalistic approaches to truth, should it not also open a place for evangelicals?

But Thomas Oden has perceptively observed that postmodernism is misnamed and that it is no ally to historic Christian faith. Oden contends that what is now called postmodern should be called "ultramodern" or "hypermodern" or even "terminally modern," for it is not a break with modernity but modernity's last gasp, carrying modernity's core commitments—the idolatries of autonomous individualism, narcissistic hedonism, reductive naturalism, absolute moral relativism—to terminal dimensions.⁶

The Bible's presentation of reality is God-centered, whereas modernity's approach to knowledge, ethics, the arts, and everything else is radically human-centered. On this point postmodernism stands squarely with modernity.

⁴ R. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Scribner's, 1958) 15.

⁵ T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2d ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970).

⁶ T. C. Oden, "The Death of Modernity," *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Assessment* (ed. D. S. Dockery; Wheaton: Bridgepoint, 1995) 26–30.

In fact postmodernism carries anthropocentrism to new extremes, abandoning the very concept of universal truth, making all truth claims relative to culture, valid only within self-contained, solipsistic “communities of meaning.”⁷ When the very concept of culture-transcendent truth is dismissed as naïve, outmoded intellectual parochialism or imperialism, truth claims are reduced to political power struggles.⁸ The result is the Balkanizing of the academy into a host of warring subcultures.

Evangelicals, long marginalized in the culture at large and the academy in particular by the triumphalist advance of secularism,⁹ may welcome postmodernist attacks on the Enlightenment’s naïve faith in sense experience and technology. But the acids of postmodernist relativism are nondiscriminatory, as ready to dissolve the truth claims of Scripture as they are to relativize the truth claims of naturalistic science. Here are two examples.

(1) In a recent study of causes of and remedies for American individualism, Robert Bellah and his coresearchers quoted the lament of a graduate student orator at a recent Harvard University commencement:

They tell us that it is heresy to suggest the superiority of some value, fantasy to believe in moral argument, slavery to submit to a judgment sounder than your own. The freedom of our day is the freedom to devote ourselves to any values we please, on the mere condition that we do not believe them to be true.¹⁰

⁷ Ironically, in its radical ideological commitment to cultural relativism postmodernism seems to be reprising a premodern motif employed by Christianity’s first opponents in antiquity: “The oldest and most enduring criticism of Christianity is an appeal to religious pluralism. . . . In the face of what he took to be Christian exclusivism, Symmachus defended a genial toleration of differing ways to the divine” (R. L. Wilken, “Religious Pluralism and Early Christian Thought,” *Remembering the Christian Past* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995] 27). Wilken (p. 28) cites similar objections of even earlier opponents of Christianity, such as Porphyry (cited by Augustine *City of God* 10.32 as contending: “No teaching has yet been established which offers a universal way for the liberation of the soul”) and Celsus, whose defense of the equal validity of diverse ancient customs and beliefs held by diverse groups was answered by Origen’s apology for the unique superiority of Christianity. “Celsus,” concludes Wilken, “is a consummate multi-culturalist” (p. 31). Wilken’s summary of the position of Christianity’s ancient detractors sounds strikingly postmodern: “All the ancient critics of Christianity were united in affirming that there is no one way to the divine. . . . It was not the kaleidoscope of religious practices and feelings that was the occasion for the discussion of religious pluralism in ancient Rome; it was the success of Christianity, as well as its assertions about Christ and about Israel. . . . By appealing to a particular history as the source of knowledge of God, Christian thinkers transgressed the conventions that governed civilized theological discourse in antiquity” (pp. 42–43).

⁸ S. L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Harper, 1993), documents how battles in education over creation science, home schooling, sex education, etc., are increasingly about who gets the power to determine which worldview will be taught to the next generation, whose picture of reality will mold children’s assumptions about what is true, how truth is known, and what is important to learn. See also the chapters on education in J. D. Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Harper, 1991).

⁹ *The Secularization of the Academy* (ed. G. M. Marsden and B. J. Longfield; New York: Oxford University, 1992). Cf. Marsden’s opening essay, “The Soul of the American University: An Historical Overview,” pp. 9–45.

¹⁰ R. H. Bellah, R. Madsen, W. M. Sullivan, A. Swidler and S. M. Tipton, *The Good Society* (New York: Knopf, 1991) 44.

(2) In 1994 the Senior Accrediting Commission of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges approved a new statement on diversity after several years of vigorous and highly-publicized debate among the schools in the association. The morning after the Commission's action, Marjorie Suchocki, vice president for academic affairs of the School of Theology at Claremont, was quoted as follows:

Notions of absolutes and universals have given way to recognition that what we call knowledge is conditioned by its social/cultural location. . . . Education that implicitly or explicitly promotes the hegemony of one mode of thought and being as if it were universally valid is flawed.¹¹

In other words, respect for diversity is more than appreciating elements of truth and goodness in each and every culture. It means that an absolute relativism, which denies hegemony to any one "mode of thought," deserves hegemony over all other modes of thought.

But the practicing scientific community does in fact value logical consistency, so those who are committed to the scientific method see postmodernist deconstruction and relativism as among true science's most dangerous enemies. Paul Gross and Norman Levitt respond vigorously to the postmodern deconstructionism of Foucault and Derrida:

Contrasted to the Enlightenment ideal of a unified epistemology that discovers the foundational truths of physical and biological phenomena and unites them with an accurate understanding of humanity in its psychological, social, political, and aesthetic aspects, postmodern skepticism rejects the possibility of enduring universal knowledge in any area. . . . There is no knowledge, then: there are merely stories, "narratives," devised to satisfy the human need to make some sense of the world. . . . On this view all knowledge projects are, like war, politics by other means.¹²

So which is evangelicalism's ally or cobelligerent—modernity or postmodernism? We appreciate postmodernism's critique of modernity's cultural arrogance, its exposé of modernity's inability to be radically self-critical, its recognition of the influence of presuppositions on perception and interpretation of experience. But we are also, I would hope, distrustful of postmodernism's radically autonomous epistemology in which factions remain isolated in their own bubbles of truth, immune to challenge from without. Enlightenment modernity declared its independence from divine revelation, but at least it retained the notion of truth in contrast to error. Postmodernism in principle grants discrete communities immunity from correction to rival worldviews or conflicting evidence, denying the very possibility of a truth that commands universal acknowledgment or a perspective on reality that is more worthy of trust than others.¹³

¹¹ B. Wildavsky, "Agency OKs New Policy on Diversity at Colleges," *San Francisco Chronicle* (February 24, 1994) A13.

¹² P. Gross and N. Levitt, *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1994) 72.

¹³ Cf. P. E. Johnson, *Reason in the Balance: The Case Against Naturalism in Science, Law, and Education* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995) 111–132.

The family squabble between modernity and postmodernism poses questions for evangelical scholarship not only in theology but in every discipline as we seek to work out a Christian response to the currents of thought of the broader academy, both in the sciences and in the humanities. How does the Biblical teaching about revelation—which brings together what we hear from God in Scripture, the Word written, and what we hear from God in the universe, his creative-providential word—enable us to work out a unified understanding of truth? What are the opportunities and obstacles that confront us as recipients of these two modes of revealed truth, as listeners to these two words of God—nature and Scripture, general and special revelation?

II. BETWEEN TWO WORDS

Deleting now the parenthetical “L” in my title, let us reflect on the fact that we live not only between two worlds (ancient versus modern) and worldviews (theistic versus anthropocentric, whether manifested in naturalistic rationalism or in individualistic relativism) but also between two words from God. The metaphor that views the study of the universe as an effort to interpret a word from God, just as Biblical exegesis interprets God’s written Word, is grounded in Scripture’s affirmations. “The heavens declare the glory of God” (Ps 19:1).¹⁴ “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made” (Rom 1:19–20). Christian theologians¹⁵ and scientists have found in this Biblical theme a rationale for reflective, disciplined interest in the physical world, speaking of the “two books” that God has given to illumine human thought. The Belgic Confession (1561) of the continental Reformed churches, for example, used the two-books simile to speak of God’s general revelation in the created universe:

We know [God] by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters [letters] leading us to see clearly the invisible things of God, even his everlasting power and divinity, as the apostle Paul says (Rom. 1:20). . . . Second, he makes himself more clearly and fully known to us by his holy and divine Word, that is

¹⁴ Scripture citations are usually from the NIV.

¹⁵ Earlier examples could be cited, though less explicit in drawing the analogy of the created order as “book” corresponding to the written Scriptures. Note, for example, Augustine’s comparison of the mutable creatures to a verse spoken aloud in time, reflective of the poet’s inner thought (*Commentary on Psalms* 9.7), or his allegorical interpretation of the creation of the firmament on the second day as reflecting the impartation of Scripture: “As a skin hast Thou stretched out the firmament of Thy Book; that is to say, Thy harmonious words, which by the ministry of mortals Thou hast spread over us” (*Confessions* 13.16 [NPNF 1.1:195]). C. Harrison concludes regarding Augustine’s imagery of the created order as divine text: “Creation, therefore, like Scripture, assumes the nature of a book, witnessing to its author: like Scripture and the Incarnation of the Word of God, it contains and engenders symbols, allegories, and, indeed, sacraments, which enable its invisible, spiritual sense—its Creator—to be seen more clearly through and in the visible” (*Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1992] 120).

to say, so far as is necessary for us to know in this life, to his glory and our salvation.¹⁶

In the British Isles, Francis Bacon (born the year in which the Belgic Confession was written) used the same image in his apology for the spiritual usefulness of a scientific investigation of the creatures:

[The increase of natural knowledge] is a singular help and preservative against unbelief and error: for saith our Saviour, "You err, not knowing the Scriptures, nor the power of God"; laying before us two books or volumes to study, if we will be secured from error; first the Scriptures revealing the will of God, and then the creatures expressing his power.¹⁷

The book of nature, general revelation, includes the evidence of vitality and design in the original creative acts through which the Creator's wisdom and power still shine. Its order and causation bear witness to the divine providence that continues to sustain and regulate the heavens, the earth, the sea, and all that fills them. But as the natural sciences examine "the creatures" today, general revelation also discloses the consequences of human sin: pollution, disaster, suffering, death—miseries that afflict not only humans but also all the creatures that are touched by our dominion gone awry.

Not only the natural sciences but also the humanities study general revelation, because human cultures constitute responses to the divinely-designed environment. Thus in one way or another not only biology, physics, chemistry and astronomy but also language, literature, philosophy, history, psychology, sociology, politics, economics and the fine arts are means of listening, directly or indirectly, to the voice of God. But what precisely does God reveal to us through the study of humanity—its arts, artifacts, attempts at survival, community, government, and understanding? Human culture, like the brilliantly-designed but curse-bruised physical world, broadcasts mixed signals. On the one hand, human culture expresses the truth that we are created as the image of God, to know, to plan, to make decisions, to invent, to improvise, to delight in beauty. On the other, it reveals our fallenness. We seek truth, but we cringe from exposure by its searching beam. We admire justice and compassion, but our relationships are often marred by self-interest. No culture is devoid of value, for every culture is an expression of the creature made in God's image. No culture is free of brokenness, for every culture also expresses our flight from his truth and our abuse of his gifts. Human cultures, even those that deny the Creator-Provider, try to interpret creation and providence. And the postmoderns are right: Even the natural sciences are expressions of particular human cultures, blending observation and interpretation in the context of a starting paradigm. Both the sciences and the humanities interpret our experience of creation and providence, though in different forms and using different strategies.

¹⁶ *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century* (ed. A. C. Cochrane; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966) 189–190.

¹⁷ F. Bacon, "Valerius Terminus, of the Interpretation of Nature," *The Works of Francis Bacon, Lord Chancellor of England* (Philadelphia: Parry & McMillan, 1859) 1.83.

The other book, the book of special revelation, includes the person of Christ himself, all his words and actions, and the miracles that attested the message of Israelite prophets and Christian apostles. At our point in the history of redemption, however, listening to special revelation is listening to the Scriptures, for God's last word was spoken in these last days in the Son and confirmed to us by those who heard him (Heb 1:1–4; 2:1–4).

God's two books—nature and Scripture—belong together, precisely because they come in different forms and accomplish different missions. General revelation comes in deed, in objects, in events, a mute painting exhibited without title, a symphony performed without program notes. The scope of general revelation is the breadth of the universe and human experience. Its purpose is to leave us defenseless before the justice of God, for both nature and human culture tacitly testify to his worthiness to be worshiped and to our failure to worship him, and hence our need of rescue (Rom 1:18–32).

Special revelation originally came in deed and in word, and it comes to us today in Scripture, in sentences and paragraphs, narratives and poetry, analogies and reasoning and clarifications—doing all the communication tasks that language can do well. It speaks not only of our need of rescue but also of the way of rescue and the identity of the Rescuer in space and time. In one sense its dimensions are at least as high and wide as those of general revelation. But in another (as the Belgic Confession implied), because of its redemptive purpose special revelation has a narrower focus. It clearly discloses the origin and meaning of the universe and human experience, but Scripture gives only occasional and selective attention to the physical processes employed by God's providence. Even when Scripture speaks of the mechanics that fascinate the scientific observers of general revelation it does not typically employ the language of modern scientific description, measurement and precision. To have done so when the OT and NT were given would have been anachronistic, inept communication, at cross purposes with Scripture's central aim. Long before contemporary controversies over science and Scripture, John Calvin had made this observation. Commenting on Scripture's description of the moon as the second great light in the firmament, even though sixteenth-century astronomy knew that planets in the solar system were in fact larger than the moon, Calvin takes note of the purpose and genre of Biblical literature:

[On Gen 1:16] Moses makes two great luminaries; but astronomers prove, by conclusive reasons, that the star of Saturn, which, on account of its great distance, appears the least of all, is greater than the moon. Here lies the difference: Moses wrote in a popular style things which, without instruction, all ordinary persons, endued with common sense, are able to understand; but astronomers investigate with great labour whatever the sagacity of the human mind can comprehend.¹⁸

[On Ps 136:7–9] It is true, that the other planets are larger than the moon, but it is stated as second in order on account of its visible effects. The Holy Spirit

¹⁸ J. Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948) 1.86.

had no intention to teach astronomy; and, in proposing instruction meant to be common to the simplest and most uneducated persons, he made use by Moses and the other Prophets of popular language.¹⁹

Although both words come to us from God and speak to us of God they speak, in effect, different languages. Consequently they require different hermeneutical strategies if we are to hear from each the message that each is designed to announce. Yet our confidence in their one divine Speaker (not to mention our innate intellectual appetite for comprehensiveness and consistency, which finds postmodernism's ideological relativism unpersuasive) raises a most interesting question: How do these two words of God, despite their distinct missions and modes, illumine and interpret each other? How does the Bible help us to understand the universe, and how does the universe contribute to our understanding of the Bible? I would suggest that current disagreements about recent creationism, the usefulness of psychology in counseling, Christian political agendas, and other issues often arise from disagreements over the role of general revelation in the interpretation of Scripture, and vice versa. I would further offer two generalized and no doubt oversimplified hermeneutical principles.

(1) What we learn from Scripture, the redemptive Word, when we have heard Scripture rightly must have primacy as we seek to learn from nature. I am not suggesting that Scripture is designed to reveal to us detailed descriptions of the laws of physics, the dynamics of educational psychology, linguistic structure, the process of photosynthesis, and so forth—as though, having Scripture, we have no need for disciplined observation, hypothesis, or empirical verification. Rather, Scripture has primacy in that it discloses the most comprehensive paradigm, the broadest possible context, in which all the data observable in nature and culture must be interpreted if they are to be understood aright. In Scripture the Artist of creation speaks, and the Engineer whose providence maintains structure and order—making scientific advance possible—gives us his name.

Historic Christianity is, after all, not a nature religion, not the product of human speculation or mythmaking. It is a religion of the Book, rooted in and responsive to God's speech in human language to human beings in human history. Though interpreting what we sometimes blithely call plain language is no simple task, still I would contend that language is less ambiguous than art. In general, words make their message clearer than artifacts can—even artifacts created by the Master Artisan.

Moreover, as we have seen, since human sin entered the picture the universe's mute witness sends mixed signals of creation and curse, and as sin-damaged interpreters we are disabled in our efforts to untangle these two threads. As Psalms 37 and 73 and the book of Job remind us, general revelation in the life experience of the righteous and the wicked now shows no one-to-one correspondence between goodness and wholeness, on the one hand, or between moral corruption and physical suffering, on the other. We

¹⁹ J. Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949) 5.184.

are even prone to mistake sin's toxic byproducts in the world for flaws in the Creator's design.

It is Scripture that bears the redemptive message of Christ, the eschatological Word. And it is Christ who clears the static so we can receive and recognize the signals broadcast across the heavens (Ps 19:1–4, 7–11). Speaking to Athenian intellectuals, Paul portrayed prior ages of general revelation as times of ignorance in contrast to the present in which God's redemptive Word "now commands all to repent" (Acts 17:30–31). Scripture bears the message that the Spirit uses to cure blindness of heart and mind—not only initially in regeneration, when the light of Christ illumines darkened minds (2 Cor 4:3–6), but also progressively throughout our lives, as our every thought is taken captive to Christ (10:3–5). Calvin aptly illustrates our need of Scripture in order to interpret nature:

Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God.²⁰

Because we have not fully understood any particle of the universe until we see it as created by the Creator to achieve his purposes, we need the spectacles of Scripture not only to perceive what creatures tell us about their Creator but also to perceive all that they tell us about themselves. Special revelation in the written Word of God has primacy, disclosing to us the most important thing to know about quarks, salamanders, ozone, rain forests, black holes, and plutonium: They are not accidental effects of random, mindless forces; rather, they come from the hand of the Creator, radiant with meaning and related in infinitely intricate order.

(2) On the other hand, general revelation—God's word in creation and providence—has priority in our experience of hearing God's two words. General revelation comes first, providing the context into which special revelation speaks and makes sense.

Not only is this the case in our individual experience of nature and Scripture. Scripture affirms that this was so in history. At the beginning, Moses tells us, God's special address to our first parents (Gen 1:28) came in the context of a universe ordered by God's fiat, a universe of contrasting creatures distinguished from each other and related to each other by the creative word of the Lord: light and dark, day and night, sky and earth, sea and land, plant and animal, bird and fish, cattle and wild beast (Gen 1:3–25).

Scripture's rich imagery—bread, wine, living water, consuming fire, vine, shepherd/sheep, husband/wife, midnight darkness, longed-for daybreak, changeless mountains, wind-tossed waves, rock, sand, garden, wilderness, and more—presuppose that its hearers have experienced the created world in its wide diversity. Palestinian weather makes Psalm 29 intelligible—both

²⁰ J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. J. T. McNeill; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 1.70.

the natural phenomena of the storm and the artistic imagery in which the Psalm portrays the storm. The thunder described by the psalmist is indeed the “voice of the Lord,” but the psalmist surely expects his hearers to realize that the Lord does not produce his voice as we do ours, through a system composed of diaphragm, lungs, vocal cords, tongue, teeth and lips.²¹

We also see the priority of general revelation when we reflect on the fact that Scripture was spoken into the context of human history and culture. God did not invent a special “Holy Spirit Greek” in which to give the NT but rather spoke in the Koine Greek that his providence had mysteriously designed through the military and cultural imperialism of Alexander the Great and his Hellenistic successors.²² To understand the Bible we must pay attention to all sorts of general-revelation data: Hittite treaties, Roman adoption law, Greek philosophical schools, parental love for a child.²³ In fact it is quite impossible to imagine encountering the special revelation in the Bible apart from the context of general revelation.²⁴ Although Scripture has ultimate primacy, general revelation has priority as the context and medium through which Scripture’s message comes to us.

III. GOD’S TWO WORDS AND OUR LIMITED LISTENING

As we stand between two words, asking how we can hear their symphony of testimony to the Creator-Redeemer, we need to recognize another important distinction. We must face the humbling fact that some distance exists (sometimes a small gap, often a yawning canyon) between the divine words themselves and our hearing of the words. It is alarmingly easy to slip unwittingly into a mode of thought and speech in which a direct equation between Scripture and our interpretation of Scripture through exegesis and theology is assumed, or in which a direct equation is assumed between the phenomena of the natural world (fossils and the geological column, for instance) and our interpretation of the phenomena in a particular scientific theory.

²¹ Other sciences help us to distinguish poetic metaphor from empirical description—as, for example, in Ps 104:21 where a terse empirical description of the lion’s hunt and attack (“The lions roar for their prey”) is placed side by side with a theological comment on the origin of the predators’ instinct to kill (“They seek their food from God”).

²² The fact that God gave his Word in languages already immersed in processes of linguistic development is no new insight. The framers of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646) observed (1.8) that the original texts of Scripture were given “in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old)” and “in Greek (which, at the time of the writing of it, was most generally known among the nations).”

²³ See J. M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987) 302–318 (“the situational perspective—history, science, and philosophy as tools of theology”).

²⁴ Cf. *ibid.* 64: “Knowing God involves knowing his world for several reasons. . . . We know God by means of the world. All of God’s revelation comes through creaturely means, whether events, prophets, Scripture, or merely the human eye or ear. Thus we cannot know anything about God without knowing something about the world at the same time.” See also Frame’s subsequent discussion (pp. 65–73) on “relationships between objects of knowledge” (God’s law/word, the world, the self).

God's revelation, whether in nature or in Scripture, is infallible and inerrant. God's word in nature, whether disclosing the Creator's wise design of the atom or displaying his wrath in storm or sickness, tells us the truth. This truth may be more complex than we can grasp within our present explanatory paradigms. Nevertheless, because the universe is created by the God who is truth we can expect that the more we understand the universe the more we will see that the universe is not a liar or a senseless lunatic. Likewise the Scriptures speak truth to us inerrantly, so that the more we understand the form and content of God's speech in Scripture the more we will see the consistent truthfulness of both words of God.

Our reception of God's words is another matter. To draw a distinction between God's revelation and our interpretation is not to suggest that human interpretation is to be avoided—as though we should (or could) appropriate truth from God's words directly, without the mediation of our own human reflection. Human interpretation in response to divine revelation is both inevitable and necessary. There is no point in pretending that we can or should keep our finite, fallible, fragmentary, fallen thought processes out of the loop.

More than this, human reflection in response to both Scripture and nature is highly commended in the Bible. Biblical wisdom literature begins with the fear of the Lord and proceeds through the sage's observation of life and thoughtful reflection to arrive at understanding. Solomon, the preeminent premessianic sage, is both an echo of Adam and a foretaste of Jesus. As Adam had named animals, interpreting, expressing both their unique identities and his own God-given authority, so Solomon's wisdom was exhibited in language, observation, inference, comparison, pattern, parable, proverb, and artistic invention: "Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East. . . . He spoke 3,000 proverbs and his songs numbered 1,005. He described plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also taught about animals and birds, reptiles and fish" (1 Kgs 4:30, 32–33).²⁵ As creatures created in the Creator's image, we have minds designed to fit the universe, to understand in a finite but accurate way both the Creator himself and his creatures.

But here things get complicated. Our fall into sin impairs our readiness to hear God's two words without static: "Although they knew God, they neither glorified God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened" (Rom 1:21). "You must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts" (Eph 4:18). Rebellious hearts evasively, defensively generate antitheistic presuppositions,

²⁵ The breadth of Solomon's wisdom reflection is notable: natural sciences (particularly botany and zoology), literature (parables)—but also, when we consider the aspects of life addressed in parables: psychology, economics, sociology, political science, marriage/family counseling, etc.—fine arts (songs, presumably entailing not only the poetics but also the musical aspect of song). In Solomon's wisdom we see in seed form virtually the whole curriculum of liberal arts and sciences.

antitheistic presuppositions produce unsound methodologies, and unsound methodologies yield distorted interpretations both of nature and of Scripture.

This does not mean that fallen humans are utterly incapable of perceiving truth. Christ's apostle to the Gentiles confirms the insight of a pagan poet: "We are God's offspring" (Acts 17:31). More astonishing, Paul also cites the confession of a Cretan prophet—"All Cretans are liars"—and pronounces this judgment true. Though "all Cretans" are liars, evidently not all lie all the time (Titus 1:12–13). The image of God persists in us, manifesting itself in a thirst to achieve interpretations that correspond to observation—even as the rebel heart suppresses truth. This is one dimension of common grace: divine kindness that rebels do not deserve, extended not only to those drawn to the Son in faith but also to those who persist in unbelief.²⁶ Common grace is the kindness of God that gives not only rain when we deserve drought (Matt 5:44–45; Acts 14:16–17) and sunshine when we deserve floods (Gen 8:22; 2 Pet 3:5–7) but also true insights to people who, were they consistent with the presuppositions of unbelief, would know only confusion, illusion, cynicism and despair.²⁷ Even the give-and-take of the academic marketplace, despite its politics and trendiness, exhibits some self-corrective mechanism through which absurd theories and misleading methods are usually exposed and eventually abandoned. It is a demonstration of God's common grace whenever, sooner or later, someone calls clever illusion's bluff.

Scripture also speaks of special grace—redeeming, reconciling, re-creating grace—that draws lovers of lies out of darkness and into the light of the Son: "You have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of his Creator" (Col 3:10; cf. Eph 1:18–19; 4:20–24). Yet even this renewal, so brimming with hope that we can again learn to hear God's word in creation truly, is in process: We are "being renewed." Born from above, born by the Spirit, we now begin to see the grand paradigm in which the data of general revelation make sense: "This is my Father's world; O let me ne'er forget that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet. . . . Jesus who died shall be satisfied and earth and heav'n be one." But the new birth does not instantly impart to the believer a mind that perceives immediately how all the pieces fit into the grand puzzle, how God has structured the forces of causation by which his word of power holds the universe together. To understand how, we must listen to the word in nature: how we must observe, devise and test hypotheses, and submit our interpretation to examination and correction by other thoughtful observers.

The same dynamics are at work as we listen to Scripture. God speaks in human language, so those who give attention to language and how it works, whether unbelievers or believers, have something to offer in our

²⁶ See J. Murray, "Common Grace," *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977) 2.93–119. On the intellectual dynamics of common grace in view of human sinfulness, see the nuanced discussion of J. Frame on the concepts of antithesis and common grace in the thought of C. Van Til (*Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* [Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995] 187–230).

²⁷ Common grace also defers final judgment, extending opportunity for repentance (Rom 2:3–4; 2 Pet 3:9).

interpretation of his written Word. He speaks his Word into human history and human culture, so those who study ancient cultures help paint the backdrop for God's dramatic dialogue with humankind. But no human observer is free from the finitude of our creatureliness or from the sin that distorts our listening to the Word. We do not hear all that is in the Word because of our sinful resistance, our limited experience, our faulty assumptions about what or how God would speak, or some other hermeneutical defect or disability. Our historical context, with its hot spots and its blind spots, may keep us from perceiving all that Scripture says.

This distinction between God's Word and my understanding of God's Word is hardest to recognize in ourselves, and it is perhaps the riskiest distinction to admit out loud. Simply acknowledging that there may be a difference between what Scripture says so plainly to my group and what Scripture itself actually says raises suspicions that the clarity, if not the authority, of Scripture is about to be compromised. In the overheated, culture-war atmosphere of America in the 1990s it is a sign of unstrategic weakness to admit that our perception of the Bible's teaching may be open to correction.²⁸ Hence we hear often in popular media, secular and Christian, of a conflict between the Bible and science, a match that the unchurched no doubt understand in a simplistic way to indicate that the Bible's claims are contradicted by the objective phenomena of the universe. Too many in the Church, however, have an equally simplistic view, alert to the human element in science's interpretation of the universe but oblivious to the important truth that human interpretation enters into our apprehension of the message of Scripture. Hence the Bible-versus-science slogan obscures a more complex situation, which is that a conflict exists between a certain human interpretation of the Bible and a certain human interpretation of the universe (for that, after all, is what science is). No doubt human interpretations called science do contradict the Bible itself at times. And when they do, they misinterpret God's word in nature as well as Scripture. Or particular human interpretations of Scripture may contradict God's general revelation in the natural world. When they do, they also misunderstand the Bible—its genre, its use of language, its purpose, or its implications. Where an interpretation of either nature or Scripture goes astray the problem may be traceable to deep presuppositions about the nature of reality, or to the selection and use of method, or to processes of inference and deduction by which observations are related. Though God's words in Scripture and creation are utterly true, the potential for error or fragmentary understanding on our part is at hand on every side.

IV. CONCLUSION

When we recognize the distinction between our growing but imperfect perception of God's two words and the words themselves, we approach a needed balance.

²⁸ G. M. Marsden, "A Case of the Excluded Middle: Creation Versus Evolution in America," *Uncivil Religion: Interreligious Hostility in America* (ed. R. H. Bellah and F. E. Greenspahn; New York: Crossroad, 1987) 132–155.

On the one hand, we will not so emphasize common grace that we ignore the influence of presuppositions (e.g. the interpreter's stance of rebellion against or submission toward the Creator) and overarching paradigms (e.g. impersonal naturalism,²⁹ eastern pantheism) on intellectual methodology (e.g. verification criteria: empiricist, rationalist, and so on) and, consequently, on the outcomes of human investigation and reflection. Too often evangelical scholars and institutions have allowed themselves to be ambushed by methodologies that seemed innocuous at the outset but carried concealed carcinogens of antitheistic presuppositions.

On the other hand, we will not so emphasize presuppositional antithesis that we idolize our present understanding of Scripture and/or of nature. We will be open to interpreting Scripture in the context of general revelation, eager to consider all that reflective, conscientious scholars in the sciences or the humanities bring to our attention. We will swallow nothing undiscerningly, but on the other hand we will not seek to erect an artificial safety zone by immunizing our present understanding against challenge, change and growth, or insulating ourselves from correction through those sometimes accurate or partially accurate insights that God's common grace bestows even on people who deny the Giver. We will not opt out of public discussion in the humanities, in the sciences, in Biblical interpretation. We will be humbled to realize that just as there remain within us ethical remnants of the old rebellion, so there are within us intellectual remnants of the old rebel's desire to arrogate to ourselves the sovereign right that belongs to God himself alone—namely, the right to be our ultimate standard of truth, our ground of cognitive rest.

We will not succumb to postmodernity's relativistic agnosticism, its claim that no perception of truth is more valid than any other. Postmodernism is right in its critique of modernity: No human-centered epistemology can get outside our human context to achieve a universal, objective comprehension of truth that deserves undisputed hegemony over others. But Scripture and the universe bear witness to their Creator, whose infinite knowledge, wisdom, and authority entitle him to hegemony over every human paradigm, method and interpretation.

Scripture points us to the one Word from the Father in whom the two words find their perfect harmony: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . All things were made through him. . . . And the Word became flesh. . . . We gazed at his glory . . . full of grace and truth" (John 1:1, 3, 14). This Word is both the agent of creation and the enfleshed display of the Father's glory amid our sin-stained history. "God, having spoken in many parts and ways in the past in the

²⁹ J. P. Moreland describes the worldview conflict ignited by Darwin as the competition between the epistemes of creationism and positivism: "An episteme is a set of common assumptions about the nature and limits of knowledge . . . what counts as good science, how science should be practiced, the limits of science, and so on. . . . Positivism was . . . a naturalistic view of science itself. . . . Positivism generally rejected teleology, vital forces, and the supernatural within science and sought to explain biological phenomena in naturalistic terms emphasizing material and efficient, often mechanistic, causality" (*Christianity and the Nature of Science: A Philosophical Investigation* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989] 215–216).

prophets, in these last days spoke in a Son” (Heb 1:1–2). The two words cohere because they are, in the final analysis, words of the one last Word, Jesus, in whom are hidden all the treasures of divine wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:2–3).

Here and now our ears and minds will never be fully attuned to hear the harmony of God’s two words, never able to resolve all tensions, explain all mysteries, and convince all objectors, any more than here and now we always love others as ourselves or worship God wholeheartedly. This unsettling situation is livable, however, because the Truth himself has promised that today’s flawed and fragmentary understanding, a dim, distorted reflection, will tomorrow give way to clear, face-to-face sight (1 Cor 13:12).