

Apologia: God's Self Disclosure - In Nature & His Word

By Rev. Dr. Daniel Paavola

In his 2005 work, *Soul Searching: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, researcher Christian Smith concludes, "It seems that when the engagement and education of youth by their religious communities is weak, then the faith of teenagers in those traditions tends to degenerate into Moralistic Therapeutic Deism." Smith reports that this deism, a generalized concept that God merely exists and wants people to "be good," may be "the new mainstream American religious faith for our culturally post-Christian, individualistic, mass-consumer capitalist society."

The implications of Smith's findings are important to Lutheran parents, youth workers, and pastors. The Gospel is God's special revelation, His great gift and promise, His unveiling of Himself in the person of Christ. As such, the Gospel is not something that can be stumbled upon by chance. It must be taught and modeled by the Church, and as members of the Church, we Christians are given the responsibility of passing the truth of God's love down to our children, and passing it down verbatim.

With *Apologia*, a new resource from thESource for Youth Ministry, parents and youth workers are given the language they need to communicate God's truth to youth. *Apologia* provides evaluation of a relevant doctrinal issue with Scriptural and doctrinal connects, all in bite-sized, easy to understand segments.

Introduction

God lives in "unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see" (1 Tim. 6:16). God is hidden behind a barrier impenetrable by human beings. In the words of Isaiah, "You are truly a God who hides himself..." (Is. 45:15)

This means that no one has the ability to look "behind the beyond" to know the true God. We creatures simply cannot bridge the gap between ourselves and our Creator. UNLESS (and it's a big "unless") God Himself takes the initiative and reveals Himself to us!

God reveals Himself in a general way in the world that He has created (called "general revelation"). But God reveals Himself specifically to us—who He is [His Name] and how we by His grace can be saved—in His Word, the Holy Scriptures. This is called "special revelation."

It must have been an awesome experience for people like Moses and Paul actually to hear the voice of God. Today we hear God's voice in the Bible, which tells us how God reveals Himself to human beings, how He pierces the barrier between Himself and His creatures to make Himself known, especially in His love for us.

Scripture Connect

Romans 1:19-20 "...since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God made it plain to them. 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...."

Artists reveal themselves in the drawings, paintings and sculpture that they create. In a similar way, God the Divine Artist reveals ("makes plain") Himself in His creation. In Himself, God is invisible and unknowable, but He has made Himself visible and knowable to all people in His creation (natural knowledge of God). Through whatever instrument a scientist peeks—whether through the massive Hubble telescope or a stereo zoom microscope—he or she will see evidence of the power and deity of God the Creator. As a scientist not long ago said, "I am filled with the same awe and humility when I contemplate something of what goes on in a single cell as when I contemplate the sky on a clear night."

David was also filled with awe as he sang, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour speech; night after night they display knowledge” (19:1-2). Or as Paul said to crowds at Lystra, “He [God] has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy” (Acts 14:17)

God has also revealed Himself within all human beings by writing the Law in their hearts (Rom. 2:14-15). By the witness of their conscience, people instinctively know this. They even experience the judgment of God’s Law and try various ways to calm their accusing conscience.

However, notice what the Scriptures in this section do not say about God’s self-disclosure in creation or in our conscience! No mention is made the revelation of God’s saving and forgiving grace. That’s because God reveals His saving love in Jesus Christ only and specifically in His Word.

Romans 16:25 “Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him—to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.” (See also 2 Tim. 3:15-16)

God’s Word is called his special revelation because only through Scripture and the Gospel of Christ that it proclaims can human beings anywhere know salvation and have eternal life. In our present condition the natural knowledge of God is completely insufficient (see again Romans 1:18-20).

Doctrinal Quotation

“The only source of man’s knowledge of God is God’s self-revelation. There can be no absolute knowledge of God independent of God’s self-revelation, because God dwells in the light which no man can approach, 1 Tim. 6:16, φὸς οἰκὼν ἀπροσίτων. God has revealed Himself in a twofold manner: a) In creation, or in the realm of nature, and b) in His Word or Holy Scripture, the only source and norm of Christian doctrine. Accordingly, we distinguished between a natural and Christian knowledge of God” (Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:371).

This distinction between God’s revelation in nature and in His Word has many interesting implications. Let’s note two:

First, every person knows that there is a God from the evidence given in nature (even if he or she doesn’t admit it) and that knowledge of God’s Law (though very dim because of sin) exists in the heart. This knowledge helps people to live together in a fallen world. This is a very positive thing. People instinctively know—at least to some degree—how to live together and to do good things for the benefit of others (called “civil righteousness”). As our Lutheran Confessions remind us, “To a certain extent, reason can produce righteousness [in the civil realm] by its own powers, although it is often shackled by its natural weakness and by the devil, who drives it to shameful acts” (*Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, IV, 23).

Second, notice that the quotation from Pieper’s Dogmatics speaks about the “Christian knowledge of God” given to us in the Word of God. Remember when Moses, at the burning bush, asked God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name’ Then what shall I tell them?” (Ex.3:13). In a sense, the entire Bible is an answer to this question, an unfolding of who God is [that is, His Name]. Jesus Himself revealed clearly who the true God is. Before He ascended into heaven, He commanded His disciples to baptize “in the name [note the singular!] of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” [note the plurality of persons!] (Matt. 28:19).

The point is this. No one can look at a delicately beautiful butterfly or a majestic oak tree and know the identity of the true God—the Father who sent His Son into the world to redeem it and to bring us the forgiveness of sins, life

and salvation through His Spirit. This God we only can learn to know in the revealed Word (special revelation).

Application

“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts,” says the Lord (Is. 55:9). Still, vast numbers of the human family try to prop their ladders against the firmament, so to speak—rung by rung by their own religious exertion attempting to scale heights into divine knowledge.

Yoga gurus teach consciousness raising techniques to achieve union with the divine Self and “absorption into the Godhead” (Swami Vivekananda). Mystics seek immediate knowledge of Ultimate Reality by direct personal experience of the “divinity within.” “In search of the spiritual,” “Americans are looking for personal ecstatic experiences of God,” says Newsweek (Aug. 29/Sept. 5, 2005). “Communion with the divine” and “the realization of godself” is the goal of those who want to “find God.” Even among some Christians, the quest for spirituality leads to claims of “direct revelations,” visions and dreams, as they seek something “more” than what is given by God in His Word.

Such efforts, of course, are doomed to failure, for God’s “judgments” are “unsearchable” and “his paths beyond tracing out” (Rom. 11:33). But God does not allow His judgments and paths to remain entirely hidden. He has lowered His “ladder” from heaven, the ladder of divine revelation, Jacob’s ladder itself. He has come down to us revealing His saving love in the person of His Son Jesus Christ and rung-by-rung has detailed this tremendous “mystery” in the beautiful Words of the Bible. These words satisfy all spiritual longings and bring joy and peace to the soul. In this Word He has given us “immeasurable more than we can ask or think” (Eph. 3:20).

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