

**Part One:**  
**Revelation**

# 1

## What Does God Reveal in the Grand Canyon?

### Part 1

#### Article 2 of the Belgic Confession

It is undeniable that Article 2 of the Belgic Confession is an important part of our faith. This article speaks of God's revelation. Two means of revelation are distinguished. There is in the first place: creation, preservation, and government of the universe. And in the second place: God's holy and divine Word. By these two means God makes himself known. Our Lord Jesus Christ said: "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 17:3). When Article 2 speaks about the means that God uses to make himself known, it undoubtedly confesses something of great significance.

Another question, however, is whether Article 2 of the Belgic Confession has any specific interest for Reformed *students*. I was asked to speak to Reformed students about Article 2. Should students today pay special attention to this article? I think that there is a good reason for them to do

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some in-depth study of this article. There is a movement today that connects university study, and especially science, with Article 2 of the Belgic Confession. Quite a number of people make a direct connection between science and general revelation as it is confessed in Article 2. In my speech, I would like to investigate this trend and discuss whether science has anything to do with general revelation.

### Some Examples

By way of introduction, I will first give some recent popular examples. Dr. Robert VanderVennen, associated with the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, wrote an article under the title: “Not the Bible Alone.”<sup>1</sup> This article speaks about our individuality, our experience, our knowledge of history and science and calls that our knowledge of general revelation. This can only mean that things we experience, the outcome of history, and the results of science are revelations. Results of science, therefore, must form a part of general revelation. When Article 2 of the Belgic Confession speaks about general revelation, we have to think of, among other things, results of science.

VanderVennen goes on to blame the concerned members of the Christian Reformed Church that they, in effect, neglect part of God’s revelation. For they neglect parts of God’s general revelation. That is not all. Their failing to take into account much of general revelation has results for their understanding of the Bible. They now read the Bible in isolation, without taking into account general revelation. This results in wrong interpretations of the Bible. These concerned members, in VanderVennen’s view, make two mistakes: 1) they neglect general revelation; 2) as a result, they can misinterpret special revelation.

VanderVennen’s article makes clear what is at stake in this interpretation of Article 2, in which general revelation is connected with science. The title says it all: “Not the Bible Alone.” This interpretation of Article 2 leads to the denial of one of the foundations of the Reformation: *Sola Scriptura*, Scripture alone.

My second example is from a book on Christian education written by J. Stronks and J. Vreugdenhil and entitled *Hallmarks of Christian Schooling*. They write: “A new physics discovery is really the revelation of God’s provision

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<sup>1</sup> R. VanderVennen, “Not the Bible Alone,” *Calvinist Contact* (Sept. 14, 1990) 4. I published a reaction to this article: “Does the Belgic Confession Teach ‘Not the Bible Alone?’” *Clarion* 39 (1990) 470–471, 492–493.

for that aspect of nature. The entire natural environment, from the macro journey of the planets to the microscopic biotic activity in the local pond, is the field of study for the school. Each lesson offers opportunities to gather in God's words as the students' knowledge of nature increases."<sup>2</sup> Mark that expression "gather in God's *words*" in connection with the study of creation. "God's words" are not sentences from the Bible but scientific discoveries.

Here we find two other results when scientific discoveries are called "general revelation." In the first place, general revelation must be increasing in content. When science discovers something new, that discovery is added to the content of general revelation. General revelation is not only continuing, it is also expanding. This view leads to the conclusion that increasingly more things are being revealed about the world.

According to Article 2, revelation—and that includes general revelation—is revelation about God. How can Stronks and Vreugdenhil say that a physics discovery is a revelation? They connect a physics discovery and God in such a way that a physics discovery reveals what God wanted that thing to be. Science discovers God's provision for the things in this world. In other publications this is called the structural aspect. As a result, general revelation no longer points upward, to God; it points downward, to the earth. A discovery concerning the earth is called "(general) revelation."

There is yet another aspect of this general revelation. John H. Kromminga wrote an article under the title "Revelation in an Unknown Tongue." He states: "Most of us do not have the capacity to read the book of the universe, which the Belgic Confession (Article 2) calls a beautiful book and the first means by which we know God." Sure, all of us have the ability to read some important messages from the book of nature. But to understand other messages most of us need an interpreter. Without an interpreter, "I do not learn anything about the history of the earth from looking at the Grand Canyon. I don't know what the symbols mean: the wrinkles in the earth's crust, the various kinds of rocks."<sup>3</sup>

That is where the interpreters come in. They are the scientists. These scholars read the message of the book of creation for the sake of the

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<sup>2</sup> J. Stronks and J. Vreugdenhil, *Hallmarks of Christian Schooling* (Ancaster: Ontario Alliance of Christian Schools, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> John H. Kromminga, "Revelation in an Unknown Tongue," *The Banner* (Dec. 7, 1992) 7. See for a positive reaction the letter of a geology professor published in *The Banner* (Jan. 25, 1993) 6: "Perhaps some of the skeptics among us should take a geology course from a Christian who teaches sound geology. They will come away singing 'How Great Thou Art' even more loudly."

many who cannot understand it. They therefore deserve our respect, our trust, and our support, Kromminga says. Scientists, then, make parts of general revelation available to the public.

Here we find yet another important element when general revelation is directly connected with science. As a result, scientists receive a special function. They become the transmitters of general revelation. This part of general revelation would be inaccessible to us without special interpreters. The common believers are made dependent on the scientists.

## The Meaning of Article 2

In summary, this view maintains that science discovers general revelation. At least three important teachings are connected with this. 1) God gives in nature (and history) more revelation than is contained in Scripture. 2) This revelation is not about God, but about God's creational and historical plans for the world. 3) This revelation is for the greatest part inaccessible to believers; the scientists have to discover much of general revelation.

This view is defended with an appeal to Article 2 of the Belgic Confession. Let us, therefore, compare it for a moment with this article. Is this emphasis on the importance of science for revelation based on Article 2, as is suggested? A look at this article will "reveal" that this is not what the Belgic Confession meant here.

In the first place, this article does not imply that there is more revelation than is given in God's Word. The article says that we first know God by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe. Second, God makes himself more clearly and fully known to us by his holy and divine Word. This "more clearly and fully" means "more clearly and more fully."<sup>4</sup> The words "more fully" imply that special revelation includes the knowledge given by way of general revelation, and that it adds other things. Article 2 does not know of any part of general revelation that is not included in special revelation.

This is directly connected with my second remark concerning the text of Article 2. What is revealed by general revelation? That is stated in the first sentence: "We know him [God] by two means." The general revelation

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<sup>4</sup> See the Dutch text as decided at the Synod of Dort: "noch cleerder ende volcomelijcker" ("even more clear and more fully"). The Latin text (which has no official authority) emphasizes even more that the importance of scriptural revelation is greater: "longe manifestius et plenius" ("by far more clearly and more fully"); see the texts in J. N. Bakhuizen van den Brink, ed., *De Nederlandse belijdenis-geschriften* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Amsterdam: Ton Bolland, 1976) 73.

Article 2 speaks about is revelation concerning God, and not concerning God's plan for things or God's history with things. Article 2 should be connected with Article 1, where we find the confession concerning God: "We all believe with the heart and confess with the mouth that there is only one God, who is a simple and spiritual Being; he is eternal..." The God we confess in Article 1, we know by two means, says Article 2.<sup>5</sup> This article, then, does not speak about scientific discoveries concerning the world.

In the third place, does the Belgic Confession imply that we have to listen to the scientist interpreting the book of nature to us? No, it says plainly that "*we* know him by two means." No interpretation is needed. In fact, the need for interpretation is denied when the Confession states in connection with general revelation: "All these things are sufficient to convict men and leave them without excuse." No one can come with the excuse that he did not have an interpreter, for general revelation as such is already sufficient to convict men. As it is said in Romans 1:19: "God has made it clear to them." No scientist needs to translate this general revelation; God himself brings home the truth about himself.

## Conclusion

This view that connects science with general revelation cannot appeal to Article 2 of the Belgic Confession. This article speaks about something different. This does not mean, of course, that connecting general revelation and science necessarily goes against the Confession.<sup>6</sup> The Belgic Confession does not intend to treat exhaustively the complete content of scriptural revelation. There are things in Scripture which are not mentioned in the Belgic Confession.

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<sup>5</sup> We have to pay special attention to the place of general revelation in the Confession. General revelation is mentioned after Article 1, about God and his attributes. The Belgic Confession again speaks about God in Articles 8–11, where the Trinity is confessed. The clear implication of the Confession is that we do not know the Trinity by the two means of general and special revelation, but only by one: special revelation. See the beginning of Article 8: "According to this truth and this *Word of God*, we believe in one only God, who is one single essence, in which there are three persons..." After that, in Articles 12 and 13, creation and providence are dealt with. This implies that the Belgic Confession speaks about these doctrines, too, only on the basis of the written works of God.

<sup>6</sup> At one point, however, there is violent disagreement, namely, when this view leads to the denial of *Sola Scriptura*. See about that my article mentioned in footnote 1.

We have to study Scripture on this point. Before we do that, let us broaden our investigation. We have now dealt with some popular explanations. The next section will present the same view as it is expressed in the Report of the Committee on Creation and Science of the Christian Reformed Church.

## Part 2

In the previous section, we dealt with three individual views in which general revelation and science have been connected. Far more important, however, is the Report of the Committee on Creation and Science, presented to Synod 1991 of the Christian Reformed Church. We can expect this Report to address this question, considering the history behind the appointment of this committee. When Dr. Howard Van Till published his book *The Fourth Day* in 1986, objections were brought in against three professors at Calvin College: Van Till, Cl. Menninga, and D. Young. Synod 1988, in dealing with these objections, decided to appoint a study committee to report on this matter to Synod 1991. Part of the mandate was:

To address the relationship between special and general revelation as found in the Belgic Confession, Article 2, and in Report 44 of the Synod of 1972 focusing primarily on the implications for biblical interpretations and the investigation of God's creation.<sup>7</sup>

Synod 1988, therefore, thought that the solution of the problems concerning evolution and creation could be found in the context of general and special revelation.

The committee that was appointed presented their report to Synod 1991. They agree with synod that these problems should be discussed within the context of general and special revelation.<sup>8</sup> The committee, just

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<sup>7</sup> See *Acts of Synod 1988* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church in North America, 1988) 598. The committee was to consist of representatives from the areas of natural science, philosophy of science, and theology.

<sup>8</sup> "The mandate places the discussion in the broadest context possible, namely, in the context of the relationship between special and general revelation. While acknowledging that in the Reformed tradition this is precisely the right context for such a discussion, we suggest also that it makes the mandate rather overwhelming, for the implications of the relationship between general and special revelation must be hammered out ever anew in terms of specific issues." See *Agenda for Synod 1991* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church in North America, 1991) 369.

like synod, connects their problems concerning the relation of faith and science with Article 2 of the Belgic Confession.<sup>9</sup> As we have seen, this is incorrect, for Article 2 does not call scientific discoveries concerning creation “revelations.” Now we will concentrate on the two main convictions of the section of the Report that deals with general and special revelation.

The first important question concerns the relation between general and special revelation. They should not be taken as independent, as two entities without connection. According to the Report, they are interdependent.<sup>10</sup> That means that Scripture sheds light on the interpretation of general revelation, and that general revelation sheds light on the interpretation of Scripture. This implies that general and special revelation are on the same level. Each may be used to understand the other.

Another passage in the Report, however, indicates that general and special revelation are not on equal footing. General revelation is primary. To prove this, the Belgic Confession is appealed to. Article 2 describes general revelation as the “first.” General revelation is “first” not only in time, “but also in the sense of being primary, constituting the matrix into which special revelation comes and against the background of which special revelation is understood.”<sup>11</sup>

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This section from the *Agenda* will be quoted in the following footnotes as “Report.”

<sup>9</sup> See Report, 371.

<sup>10</sup> Report, 370: The Report “begins with the basic confessional and theological affirmations concerning the mutual interdependence of general and special revelation which determine the problem for the Reformed tradition.” The Report wants to strengthen its position with a quotation from L. Berkhof’s *Manual of Reformed Doctrine*: “Scripture can be fully understood only against the background of God’s revelation in nature” (372). This quotation, however, cannot be used in the context of the Report. Berkhof does not address here the problem of how to harmonize scientific discoveries with the Bible: “Consequently, the Christian now reads God’s general revelation with the eye of faith and in the light of his Word, and for that very reason is able to see God’s hand in nature and his footsteps in history. He sees God in everything round about him and is thus led to a proper appreciation of the world.” *Manual of Reformed Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 11<sup>th</sup> printing, 1973) 30. The context shows that the words “God’s revelation in nature” do not mean that God reveals something about nature, but that God through nature reveals himself.

<sup>11</sup> Report, 371. This is obviously a failure if it is meant as an interpretation of Article 2 of the Belgic Confession. In this article “first” neither implies that general revelation is first in time, nor that it is primary. The article begins: “We know



Now a matrix is a mold. Molten pewter is poured into a matrix. After it has cooled down, the matrix is opened and out comes a spoon. The matter is still pewter, but the shape has been determined by the matrix. Actually, the matrix determines not only the shape, it also determines how that particular piece of pewter can be used.

In the same way, general revelation should function as the matrix for special revelation. Let me give an example. The example does not occur in the Report, but is based on the article of Kromminga. A geologist studies a rock formation in the Grand Canyon and comes to the conclusion that it has been formed 135 million years ago by huge tidal waves. This conclusion should be taken as general revelation. Science has “read” the world, as it is sometimes expressed. Special revelation should be shaped by this mold. We know from special revelation that God created the world. This statement, therefore, should be explained within the context of the scientific result of general revelation. The outcome is that God created that particular part of the Grand Canyon 135 million years ago by means of great tidal waves. The perimeters of the exegesis of Genesis 1 are determined by the scientists. That is implied in the statement that general revelation is the matrix into which special revelation comes.

The second important line of thought of the Report concerns the question: What does general revelation reveal? The primary answer, says the Report, is that general revelation reveals God. Romans 1:20 and Psalm 19:1–2 are quoted in this connection. That is correct; these texts speak of general revelation concerning God.

Romans 1:19 speaks about “what may be known about God.” Verse 20 says that “since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities<sup>12</sup>—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen,” and verse 21 summarizes this as: “although they knew God.” And Psalm 19 begins with: “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his

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him by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe.... Second, he makes himself more clearly and fully known to us by his holy and divine Word.” “First” and “second” are no more than an enumeration as explanation of the “two means.”

<sup>12</sup> The RSV translates: “Ever since the creation of the world his invisible *nature*, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.” The Greek text, however, does not speak about “nature”; it speaks about God’s “invisibles,” his invisible things. Synod Winnipeg was correct when it decided to go back to the old text; see *Acts of General Synod 1989 of the Canadian Reformed Churches* (Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 1989) Article 159 (p. 117).

hands.” When Article 2 of the Belgic Confession states, “We know him [the God of Article 1] by two means,” it is in agreement with these texts.

If the Report had ended here, it would not have fulfilled its mandate. It would have to say that the distinction between general and special revelation has nothing to do with the investigation of God’s creation. In order to connect general revelation with science, the Report makes the transition from “God” to “wisdom of God.” This wisdom is embedded in creation itself. General revelation discovers the wisdom of God. A quotation:

By working with the creation, by sifting it through our fingers, by tilling the ground, by peering through microscopes and telescopes, we learn creation’s secrets, we discover its order, how it functions, how it sustains and produces life. In other words, we discover embedded in it the wisdom of God.

That is why, when the farmer has it right, when he discovers contour plowing and proper crop rotation, or when a scientist discovers DNA, that marvellous arrangement of the genetic code that controls the development of organic life, we may say with Isaiah, “...his God teaches him, this also comes from the LORD of hosts; he is wonderful in counsel, and excellent in wisdom.”<sup>13</sup>

These sentences show clearly what is meant with the wisdom of God. It is the secrets of the world, the order in the world, how everything functions and produces life. The wisdom of God is not the fact that God is wise, but those things which God in his wisdom has determined. When a farmer discovers crop rotation, he discovers something which God has created in this world. When a scientist makes a new discovery, he has uncovered another piece of God’s wisdom.

We have to realize that suddenly “general revelation” means something completely different. Up to now, “general revelation” always indicated something concerning God. This is also the case in Psalm 19 and Romans, as we have seen. The Belgic Confession follows this usage. When general revelation is brought in connection with science, however, it suddenly indicates something about the world. It means the structure of this world, or, to connect it with God, it means how God in his wisdom determined the way of existence for everything. This meaning cannot be proven with the traditional texts for general revelation. A new text has come up in support of this view: Isaiah 28:23–29.

At this point we have to think through the implication of this meaning

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<sup>13</sup> Report, 375.

of general revelation. Scientific discoveries, if they are correct, have to be given the status of revelations from God. Christians would not want to deny what God has revealed to them. If scientific results present themselves as revelations from God, Christians have to accept these on the authority of God. Certain scientific discoveries have to be accepted, not as products of human investigation but as divine revelations.

We will have to come back to Isaiah 28 and ask whether it can support this meaning of “general revelation.” First, however, I would like to investigate something else. From the preceding, we received the impression that this application of general revelation to the results of science is new. It is certainly not to be found in the Belgic Confession. But the Report gives the impression that it is Reformed to discuss questions of faith and science within the context of general and special revelation. And it substantiates this by invoking the authority of two Reformed scholars of high standing: Calvin and Bavinck.<sup>14</sup> Before we try to find our final answer in Scripture, we will turn to these scholars. Did they accept results of science as knowledge revealed by general revelation?

## Calvin

The Report uses in this section on general revelation two places from Calvin’s *Institutes*: some chapters from book 1 of the *Institutes* and part of a chapter from book 2. We will deal with these separately. The reason for dealing with these sections separately will become clear later.

To begin with book 1, Calvin here explains his view on general revelation step by step. Chapter three is the beginning of the discussion. This chapter speaks about the knowledge of God that God has *implanted* in all men. “God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty” (1.3.1).<sup>15</sup> This means that all men know God without any revelation from outside.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The third Reformed scholar used in this section of the Report is L. Berkhof. We will not go into his view, but note the misuse of a quotation of Berkhof above, in footnote 10.

<sup>15</sup> Quotations from the *Institutes* will be taken from J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2 vols.; ed. J. T. McNeill; trans. F. L. Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

<sup>16</sup> Calvin uses for this part of what we call “general revelation” names such as “seed of religion” and “sense of divinity.” I have difficulty with Calvin’s view at this point. See my article “The Sense of Divinity” in *Westminster Theological Journal* 48 (1986) 337ff.

Chapter four shows that this part of general revelation fails since it does not lead to true religion. “They do not, therefore, apprehend God as he offers himself, but imagine him as they have fashioned him in their own presumption” (1.4.1).

Chapter five says that there is yet another way in which God makes himself known to all men. “Lest anyone, then, be excluded from access to happiness, he [God] not only sowed in men’s minds that seed of religion of which we have spoken but revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe” (1.5.1).

From the quotations it can be learned that Calvin in all instances speaks about revelation concerning God. That is consistent with the title of the book: *The Knowledge of God the Creator*. This indicates that book 1 of the *Institutes* cannot be used to support the view that general revelation has anything to do with scientific discoveries concerning the world.

The Report, however, does quote a passage from this section of the *Institutes* in support of its view.

There are innumerable evidences both in heaven and on earth that declare his wonderful wisdom; not only those more recondite matters for the close examination of which astronomy, medicine, and all natural science are intended, but also those which thrust themselves upon the sight of even the most untutored and ignorant persons, so that they cannot open their eyes without being compelled to witness them. Indeed, men who have either quaffed or even tasted the liberal arts penetrate with their aid far more deeply into the secrets of the divine wisdom (1.5.2).

Does this quotation not say that what scientists discover about the world is divine wisdom? No, Calvin does not state that scientific discoveries should be taken as revelations concerning the world. He uses them to underline that God is revealed in the scientific discoveries. Someone who is ignorant of scientific discoveries sees more than enough of God’s workmanship, says Calvin, “to lead him to break forth in admiration of the Artificer.” More things become known through scientific investigation: “As God’s providence shows itself more explicitly when one observes these, so the mind must rise to a somewhat higher level to look upon his glory.” And the last sentence of this section confirms that Calvin means that more knowledge of the world should lead to greater admiration of God: “But yet, as all acknowledge, the human body shows itself to be a composition so ingenious that its Artificer is rightly judged a wonder-worker.”

We can conclude that book 1 of the *Institutes* cannot be used to support the main thesis of the Report that scientific discoveries can have the status of revelation. When Calvin briefly refers to scientific discoveries, he empha-

sizes that scientific discoveries only increase our reasons for praising God.

What about book 2? Does this book of the *Institutes* place scientific discoveries in the context of general revelation? The Report gives several quotations;<sup>17</sup> one is enough for our purpose:

But if the Lord has willed that we be helped in physics, dialectic, mathematics, and other like disciplines, by the work and ministry of the ungodly, let us use this assistance. For if we neglect God's gift freely offered in these arts, we ought to suffer just punishment for our sloths. (2.2.16).<sup>18</sup>

Let us first place this quotation in the proper context. Chapter two as a whole deals with the results of the fall into sin. The title of the chapter already indicates this: "Man has now been deprived of freedom of choice and bound over to miserable servitude." Calvin is in the first place interested in the freedom of the will. Some church fathers have a tendency to accept the freedom of the will (2.2.4), but Calvin rejects their opinion (2.2.10).

Calvin, then, hastens to prevent a misunderstanding. When he upholds that man has lost the freedom of the will, he does not want to say that man is no more than a beast. That is the reason why, in a chapter about sin, Calvin suddenly speaks about the sciences. In the sentences quoted earlier, Calvin acknowledges that secular science can come with good results. Yet I have two objections against using this section from the *Institutes* in the context of science and general revelation.

In the first place, only one side of what Calvin says in this discussion is mentioned. Calvin is far less positive about secular scholarship than shows from the quotation. He begins this section by stating agreement with a statement of Augustine "that the natural gifts were corrupted in man through sin, but that the supernatural gifts were stripped from him" (2.2.12). We are dealing here with what, in Augustine's terminology, are natural gifts. They are corrupted, says Augustine. When Calvin says it in his own words, he says: "Soundness of mind and uprightness of heart were withdrawn.... This is the corruption of the natural gifts. For even though something of understanding and judgment remains as a residue along with

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<sup>17</sup> The quotations in the Report are from *Institutes*, 2.11.15–16; see Report, 377.

<sup>18</sup> Even though I agree with Calvin that God has preserved many "natural" gifts in mankind, I am not convinced that these gifts can be seen as gifts of the Spirit. See my article "De Geest in Bezaleël (Exodus 31:3)" in *Ambt en actualiteit: Opstellen aangeboden aan Prof. Dr. C. Trimp* (ed. F. H. Folkerts et al.; Haarlem: Vijlbrief, 1992) 25–35. [A translation of this article is included in this book as chapter 5, ed.]

the will, yet we shall not call a mind whole and sound that is both weak and plunged into deep darkness.” (2.2.12).<sup>19</sup> The Report fails to mention that the gifts are corrupted, according to Calvin. By doing so it presents science in a more positive light than Calvin does.

My second objection is more important in the context of our discussion. Calvin does not speak here of revelation at all, let alone general revelation. When this section from book 2 of the *Institutes* is used in the context of general revelation, different categories are mixed up. Calvin says that Christians should accept the correct results of science, even if that science is secular. But he does not say that those results are revelations.

Calvin says in book 1 that God reveals himself in creation. He says in book 2 that Christians can accept results of secular science. But no book of Calvin says that scientific results concerning the world should be accepted as general revelations. The Report can use neither book 1 nor book 2 of the *Institutes* in support of its view.

### Part 3

In connection with general revelation, we are discussing the Report of the Committee on Creation and Science, submitted to Synod 1991 of the Christian Reformed Church. This Report not only called general revelation the primary revelation, but also stated that correct results of science should be seen as revelations from God. Two Reformed scholars in particular were appealed to in support of this view: Calvin and Bavinck. We dealt with Calvin in the previous article; in this article, we will begin with Bavinck's view. Finally, we will draw a conclusion on the basis of God's revelation in Scripture.

#### Bavinck

H. Bavinck was a Reformed theologian around the turn of the century, who wrote a complete survey of Reformed doctrine. It is a four-volume

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<sup>19</sup> Calvin comes back to Augustine's view at the end of this section: “For with the greatest truth Augustine teaches that as the free gifts were withdrawn from man after the fall, so the natural ones remaining were corrupted.... Not that the gifts could become defiled by themselves, seeing they came from God. But to defiled man these gifts were no longer pure, and from them he could derive no praise at all” (2.2.16). The gifts themselves are not corrupted, according to Calvin. However, the gifts are used by corrupted men. That causes the misuse of the gifts and the bad results.

set, entitled *Reformed Dogmatics*. If Bavinck is appealed to in a discussion concerning general and special revelation, one would expect that the section on revelation in *Reformed Dogmatics* would be used. That does not happen, however. A different book is appealed to, his study on *Common Grace*. The quotation taken out of this book is:

There is thus a rich revelation of God even among the heathen—not only in nature but also in their heart and conscience, in their life and history, among their statesmen and artists, their philosophers and reformers. There exists no reason at all to denigrate or diminish this divine revelation.<sup>20</sup>

This quotation of Bavinck (and the two of Calvin given before) form the basis for the conclusion that the Reformed tradition does not allow us to dismiss secular or unbelieving scholarship.

Bavinck, however, does not at all speak about science in this passage; he speaks about religion. Bavinck is dealing with God's self-revelation: "The revelation of God in nature and history is never a mere passive pouring forth of God's virtues but is always a positive act on the part of God." Therefore this flows over in a discussion of religion. "The specific difference between the religion of Israel and the religions of the world cannot lie in the concept of revelation.... All religions are positive: they rest upon real or supposed revelation."<sup>21</sup> Within the context, it is obvious that Bavinck does not speak about the relation between general revelation and science, but about the relation between (natural and supernatural) revelation and religion.<sup>22</sup>

But, as we said previously, we actually should look in Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* if we want to know whether Bavinck sees correct results of science as general revelation. The content of general revelation is God, according to Bavinck. "All that is and happens is, in a real sense, a work of God and to the devout a revelation of his attributes and perfections. That

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<sup>20</sup> Report, 377, referring to the complete translation of this study on "Common Grace" in *Calvin Theological Journal* 24 (1989) 35–65.

<sup>21</sup> H. Bavinck, *Common Grace*, 41.

<sup>22</sup> Another misunderstanding of Bavinck's article occurs on p. 372 of the Report. The statement "Special revelation does not intend to create a new supernatural order of things or a new world" is supported by this quote from Bavinck: "It creates no new cosmos but rather makes the cosmos new." In Bavinck's speech, however, "it" does not refer to special revelation but to the Christian religion: "Christianity does not introduce a single substantial foreign element into the creation. It creates no new cosmos but rather makes the cosmos new." See H. Bavinck, "Common Grace," *Calvin Theological Journal* 24 (1989) 61.

is how Scripture looks at nature and history. Creating, sustaining, and governing together form one single mighty ongoing revelation of God.... To the devout everything in nature speaks of God.”<sup>23</sup>

On one occasion, Bavinck indicates that much is connected with general revelation: “No one escapes the power of general revelation. Religion belongs to the essence of a human. The idea and existence of God, the spiritual independence and eternal destiny of the world, the moral world order and its ultimate triumph—all these are problems that never cease to engage the human mind.”<sup>24</sup> But whatever Bavinck connects with general revelation, it is not the results of science.<sup>25</sup>

There is, however, one quotation from Bavinck’s *Dogmatics* that time and again crops up in this connection. It is a long quotation, but I will give it here in installments:<sup>26</sup>

In a sense we can say that also all knowledge of nature and history as we acquire and apply it in our occupation and business, in commerce and industry, in the arts and sciences, is due to the revelation of God. For all these elements of culture exist only because God has implanted in his creation thoughts and forces that human beings gradually learn to understand under his guidance. Scripture itself testifies of this when it says that it is God who teaches the farmer about the way he has to work the fields (Isa. 28:24–29).

Bavinck, indeed, says here that knowledge we have could be seen as the result of revelation. At the same time, however, it is remarkable that the

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<sup>23</sup> H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek* (4 vols.; 4<sup>th</sup> ed.; Kampen: Kok, 1928) 1.278. English Translation: *Reformed Dogmatics* (4 vols.; ed. J. Bolt; trans. J. Vriend; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–2008) 1.307–308.

<sup>24</sup> H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1.293 (ET 1.321–322).

<sup>25</sup> The same can be seen in the brief dogmatics which Bavinck published under the title *Magnalia Dei*. He discusses general revelation in chapter 3, which begins with the following sentence: “If it is true that man can have knowledge of God then this fact presupposes that God on his part voluntarily chose to make himself known to man in some way or other.” The content of the chapter, too, shows that Bavinck sees general revelation as revelation of God concerning himself. “Every revelation which proceeds from God is *self*-revelation. God is the origin and he is also the content of his revelation.” See the English translation: H. Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith: A Survey of Christian Doctrine* (trans. H. Zylstra; Grand Rapids: Baker, reprinted 1977). The quotations can be found on pp. 32 and 35.

<sup>26</sup> The Dutch text in H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1.313–314 (ET 1.341–342).



quotation begins with a qualifier: “in a certain sense.” To understand this quotation we have to see it in its context. Bavinck has first stated that the content of general revelation is God. “All revelation of God is obviously self-revelation.” The quotation given above is an objection against Bavinck’s general rule that all general revelation is self-revelation. This is indicated in the opening words: “in a certain sense.” If this is an objection, how does Bavinck answer it?

But since the creation’s existence is distinct from God, and history and nature can also be studied by themselves and for their own sake, knowledge of God and knowledge of his creatures do not coincide, and in the latter case we usually do not speak of revelation as the source of knowledge.

Here we have Bavinck’s first counter-argument: We usually do not call this knowledge of nature and history “revelation.” The reason is that they can be studied separate from God.

But the moment creatures are related to God and considered *sub specie aeternitatis* (under the aspect of eternity),<sup>27</sup> they assume the character of a revelation to us and to some greater or lesser degree make God known to us.

Bavinck then explains when the creatures can be called “revelation”: when they are connected with God, when we know God through them. This is his decisive counter-argument. According to Bavinck, something may only be called “revelation” when it reveals something about God.

In revelation God becomes knowable. And it is always also the purpose of revelation that human beings should know, serve, and honour God. Revelation indeed has God as its author and content and so also as its final end; God does all things for his own sake: of him, through him, and to him are all things (Rom. 11:36). But the end of revelation subordinate to this goal is nevertheless always that the rational creature might know and serve God. This also applies, moreover, to general revelation (Acts 14:17; 17:27; Rom. 1:19–20). There is a real vocation (*vocatio realis*), a calling from God that comes to human beings through nature and history and that, when they do not obey this calling, renders them inexcusable.

Bavinck has reached his conclusion: revelation makes God known (not facts from nature or history). And he strengthens his conclusion by emphasizing the goal of revelation: that man should know God (not facts

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<sup>27</sup> This Latin expression means literally “under the aspect of eternity.” “Eternity” is a designation of God. The whole expression means the same as the previous: “in relation with God.”

from nature or history) in order to serve him.

In conclusion, the statement that all knowledge of nature and history are the result of revelation functions in Bavinck's exposition as an objection. He rejects this statement, however, and maintains that general revelation makes God known.

## Isaiah 28

The texts most often used for general revelation support the view of Bavinck (which is also the view of Article 2 of the Belgic Confession) that general revelation reveals God. A quick survey of the most important texts will show that:

Psalm 19:1. "The heavens declare the glory of *God*; the skies proclaim *the work of his hands*."<sup>28</sup>

Acts 14:16–17. "In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left *himself* without testimony: He has shown kindness...."

Acts 17:26–27. "From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek *him* and perhaps reach out for *him* and find *him*...."

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

These texts all say that God revealed himself in his general revelation. The exception to this rule is Romans 2:14–15. "Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that *the requirements of the law* are written on their hearts...." This exception, however, is the law of God. Not one of these says that some results of science are revelations from God.

The previous texts are all texts traditionally used for general revelation. One text, however, began to be used in this connection only fairly recently: Isaiah 28. This is a passage about a farmer who sows different seeds in different places and who harvests the different grains in different ways. The conclusion is: "This also comes from the LORD of hosts; he is wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom" (v. 29 RSV). This text has a central

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<sup>28</sup> For our topic are important the articles of C. Van Dam, "How does God Reveal himself in his Works and Word?" in *Clarion* 41 (1992) 154–156, 179–181, 201–202. See on Psalm 19 especially the second installment.

place in the Report.<sup>29</sup> The conclusion drawn from it is: “God instructs the farmer not directly from the Scriptures, for that is not their purpose, but through the wisdom embedded in the creation itself.”

We can easily agree with the first half of this statement. Isaiah 28 does not say that God instructs the farmer through the Scriptures how to farm. The problem is in the second half of this statement, the positive side of it. Does Isaiah 28 teach that God instructs the farmer through the wisdom embedded in the creation itself?

Before we answer this question we have to see the importance of it within the context of the Report. The Report draws a parallel between a farmer and a scientist. When a farmer has it right, his God teaches him. Similarly, when a scientist discovers DNA, we may say with Isaiah: “His God teaches him, this also comes from the LORD.”<sup>30</sup> This teaching of God is seen as revelation.<sup>31</sup> Scientific results, if they are correct, have the status of revelations from God.

This application of Isaiah 28, however, is not in agreement with the text. In the first place, the text does not say that God teaches facts concerning the world. It says instead that God teaches practical things: how to plow (v. 24); where to sow (v. 25); with what to thresh (v. 27); how long to thresh (v. 28). God teaches the farmer, no doubt through experience, how to act in his creation. Not the scholar’s scientific results (like DNA) but the farmer’s practical actions are taught by God.

In the second place, the text does not speak about “wisdom of God embedded in creation.” It says in verse 29 that the practical insight of the farmer “comes from the LORD.” God has given this to the farmer. After

<sup>29</sup> Report, 374ff. See also A. Wolters, *Creation Regained* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 28ff.

<sup>30</sup> The complete sentence is: “In other words, we discover embedded in it [creation] the wisdom of God. That is why, when the farmer has it right, when he discovers contour plowing and proper crop rotation, or when a scientist discovers DNA, that marvelous arrangement of the genetic code that controls the development of organic life, we may say with Isaiah, ‘...his God teaches him; this also comes from the LORD of hosts; he is wonderful in counsel, and excellent in wisdom.’” Report, 375.

<sup>31</sup> This can be seen from two clear indications. In the first place, Isaiah 28 is discussed in the section on “general revelation and science,” Report, 373. In the second place, the discussion of Isaiah 28 is introduced with this sentence: “Certainly this perspective on general revelation as a manifestation of the thought of God or, more particularly, of the wisdom of God is a clear teaching of Scripture.” Report, 374.

that, the text continues to speak about God: “He is wonderful in counsel, and magnificent in wisdom.” The wisdom meant here is an attribute of God. The reasoning is: if God gives this insight to the farmer, how great then is the wisdom of God.

This text does not belong to the traditional proof texts for general revelation. It should not become a proof text for general revelation, either. Isaiah 28 does not speak about general revelation at all.

## **Conclusion**

We have investigated a modern claim that the correct results of science should be seen as general revelations from God. This view disagrees not only with Article 2 of the Belgic Confession, it also disagrees with what Scripture says about revelation.

Several elements show this. Scripture limits the content of general revelation to knowledge about God and in one instance, knowledge of God’s will (Rom. 2:14–15). It nowhere indicates that (scientific) discoveries should be considered revelations.

Further, all men have always received this revelation (see especially the texts from Acts 14 and 17). In distinction from special revelation which increased in content as the canon grew, general revelation has in content always been the same. Scripture does not support the view that general revelation increases. Neither does Scripture say that we need an interpreter (the scientist) to get to know this general revelation. General revelation, as Scripture speaks about it, is always accessible to all men, and all do receive it (see especially Acts 14 and Rom. 1).

Scientific results never have the status of revelation. What God reveals in the Grand Canyon is not facts about the world (how it was made and when) but his own power and glory. For that reason, not even correct scientific results should be seen as revelations from God. A qualitative difference exists between revelation and scientific results.

Problems between Scripture and science should not be discussed as if they are problems between special and general revelation. Problems between Scripture and science are problems between divine revelation and human investigation.