

GENERAL REVELATION AND EVANGELICALISM

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Recently David Diehl has addressed the criticism that evangelicals are not coming to terms with science.¹ While acknowledging that many evangelicals have integrated theology and science to a respectable degree, he finds that evangelicals often do resort to *ad hoc* solutions that lack consistency and integrity with respect to both theology and science.

In response, Diehl defends the thesis that an adequate method for relating theology and science can be found, at least implicitly, in the evangelical view of general and special revelation. The weakness evangelicals often have in relating theology and science stems primarily from an underdevelopment in their doctrine of general revelation.

To remedy this perceived deficiency Diehl suggests that evangelicals should have a higher regard for general revelation, acknowledging, among other things, its objective authority and epistemological priority.

Unfortunately, his proposal raises further problems regarding the interaction between science and theology. In this essay I wish to examine some of the implications and difficulties posed by Diehl's development of the doctrine of general revelation.

I. The Proposed Expansion of General Revelation

Diehl starts off by summarizing the evangelical position regarding general revelation. It consists essentially of the following propositions:

- a. General revelation is a revelation of God through his works of creation and providence in a natural, continuous, universal, indirect and non-propositional mode;
- b. It gives a knowledge of God's general character and will;
- c. The knowledge of God by general revelation has been darkened by sin;
- d. In spite of sin, general revelation is clear and objective and is therefore the basis for universal human guilt and a point of contact for the gospel;
- e. Scripture and the grace of the Holy Spirit are needed to enable us to understand properly the message of general revelation.

Then Diehl proceeds to expand this doctrine of general revelation. His first suggestion is that we acknowledge the objective authority and the creational specificity of general revelation. In elaborating upon this Diehl asserts that we must appeal to general revelation not only in establishing man's religious guilt, but also for all truth for which general revelation is the source. Diehl enlarges the scope of general revelation to include knowledge, not only of God, but also of his works. His integration of science and theology is then based upon viewing the theologian and scientist as, respectively, interpreting special and general revelation.

Although theologian and scientist may be quite fallible in their interpretations of Scripture and nature, Diehl affirms that general and special revelation are equally authoritative and infallible for the respective truths that they reveal (p. 448). He places theology and science on the same methodological plane, arguing that we would have equal respect for theological and scientific models that can explain their respective sets of data with equal adequacy according to the common rational criteria (p. 452). Hence, according to Diehl, we must be careful not to let the theologian lord it over the scientist on questions of the specific nature and law-structure of creation (p. 452). He objects to those who

reduce general revelation to a second-rate position so that in theology-science disputes they can go running exclusively to Scripture as though it were the only trustworthy source of truth (p. 448). On the contrary, Diehl goes so far as to claim the epistemological priority of general revelation, since biblical statements are dependent on general revelation for their rational, empirical, and personal meaning (p. 450).

II. *The Nature and Content of General Revelation*

Let us examine first of all Diehl's contention that general revelation gives us knowledge not only of God's general character and will, but also of creation's specific nature and laws.

In the traditional evangelical view general revelation consists of God's *self*-revelation: the invisible character of God is made known through His works of creation and providence (e.g., Rom. 1:20). Thus general revelation is considered to be quite distinct from nature, which is merely one of the means by which general revelation is mediated.²

As Diehl himself notes, his views regarding general revelation are not entirely new. Berkouwer already opposed those who maintained that we have two authoritative revelations existing side by side. He objected, for example, to the notion that the study of *God's revelation in nature* has led to important discoveries concerning the age of the earth.³ To this idea Berkhouwer counters:

However, this view ignores the fact that it will not do simply to equate the knowledge of nature with the knowledge of God's general revelation, for this revelation deals with the knowledge of God *himself*. In our opinion it is wrong to say, as is sometimes done, that the natural sciences "investigate" God's general revelation; and surely it is just as wrong to state that we owe our knowledge of God's revelation in nature primarily to the natural sciences. . . . The revelation of God in his works is a matter of God's self-revelation, and that is not apprehended first of all by scientific investigation, but through faith. . . . In general revelation we are not dealing

with an independent source of knowledge; on the contrary, by faith we understand the act of divine revelation in created reality.⁴

Although Diehl cites Berkouwer's criticism, his response is, in my estimate, inadequate. In support of his expansion of the concept of general revelation, the only Scripture reference Diehl appeals to is Psalm 19:1 ("the firmament proclaims his handiwork"). According to Diehl this demonstrates that nature reveals also the work of God's hands (i.e., of the things God has made). But surely this text merely states the divine authorship of the firmament? Is not the key word here not "handiwork" but "*his* handiwork"? I fail to see this text as evidence for Diehl's proposed expansion of general revelation. Indeed, whenever the Bible speaks about those things revealed through nature, it always refers to some characteristic of the Creator, such as His power, majesty, goodness, etc.⁵ Nowhere does Scripture imply that anything else is revealed through nature.

Scripture does encourage us to study nature, but with the primary goals of either practical application (e.g., Gen. 1:28) or spiritual illustration (e.g., Matt. 6:26). As to the deeper questions of nature such as, for example, origins, the Bible testifies to man's ignorance, to his inability to transcend his observations of the present (cf. Job 38-41).

Perhaps Diehl merely wishes to stress the divine authorship of nature itself. But then why not simply refer to "nature" rather than "general revelation"? The term "revelation" carries the connotation that the knowledge which is revealed goes beyond our mere observations of nature. It implies that through the visible workings of nature certain invisible characteristics of nature are made manifest. We must then ask precisely what the contents of such revealed knowledge are and how it may be acquired.

In the case of God's self-revelation, the step from the visible creation to the invisible God is made largely via the rudimentary knowledge of God that has been naturally implanted in the human mind.⁶ But how is this step to be made regarding the invisible aspects of nature? Are we to

assume that we are born with additional *a priori* knowledge regarding nature?

III. *Observation, Logic, and Theory*

To be sure, few would deny the epistemological priority of our observations of nature. Nor would many object to the principle that our reading of Scripture should be consistent with our experiences of nature. In this sense “general revelation” is surely authoritative: we must appeal to it, or at least our experiences of it, as a check on all our theories in the sciences (cf. p. 449).

Also, to make sense of our reading of Scripture we must rely on the rules of deductive logic. God has made the universe in such a way that these rules apply and God has endowed man, created in His image, with the analytical ability to apply these laws.

Thus I concur with Diehl’s emphasis on the authority of empirical, personal evidence and the laws of deductive logic: both come directly from God.

However, our reasoning ability is not confined to the mere application of deductive logic but includes also the capacity for abstract, speculative thought. Unfortunately, particularly after the Fall, our reasoning is a tool that is manipulated by our inner desires. As such it can easily be misguided: “for out of the heart come evil thoughts” (Matt. 15:19). Clearly, man is responsible for his thoughts and hence also for their product: scientific theories. For scientific theories are but the fallible constructs of man’s creative imagination.

My difficulty with Diehl’s position therefore arises when he extends the contents of “general revelation” beyond observational data and deductive logic. Diehl suggests that in theology-science disputes, Scripture is not the only infallible source of knowledge. But most of these disputes are concerned with *non-observable* questions such as, for example, the matter of an absolute frame of reference or the antiquity of man. If “general revelation” is to provide infallible

answers to such questions, then such infallibility is to be applied to more than just our observations or our deductive reasoning: it must encompass also various aspects of our speculative theorizing.

In science we must always be careful to distinguish between *observations* and *theories* that are devised to explain and extend those observations. Our observations of nature can give us direct information only about the presently observable parts of the universe. To acquire knowledge regarding that part of reality currently beyond our observations we must rely upon theoretical assumptions regarding how the universe behaves. It is generally acknowledged by philosophers of science that theories are derived primarily from the creative imagination of the scientist; that theories cannot be conclusively either proven or disproven; and that both the construction and selection of theories is heavily dependent upon prior philosophical and religious commitments.⁷

For example, two of the prime objections to creationism by the National Academy of Science are (1) creationists' reliance on revelation (i.e., Scripture), and (2) their supernatural account of origins.⁸ Clearly this rejection of creationism is made on the basis of an *a priori* anti-theistic religious stance.

IV. *Criteria for Theory Selection*

Diehl does acknowledge the distinction between observation and theories, as well as the fallibility of theorizing. Nonetheless, he asserts that there are some scientific views that have been unpopular with theologians to which scientists have held tenaciously, not so much because of a metaphysical bias but because such theories have been so superior to any alternative that it would be truly unscientific *and unfair to general revelation* to reject them (p. 453).

Diehl furnishes us with three examples of what he accepts as such well-substantiated theories: the Copernican view of the solar system, the great antiquity of man according to

modern anthropology, and the big-bang view of the age of the universe (p. 453). All three are not only well removed from direct observation but are also of disputable accuracy.

With Copernicus arose the question of absolute rest: was the earth or the sun at absolute rest? After the overthrow of Newtonian physics, with its concept of absolute space, in favor of relativity it was generally recognized that this is not a scientifically answerable question. Since all we can ever *observe* is *relative* motion, the choice of a preferred frame of reference must be made on purely philosophical grounds. Thus many prominent scientists⁹ and philosophers have asserted that, scientifically, the heliocentric and geocentric models of the solar system are equivalent. Here, for example, is the assessment of Bertrand Russell:

But in the modern theory [i.e., relativity] the question between Copernicus and his predecessors is merely one of convenience; all motion is relative. . . . Astronomy is easier if we take the Sun as fixed than if we take the earth, just as accounts are easier in decimal coinage. But to say more for Copernicus is to assume absolute motion, which is a fiction. . . . It is a mere convention to take one body as at rest. All such conventions are equally legitimate, though not all are equally convenient.¹⁰

Regarding the great antiquity of man and the universe, as alleged by secular scientists, it must be noted that there are many qualified scientists (e.g., members of the Creation Research Society) who reject such ages and still adhere to the biblical chronology. In fact, creationists have countered that it is, on the contrary, their model which is superior.¹¹ Whom are we to believe? At issue here, once again, is not the *observational* evidence but its *theoretical* extrapolation and interpretation.¹² The difficulty in judging the matter lies in the subjective nature of both the criteria used to define what is meant by "superior" and the assessment as to which explanation does in fact best fulfill these criteria. The determination of scientific truth is more complex than a simple majority vote.

Let us now consider Diehl's contention that it would be "unfair to general revelation" to reject such "well-substantiated" theories as illustrated by his examples. Diehl's statement implies that "general revelation" includes not only observations but also some scientific theories. But which ones? Again we are plagued by the absence of adequate criteria: how we are to judge which theories are sufficiently "well-substantiated" so that it would be unfair to general revelation to reject them?

In discussing the question of criteria Diehl asserts that conceptual models should be tested in their ability to explain the relevant data according to such criteria as consistency, coherence, congruity, and comprehensiveness (p. 452). But why these criteria and not others? As I have already noted, the establishment of such criteria, as well as the assessment of scientific theories in their light, is a very subjective process.¹³ It is strongly contingent upon our preconceived notions as to how the universe should behave.

Diehl offers us no substantial justification of his criteria, nor does he demonstrate the alleged great superiority of his cited theories in terms of these criteria. Furthermore, in stating that the rejection of such theories is unfair to *general revelation*, Diehl should at least elaborate upon how such scientific conclusions have attained the status of divine truth. The specification, justification, and application of objective standards are essential if Diehl is to demonstrate the validity of his assertion that such scientific theories are indeed so well-substantiated as to compel us to modify our assessment of Scripture.

As we noted above in our remark concerning the National Academy of Science, secular science rules out from the start the possibility of miracles and the physical relevance of Scripture. Applying such presuppositions consistently brings us inevitably to the total demythologization scheme of Rudolf Bultmann. No doubt Diehl does not wish to go all the way with Bultmann. Indeed, Diehl criticizes liberal theology's denial of special revelation (p. 442). But where and how does he draw the line? After all, Bultmann in his denial of miracles was also merely acting upon what he felt

were well-substantiated scientific facts. Diehl gives us no explicit criteria to differentiate his position from that of Bultmann.

The notion that God has revealed truth in two books, Scripture and nature, has been advocated as a means of reconciling science and Scripture from the beginning of the scientific revolution. And from the beginning it has been abused. Galileo, to cite one prominent example, considered the book of nature to be as significant as the book of Scripture, but he assumed that on physical matters the former spoke more clearly than the latter.¹⁴ John Dillenberger describes Galileo's attitude as a threat to Christian understanding:

. . . a tradition was forged in which the increasing clarity discerned through nature was set against the prevailing unclarity of Scripture, with the attendant hope that thereby the latter might be purged of its obscurity. In retrospect, it is clear that this can only be accomplished by a logic which no longer took its cue from the biblical revelation but from a philosophy which determined the content from its own angle of vision. In Galileo, an independent natural basis for religion had begun to determine the biblical understanding of revelation.¹⁵

Historically, the doctrine of the two books has frequently led to a demise in biblical authority. Too often theoretical speculation has been identified with the supposed divine revelation in nature. Without valid criteria that enable us to distinguish between truthful theories and mere speculation, this approach can easily give rise to very subjective re-interpretations of Scripture.

V. Science and Theology

In his discussion of the interaction between science and theology Diehl appears to be willing to allow science to influence theology much more than vice versa. It is true that Diehl does grant the theologian the right to criticize questionable presuppositions in the scientist's theorizing (p. 452). Yet, regrettably, he offers no examples of presuppositions

that he would consider to be questionable. As we have seen, the basic assumptions of secular science, as voiced by the National Academy, are very much questionable from a biblical perspective. Yet Diehl sees fit to accept the conclusions that flow from such dubious premises.

In this connection it is pertinent to keep in mind that general revelation has always been taken as a revelation of God through His works of creation and providence *in a natural, continuous mode*. As such it includes no notion of the miraculous. The knowledge gleaned from a study of God's current regular works is in no position to question the veracity of the biblical record of God's mighty deeds in the past, particularly not to the extent that these involve miracles.

There is a final matter in which Diehl's extension of general revelation is certainly not implied in the traditional stance. This concerns the significance of Scripture. In the traditional view Scripture is needed to enable us to properly understand general revelation. Yet in Diehl's examples mentioned above the opposite appears to be the case. Indeed, Diehl suggests that we be prepared, presumably upon the basis of such "well-substantiated" theories, to rethink what inerrancy means (p. 453). The fact that Diehl wishes to rethink the matter of *inerrancy* rather than *hermeneutics* implies that the issue here is not the proper interpretation of Scripture but its *authority*. Again, we question the validity of Diehl's epistemology: he must come up with more compelling grounds for his elevation of scientific theory to the status of a divine revelation greater even than God's special revelation.

Diehl talks about science and theology each dealing with their *respective* sets of data. Ostensibly Diehl wishes to limit the function of Scripture with regard to science merely to that of checking proper presuppositions. But does not Scripture give us also valid data about past events? Does it not tell us of God's mighty deeds? Should not science also, in its attempt to reconstruct the past, use such infallible data? Should not this biblical data also be used, as well as our observational data, as a check on our scientific theories? If

Scripture is needed to understand properly the message of general revelation regarding God's self-revelation, then one would think the same should surely apply also to other purported knowledge acquired via general revelation. How else can we confirm that our assessment of the contents of general revelation is correct?

VI. *Conclusion*

In conclusion, let me summarize my main difficulties with Diehl's proposal for integrating theology and science:

- a. The extension of the contents of general revelation to include knowledge of nature lacks biblical support;
- b. He does not adequately construct and justify criteria that would enable us to identify those scientific theories that are to be considered "well-substantiated";
- c. He does not demonstrate how such scientific theories can attain the status of divine revelation;
- d. He does not insist that the scientist accept all biblical data as normative;
- e. He permits the authority of special revelation to be challenged by scientific theorizing.

In the beginning of his article Diehl notes (p. 441) that he is concerned to find a basis for the unity of all human knowledge. In so doing he hopes to avoid both a Barthian dichotomization of theology and science, and a liberal denial of special revelation.

It is not clear to me that Diehl has succeeded in this quest. I cannot avoid the conclusion that his approach is a retreat in the face of secular science, the prime deficiency in Diehl's proposal being an underestimation of the speculative nature of scientific theorizing.

Let me stress that I have no difficulty in granting the status of "objective authority," "creational specificity," "epistemological priority," and "Christological progressiveness" to our *observations* of nature. In my judgment,

however, Diehl has not made a convincing case for his proposal to apply such descriptions also to scientific *theories*.

In the absence of any proof of the reliability of scientific theories in terms of their knowledge-extending function, we can only conclude that Scripture, if it speaks on an issue, is the only trustworthy source of truth regarding those aspects of reality beyond our observations.

A Christian epistemology must thus acknowledge the priority of Scripture over human theorizing: our thoughts must be subjected to God's Word rather than vice versa. Hence, rather than permitting (secular) science to unduly modify our reading of Scripture, or our qualification of its inerrancy, we must call for a radical revision of either the content or the function¹⁶ of scientific theorizing so as to avoid conflict with special revelation. A proper integration of science and theology must demand that both scientists and theologians interpret physical reality in a manner consistent with *all* the data, both natural (i.e., observational) and biblical.

ENDNOTES

1. David W. Diehl, "Evangelicalism and General Revelation: An Unfinished Agenda," *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30 (1987) 441.
2. See, for example, Bruce A. Demarest, *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 14.
3. G.C. Berkouwer, *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955) 288.
4. G.C. Berkouwer, *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955) 288-289.
5. See, for example, Demarest (*General Revelation*, 243) for a complete list.
6. Cf. Demarest, *General Revelation*, 230.

7. See, for example, Imre Lakatos *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).
8. *Science and Creationism: A View from the National Academy of Science* (Washington: National Academy Press, 1984).
9. See, for example, Fred Hoyle, *Nicolaus Copernicus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) 88.
10. Bertrand Russell, *ABC of Relativity* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1958) 13.
11. See, for example, Henry M. Morris, *The Scientific Case for Creation* (San Diego: CLP Publishers, 1977) 41.
12. For a further discussion on this issue see, for example, Frederic R. Howe, "The Age of the Earth: An Appraisal of Some Current Evangelical Positions," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 142:23-37 and 114-129.
13. For a recent account of some of the difficulties faced by those advocating that scientific change is "rational" (i.e., that there exist objectively valid criteria for considering newer theories to be "better"), see Gerald Doppelt, "The Philosophical Requirements for an Adequate Conception of Scientific Rationality," *Philosophy of Science* 55 (1988) 104-133.
14. See, for example, Galileo, "Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina," in *Discoveries and Opinions of Galileo*, translated by Stillman Drake (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1957).
15. John Dillenberger, *Protestant Thought and Natural Science* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960) 90.
16. One could, for example, adopt an instrumentalist approach to scientific theories. For a discussion of this possibility, see John Byl, "Instrumentalism: A Third Option," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 37 (1985) 11-18.