

**Biblical Faith and Other Faiths:  
Examination of Historical Views of Universal Revelation, General Revelation and  
Prevenient Grace Operative in the Context of Other Religions**

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### **Introduction**

The topic I have been assigned is the role of universal revelation, sometimes called general revelation or prevenient grace, in the context of other religions. I want to provide a broad historical overview of how this issue has been dealt with over the history of the church, especially as it is applied to non-Christian religions. I will conclude with a few pointers to further research which explores in depth how these themes have been operative in the context of other religions.

Christians committed to historic orthodoxy argue that salvation is mediated through Jesus Christ. Thus, to have a robust soteriology one must affirm the uniqueness of Christ; particularly, the centrality of his death and resurrection and traditionally, most historic Christians would insist on the necessity of a personal response. However, what is far less clear among those espousing historic orthodoxy is whether affirming the centrality of Christ should foster a more negative, confrontational, assessment of other religions, or if it could be the basis for a more generous view which demonstrates greater continuity. One's attitude towards other religions touches deeply on a range of theological considerations, including our understanding of revelation, how we understand the Fall, our soteriology, and our epistemology. Even if all non-Christian religions ultimately fall short and cannot provide salvation because they do not accept the centrality of Christ's work, or sufficiently foster human repentance and faith, this still does not settle the question of whether Christian truth is completely detached from truths which may be found through general revelation or whether other religions can serve as a stepping stone or a tutor to Christ just as, for example, the Old Testament Law functioned.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to overturn the widely held notion that this is a modern debate growing out of what is commonly called the "scandal of particularity" or that this debate is merely another sign of the malaise emerging from the breakup of Christendom, an increasingly pluralistic world, and the rise of Post-modernity. While we do live in an age where exclusivist views of soteriology are widely scoffed at by the wider culture, the deeper issues surrounding the role of general revelation is a perennial one in the life of the church. This paper will explore the role of general revelation in relation to other religions in the patristic period, the Reformation and later Wesleyan revivals, and finally, the rise of 19<sup>th</sup> century fulfillment theology.

### **Patristic Period**

The patristic period is that 350-year period which runs from close of the Apostolic Age around 100 A.D. to the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. It is this period which give us such remarkable figures as Tatian, Clement, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Athanasius, the Gregorians – Nazianzus and Nyssa, Jerome and Augustine, to name a few.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this, see my, "Can Hindu Scriptures Serve as a 'Tutor' to Christ?" as found in D. A. Carson, ed., *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2016): 1057-1088.

For our purposes, we will focus on the theology of Justin Martyr in his Apologies and his creative use of the *logos* concept, and, in particular, his use of the phrase, “*logos spermatikos*.” There are three works which form the corpus of what remains of Justin’s writings: His First and Second Apologies, addressed to Emperor Antoninus Pius and his more extensive and well-known *Dialogue with Trypho*, a very important precedent for inter-religious dialogue.<sup>2</sup> It is a fictional conversation between Justin and a Jew named Trypho and was probably based on actual dialogues Justin had with Jewish leaders.<sup>3</sup>

Justin’s use of the concept of *logos spermatikos* or ‘seed of the word’ in his apologetic writings is of particular interest to us in this conference. The general concept of *logos* was well known in the ancient world, and it is used in a wide range of ways in the writings of Platonists, Stoics, Hellenistic Jews and, of course, in the Prologue to John’s Gospel. There is a fierce debate among scholars, which is beyond the scope of this paper, about which of these groups had the biggest influence on Justin, but most agree that finally Justin developed the concept in a way which was singularly his own. The specific expression ‘*logos spermatikos*’ also appears in writings from several strands of thought in the ancient world. For the Middle Platonists, the concept of *logos spermatikos* was an ethical principle which sowed the foundational ‘seeds’ from which human ethics arises. In contrast to the ethical emphasis among Platonists, the Stoics interpreted *logos spermatikos* as reason. They frequently use the expression in the plural, ‘*logoi spermatikoi*’ (seeds of reason), referring to a rational capacity that pervades the entire universe and which allows humans to reason and, ultimately to participate in divinity. The Hellenistic Jew Philo also uses the expression in his disputes with the Stoics. He seems to use the expression vaguely to refer to a ‘governing faculty’ or ‘generative principle’ which is present in all of nature. The exact expression *logos spermatikos* never appears in the New Testament, although Jesus’ parable of the Sower depicts the Word (*logos*) being sown broadly into the world leading many to argue that this theological usage, rather than the more philosophical orientation of the Stoics and Platonists, is the primary reference for Justin. Indeed, Justin even uses the expression ‘sowing of the *logos*’ in his Second Apology.<sup>4</sup>

The most explicit connection between the general philosophical usage and the more Biblical and theological imagery appears in the Prologue to John’s gospel. John, addressing the gospel to a Greek audience, uses the familiar philosophical term *logos* as his starting point, but connects it with the divine, spoken word which in the book of Genesis brings the whole created order into being. Genesis begins, “In the beginning, God” (Gen. 1:1). John’s Gospel begins, “In the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1). Genesis goes on to picture God bringing forth the entire creation through his word (*logos*)<sup>5</sup>. John’s Prologue continues to resonate with this theme as he describes Christ’s presence at the creation: “Through Him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (John 1:3). John then declares that God has spoken another Word into the world. Not the original word of creation, but the Word of redemption, Jesus Christ, the Word (*logos*) made flesh: “and the Word (*logos*) became flesh and lived for a

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<sup>2</sup> It is beyond the scope of this case study to examine a wide range of other works such as the *Discourse to the Greeks* and *The Admonition to the Greeks* which have been attributed to Justin. However, the vast majority of Justin scholars reject that these additional works are genuine writings of Justin.

<sup>3</sup> L. W. Barnard argues that the *Dialogue with Trypho* is based on an actual dialogue which took place in 132 A.D. which was later expanded and elaborated for apologetic purposes. See, L. W. Barnard, *Justin Martyr* (Cambridge University Press, 1967) 24.

<sup>4</sup> Second Apology 13.

<sup>5</sup> The word *logos* is the word used in the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament. The Septuagint is probably the only version of the Old Testament read by Justin.

while among us...full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). With this background, we now turn to Justin’s use of *logos spermatikos*.

While Justin does not use the full expression *logos spermatikos* in his *First Apology*, he makes several references to *logos* which are important for this study. In this first apologetic work, Justin seeks to expose the errors in the false worship associated with the Greek gods and goddesses. He declares that these Mt. Olympian deities are nothing more than demons which form the basis of all such pagan religions. He goes on to praise Socrates who “endeavored by true *logos* and examination, to bring these things to light, and deliver men from the demons.”<sup>6</sup> He then makes a remarkable parallel between the things condemned by Socrates (470-399 B.C.E.), who lived over four hundred years before Christ, and the current practices of the “Barbarians” of his own time who, he argues, were “condemned by Reason, or the Word, the *Logos* Himself who took shape, and became man, and was called Jesus Christ.”<sup>7</sup> Justin is clearly identifying the *logos* which became flesh in Jesus Christ with the *logos* by which Socrates perceived and denounced the perverse worship of the gods and goddesses in the Greek pantheon. In other passages, Justin identifies the *logos spermatikos* as operating in the Hebrew Prophets of the Old Testament who not only predicted the coming of Christ, but through their writings also influenced the formulation of philosophy throughout the world. Justin specifically cites insights from Plato which he believed were drawn directly from Moses.<sup>8</sup>

Justin also utilizes the *logos* principle as a way to demonstrate to the emperor the antiquity of the Christian faith which, through *logos*, was able to actually precede the incarnation of Christ. He writes,

We have been taught that Christ is the first-born of God, and we have declared above that He is the *logos* of whom every race of men were partakers; and those who lived reasonably (by *logos*) are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists; as among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus, and men like them; ...and among the barbarians, Abraham, and Ananias, and Azarias, and Misael, and Elias and many others whose actions and names we now decline to recount.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, Abraham, Moses and even Socrates are considered by Justin to be Christians before Christ. This is vital to Justin’s theology because the Christian faith was rejected in large part because it seemed to be such a recent and novel development. Viewed from Justin’s perspective, Christianity was actually ancient because of the universal access to the *logos* of God throughout history. This does not, however, diminish the significance of the emergence of Christianity in history because, as we shall see, the *logos* of God was, for Justin, only completely and fully manifested in the historic incarnation. All previous manifestations were only shadows

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<sup>6</sup> First Apology, 5 (emphasis mine). All primary source quotations from Justin Martyr are taken from Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1999) 164.

<sup>7</sup> First Apology, 5; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, 164.

<sup>8</sup> First Apology, 32, 44; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, 173, 177. Justin says that “whatever both philosophers and poets have said concerning immortality of the soul, or punishments after death, or contemplation of things heavenly, or doctrines of the like kind, they have received such suggestions from the prophets as have enabled them to understand and interpret these things.”

<sup>9</sup> First Apology, 46; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, 178.

of what was to come. Justin refers to these pre-Christians manifestations of *logos* as ‘fragments’ or ‘seeds’ (*spermatikos*) of the *logos*.

It is in his Second Apology that Justin introduces the concept of *logos spermatikos*. In chapter eight Justin attributes the insights of Platonist and Stoic philosophers as well as poets like Heraclitus to the “seed of the Word” (*sperma tou logou*) which was “implanted” within them and is present “in every race of men.”<sup>10</sup> What makes Christians distinct from the other non-Christians peoples of the world is that they do not have merely the “seed” of the *logos*, but they have “the knowledge and contemplation of the *whole logos*, which is Christ.”<sup>11</sup> According to Justin, this explains the particular severity of Christian persecution when compared with the relatively scant persecution of the philosophers. It is because the latter “lived according to only part of the *logos spermatikos*” whereas Christians live by the knowledge of the “*whole logos*, which is Christ.”<sup>12</sup> This distinction between the seed of the Word and the whole Word is also used to explain the various contradictions within philosophy. Whenever they contradicted themselves it is because “they did not know the whole of the Word (*logos*).” If they spoke accurately, it was because they had found and properly contemplated some part of the Word.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Justin maintains a firm distinction between the seed and the whole, the former being a mere imitation and shadow of the whole. Nevertheless, for Justin Martyr, Greek philosophy became the tool of Christ to turn people away from the worship of false gods and to prepare them to receive the gospel of Jesus Christ who alone is the fullness of *logos*.

While we are focused on the patristics, we should note, at least in passing, the writings of Clement who as far as we know is the first to advocate the idea which is expressed today as “all truth is God’s truth wherever it may be found.” In contrast to Tertullian’s famous declaration, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” which is the starkest form of the Patristic “radical discontinuity” view. Tertullian shows disdain for the philosophers of Athens and, instead, extols the glorious of divine revelation. Clement, in contrast, argues that through the radical in-breaking of the gospel in Jesus Christ the whole world has become a Jerusalem and even Athens must ultimately point to the revelation of Jesus Christ.

So, in summary, by the second century we have a deep divide in the church fathers about their attitudes towards general revelation and its role in a robust Christian doctrine of soteriology. Tertullian and Tatian take the “radical discontinuity” view and Justin Martyr and Clement take the “positive continuity” view. Interestingly, Tatian and Tertullian reject the “continuity” view for different reasons. Tatian is a great critic of Plato and warns the church of the dangers of Platonizing the gospel message and taking it too far from its Jewish roots and heritage. Tatian is an ardent defender of the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, an ardent defender of the historicity of the incarnation. His basis point is that Jewish culture and Jewish heritage is rooted in historical events (i.e. Red Sea, Ten Commandments, Temple building, Exile, Return, Rebuilding etc..) These are historical events. Graeco-Roman world, on the other hand is based on mythology with no anchorage in historical events - morality, what little exists, is taught through allegory, not through historical acts of revelation. If the church gets Hellenized the Resurrection will be separated from real history and end up being just a metaphor for radical transformation. This is, of course, what happened in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the writings of Rudolph Bultmann. Tertullian, does not argue against the continuity view because of

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<sup>10</sup> Second Apology, 8; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, 191.

<sup>11</sup> Second Apology, 8; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, 191.

<sup>12</sup> Second Apology, 8; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, 191.

<sup>13</sup> Second Apology, 10; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, 191.

the importance of history like Tatian did. Rather, Tertullian argues on cultural grounds; stating that cultures are nothing more than a collection of ever changing customs, whereas the gospel is a fixed and a divine reality which cannot be united to cultural forms.

### 16<sup>th</sup> Century Reformation to 18<sup>th</sup> Century Wesleyan movement

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century the writings of John Calvin on General Revelation, particularly his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and his commentary on Romans had a profound influence on the development of Reformed theology. Calvin accepts the distinction between general (I:3-5) and special and general (I:6-12).<sup>14</sup> Calvin, following Augustine, affirms that all people have a “sense of the divine” (*sensus deitatis*) and Calvin even affirms what he calls the universal “seed of religion,” the “*semen religionis*.” However, despite the intriguing language rather than go in the direction of Justin Martyr, Calvin argues that due to the noetic effects of sin, our epistemology is also totally depraved, not just our hearts. Therefore, depravity prohibits us from benefiting from “knowing” or “learning” anything from this general light and, in fact, we suppress it in every way, making us without excuse. Calvin is, therefore, a classic presuppositionalist, meaning that we only gain access to the insights of general revelation once we have been redeemed and the veil of depravity is lifted. Thus, other religions have only light to condemn them and make them accountable, but not enough light to lead them to Jesus Christ.

Wesley, in contrast, was struck by the paradox or tension between the doctrine of total depravity whereby the Apostle Paul clearly states that we are “dead in our trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1; Col. 2:13) and yet we cannot but be overcome by an avalanche of verbs which calls us to respond. We are called “to repent,” “to believe,” “to turn,” “to come,” and so forth, none of which can be done by someone who was dead. We could spend the entire paper just on Wesley’s view on this, but, suffice it to say, Wesley developed a particular view of general revelation, all drawn from writings in the early church, which have the net result of a far more robust doctrine of general revelation than in Reformed Theology. For the sake of this survey, we will call this the doctrine of prevenient grace, though this is only one aspect of Wesley’s doctrine of general revelation. For Wesley, *prevenient grace*, meaning grace that precedes justification. Wesley argues that such texts as “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44), and “the true light which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world” (John 1:9) point to some kind of universal grace which lifts us sufficiently out of our total depravity such that we can exercise our will.

Wesley wrote, “Although I have not an absolute power over my mind, because of the corruption of my own nature; yet through the grace of God assisting me, I have a power to choose and do good, as well as evil.” He goes on, “I only assert, that there is a measure of free-will *supernaturally restored to every man*, together with that supernatural light which “lightens every man that cometh into the world.”<sup>15</sup> Contrary to popular caricatures, Wesleyans technically do not believe in free will (which is Pelagian) but freed will. But, the importance of this for world religions is profound since Wesleyans teach that prevenient grace is universal, and is not tied to the regeneration of particular people. Second, Wesleyans believe that general revelation is not merely the external witness of nature, but the internal witness of human conscience. Wesley argued that we do not have merely two states of humanity: carnal man and redeemed man. We actually have three states: *Natural man*, i.e. man under depravity and devoid of the

<sup>14</sup> John Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1. John T. McNeill, John Baillie, and Henry P. Van Dusen, eds., (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

<sup>15</sup> *The Works of John Wesley*, Letters I, 328, Works, Vol X, 230.

grace of God. The *Legal man* which is a person whose conscience has quickened them and made them aware of their sins (Qur'an or the Upanishads could serve to prick our consciences), and the *Evangelical man* who has been redeemed and whose heart has been re-oriented away from the gravity of sin and towards the gravity of holy love by the power of the Holy Spirit. This has huge implications for epistemology in relation to other religions. Unlike Reformed theologians, Wesleyans affirm molonism, or middle knowledge, meaning that God knows all possible human choices without predetermining what those choices might be. These are truths which result from choices we make, rather than prior choices which God has determined.

### 19<sup>th</sup> Century and Fulfillment Theology

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was actually quite common for evangelicals to adhere to the essentials of a Christo-centric soteriology and, at the same, affirm what was then known as fulfillment theology. Fulfillment theology arose out of the 19<sup>th</sup> century fascination with applying Darwinian ideas of evolution to science, sociology, religion and ethics.<sup>16</sup> In the writings of Max Müller (1823-1900), the concept of fulfillment robbed Christianity of all claims to revelation, and the origins of religion were viewed as an expression of universal human experience.<sup>17</sup> All religions were arranged in stages from the lower religions to the higher, monotheistic religions culminating in Christianity. However, there were scholars as well as missionaries who adopted the fulfillment concept within an evangelical framework. The most well-known scholar to do this was Monier Monier-Williams (1819-1901) at Oxford. Monier-Williams argued for the supremacy of historical Christianity as divinely revealed. He was convinced that, in time, all the other religions of the world would someday crumble as they came into contact with the truth of the Christian gospel. However, he developed a far more positive attitude towards world religions arguing that Christianity would not be victorious because it *refuted* all religions, but because it *fulfilled* them. He argued that all religions reveal universal, God-given instincts, desires and aspirations which are met in the Christian gospel. The missionary community, particularly in India where they were meeting such stiff resistance from Hinduism, latched on to fulfillment ideas and began to explore them with earnest in the early years of the twentieth century. The most notable and articulate expression of fulfillment thought came from missionaries working in India such as T. E. Slater (1840-1912) in his work, *The Higher Hinduism in Relation to Christianity* and J. N. Farquhar's (1861- 1929) landmark book, *The Crown of Hinduism* published in 1913. Farquhar and Slater were the two of the earliest scholars to produce major works which ambitiously set out to compare the doctrines of Hinduism with doctrines in Christianity, demonstrating a fulfillment theme.<sup>18</sup> Farquhar sought to establish a non-confrontational bridge for the Hindu to cross over to Christianity because, he argued, all of the notable features and aspirations within Hinduism find their highest expression and ultimate fulfillment in Christianity. He based the fulfillment theme on Christ's claim in Matthew 5:17 that He had not come to abolish or destroy, but to fulfill.

The notion of fulfillment theology would be challenged in 20<sup>th</sup> century due to the two world wars which completely changed the optimistic climate of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Hendrick

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<sup>16</sup> Charles Darwin (1809-1882) published his landmark *On the Origin of Species by means of Natural Selection* in 1859. Later, Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) demonstrated how evolution should be applied to all areas of human existence.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Max Müller, *Origin and Growth of Religion* (Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1964).

<sup>18</sup> See, J. N. Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism* (Oxford University Press, 1913). This classic work was reprinted in 1971 by Oriental Books Reprint Corporation in New Delhi.

Kraemer in his *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, the thesis of which was espoused at the influential 1910 Edinburgh World Missionary Conference, but later published in 1938 was a major re-assertion of the “radical discontinuity” view. This book became a rallying cry for evangelicals around the world and tended, even though Kraemer later said it was not his intention, to dull the memory of the church regarding earlier, more positive assessments of other religions.

Regardless of intentions, the fulfillment motif among evangelicals was largely snuffed out with the publication of Kraemer’s work, which as noted, espouses a rigid, uncompromising stance toward world religions. On the liberal side, the ongoing rise of rationalistic presuppositions further encouraged evangelicals to close ranks. This, coupled with the “radical discontinuity” in the writings of the German theologian Karl Barth further helped to insulate evangelicals from seriously considering fulfillment ideas. I will add, in passing, that the later emergence of inclusivism in Vatican II, in the writings of Karl Rahner and, even among evangelicals such as Clark Pinnock, has made the embrace of robust views of general revelation even more challenging in our day.

## Conclusion

While acknowledging that there is no independent salvation in Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam, and even that general revelation is incapable of saving anyone, a number of Christians committed to historic orthodoxy nevertheless believe that God provides truths about himself and humanity through general revelation which is accessible to all, and that some of these truths have been incorporated into the beliefs of other religions, providing points of continuity whenever there is a consistency with Biblical revelation. This view has been advocated, for example, by Gerald McDermott from Beeson Divinity School (since 2015) in *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions?* And his remarkable work on Jonathan Edwards’s eschatology and the marginal notes of Jonathan Edwards in writings like his *Humble Attempt* call to prayer is extraordinary. Harold Netland from Trinity Evangelical in his *Encountering Religious Pluralism* and in my own writings such as *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable* and *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*.<sup>19</sup> It is advocated in somewhat bolder terms in the writings of Amos Yong, who has served at Fuller since 2014. However, Yong does not primarily root his view in terms of general revelation which is the theme of this address. Rather, Yong, as a Pentecostal scholar, builds his view off of his pneumatology. Nevertheless, this theme comes through almost all of his writings, but particularly in, *Discerning the Spirits* (2000) and his *Beyond the Impasse* (2003) and *The Spirit Poured out on All Flesh* (2005). This scholarship has not been isolated from the conversations related to C-5 and “insider movements.” Therefore, it is a fruitful avenue for further discussion.

In other writings, I have explored the application of a more robust view of general revelation to a wide range of case studies in other religions. In Islam, I have written extensively on how this might influence our discussion of insider movements, as well as whether the “God of Muhammad is the Father of Jesus Christ.” In Hinduism, I have explored the role of how Christians should interact with the “sacred texts” of other religions. While this study focused exclusively on Hinduism, it has wide application to how we interact with the sacred text of any religion. That case study concludes with specific guidelines for how this might effectively be done. For Buddhism, I have exposed the false, but widely held view, that the difference between

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<sup>19</sup> Gerald R. McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000). Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

Christianity and other religions is that all other religions are based on “works righteousness” and Christianity is based on grace. Actually, there are numerous strands of “salvation by grace through faith” teachings in non-Christian religions. However, nowhere is the doctrine so clearly stated than in the popular *Jodo Shin Shu* (True Pure Land) stream of Mahayana Buddhism, which first emerged in Japan in the 13<sup>th</sup> century through the Buddhist reformer, Shinran Shonin (1173-1262). Even Karl Barth, in his *Church Dogmatics*, once described the *Jodo Shin Shu* teaching of Shinran as “the most adequate and comprehensive and illuminating heathen parallel to Christianity.”<sup>20</sup> I explore many ways that True Pure Land teaching points to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In conclusion, the role of general revelation remains an under developed theme in Christian theology which has, apparently, been unable to mature until the gospel had more sustained interaction with the texts and the followers of other religions. That day has now come and the rich, nuanced reflections which are now emerging will, I am sure, provide a lasting contribution to Christian theology for centuries to come.

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<sup>20</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I. 2 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark. 1956), 340. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, eds.

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Reading in preparation for lecture: A Trinitarian “New Creation” Theology of Culture as found in Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*,” (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010): 159-190. While this chapter does not specifically address the content of this paper, it is the foundational material necessary to approach this question theologically, as our attitude towards general revelation is largely built upon our attitude towards human culture and the very nature of contextualization or cultural translatability.