

The Utilization of Nature in Christian Outdoor Ministry,

Scope, Limitations and Historical Considerations.

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Preface

I was in Patagonia leading a backpacking trip when we came upon the most unusual tree. The core was hollow and it was completely twisted like a pretzel. It seemed that strips of bark were holding the tree up as it made a gradual 90 degree bend. About 40 feet up you could see a few signs of life, green leaves and a few limbs that looked alive. I couldn't believe it was still upright, much less hanging on to life. I gathered the students around and asked them to make some observations and asked them also to make parallels to the Christian life. It was then that I realized that I had no idea what I was doing. While the observations and parallels were mostly in line with orthodox Christianity, I knew I was on thin ice. Whatever was in the students minds, their own preconceptions, were being projected on the tree. Was it a picture of the Christian's struggle, analogous to fallen man, the inside of a carnal Christian or something entirely other? That was when I first began to consider in what ways we should utilize nature and what contemporary and historical issues we should be aware of as we utilize natural phenomenon. How can we use nature in interacting with non-Christians to point them to Christ rather than giving weight and support to their own pantheistic or syncretistic views? About 3 months later I was reading C. S. Lewis' book, *The Four Loves*, and stumbled on some very intriguing comments along this line. He was much more pessimistic about the value of Natural Revelation than I would have guessed. This started me on a quest for a deeper understanding and made me desire to equip our ministry staff to deal more biblically and accurately with this issue.

There is a treasure trove of writing and historical background that we need to be aware of if we are to be effective Christian outdoor guides. Ashley Denton says, "More than 50 percent of Jesus' teaching occurred in the outdoors, whereas 16 percent occurred indoors. The particular indoor or outdoor setting of the remaining 33 percent of Jesus' teaching is unknown but, from the context, the majority of these passages may also have occurred in the outdoors."¹ Denton's observation highlights the validity of teaching God's Word and will in the context of the outdoors. The natural witness to God's greatness is something we need to utilize and utilize well.

This paper is mostly a compilation of quotes from some important sources, organized in a way that I hope is helpful. I have included some of my own commentary where it is necessary for coherency and drawn some conclusions at the end.

¹ Ashley Denton, *Christian Outdoor Leadership, Theology, Theory, and Practice*, (Fort Collins: Smooth Stone Publishing, 2011) 21.

“The Word of God is contained in two books — the book of nature and the book of Scripture.” (Ligonier)

Definitions and Introductions

The terms Natural Theology, General Revelation, Special Revelation, Specific Revelation and Natural Revelation can be confusing; they are frequently misapplied, and their use by the Church has undergone historical shifts. We need to know what an author meant when he wrote and have consistency in our usage.

“Historically theologians have distinguished between different kinds of revelation. Many medieval theologians described the difference using the terms **natural** and **supernatural** revelation. The distinction had nothing to do with the source or origin of the revelation. Theologians who made this distinction believed that all revelation was supernatural in origin because God was its source. Instead, this distinction had to do with the mode of revelation. Natural revelation was communicated by God through so-called “natural” phenomena [His created works], while supernatural revelation was communicated by God through special divine intervention [dreams, visions, etc.]”²

“A more common distinction among Reformed theologians is the distinction between **general revelation and special revelation.**”³

General:

“This distinction between general and special revelation focuses more on the extent and purpose of revelation. General revelation is referred to as “general” revelation because it has a general content and is revealed to a general audience. Through general revelation to all men, God communicates His existence, His power, and His glory, such that men are left without excuse.”⁴

Special:

“General revelation, whether immediate or mediate, is directed to all men. It is, however, “not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of His will, which is necessary unto salvation” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, I.1). General revelation does not reveal Jesus Christ or His work of

² “General and Special Revelation — A Reformed Approach to Science and Scripture” Keith Mathison for Ligonier Ministries, last modified May 18, 2012, <http://www.ligonier.org/blog/general-and-special-revelation-reformed-approach-science-and-scripture/>.

³ Mathison

⁴ Mathison

redemption for sinners. Thus there is a need for what is called “special revelation.”⁵

Special revelation is the revelation of the way of salvation.

“One of the most important biblical texts describing God’s special revelation is found in Hebrews 1:1–2, which reads: ‘Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.’”⁶

In their 1987 book *Integrative Theology, Knowing the Ultimate Reality, the Living God*, Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest give this definition of General Revelation; “General Revelation refers to the disclosure of God in nature, in providential history, and in the moral law within the heart, whereby all persons at all times and places gain a rudimentary understanding of the Creator and his moral demands.”⁷

The broader study of General Revelation is Natural Theology. Webster defines it as: “theology deriving its knowledge of God from the study of nature independent of special revelation.”⁸ Thomas Aquinas is the best known classical proponent of Natural Theology, and many conservative evangelicals, including J.P. Morland, continue to follow Aquinas’s line of reasoning as discussed later.

The facts of Nature reveal God

Those that deny that nature reveals God may argue that:

“Religious truths do not admit of proof. They belong to the same category with aesthetic and moral truths. They are the objects of intuition. To be perceived at all, they must be perceived in their own light. You cannot prove a thing to be beautiful or good to the man who does not perceive its beauty or excellence. Hence, it is further urged, that proof of religious truth is unnecessary. The good do not need proof; the evil cannot appreciate it. All that can be done is to affirm the truth, and let it awaken, if possible, the dormant power of perception.”⁹

Yet we, as Christians, can say, “the arguments in support to the truths of natural religion are not drawn exclusively from the external works of God. Those which are the most obvious

⁵ Mathison

⁶ Mathison

⁷ Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology, Knowing the Ultimate Reality, the Living God*, (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1987) 61.

⁸ “Natural Theology,” Merriam-Webster Online, 2013, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/natural%20theology>.

⁹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology Volume 1*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans’ Publishing, 1975) 22.

and most effective are derived from the constitution of our own nature. Man was made in the image of God, and he reveals his parentage as unmistakably as any class of inferior animals reveal the source from which they sprung. If a horse is born of a horse, the immortal spirit of a man, man's instinct with its moral and religious convictions and aspirations, must be the offspring of the Father of Spirits."¹⁰

The fact that natural revelation is not conclusive for all peoples should not discourage or surprise us. "An argument which is conclusive for one mind may be powerless over other minds. That the material universe began to be; that it has not the cause of its existence within itself, and therefore must have had an extramundane cause; and that the infinitely numerous manifestations of design which it exhibits show that the cause must be intelligent, are arguments for the being of God, which have satisfied the minds of the great body of intelligent men in all ages of the world. They should not, therefore, be dismissed as unsatisfactory, because all men do not feel their force. Besides, as just remarked, these arguments are only confirmatory of others more direct and powerful derived from our moral and religious nature."¹¹

"The Scriptures clearly recognize the fact that the works of God reveal his being and attributes. This they do not only do by frequent referent to the works of nature as manifestations of the perfections of God, but by direct assertions," as in Psalm 19:1-4."¹²

"It cannot, therefore, be reasonably doubted that not only the being of God, but also his eternal power and Godhead, are so revealed in his works, as to lay a stable foundation for natural theology."¹³

As powerful a witness as is found in God's creation, it is clear that Natural Theology is insufficient to provide us with the full truth about God. "The question as to the sufficiency of natural theology, or of the truths of reason is to be answered on the authority of the scriptures. No man can tell *a priori* what is necessary to salvation. Indeed, it is only by supernatural revelation that we know that any sinner can be saved. It is from the same source alone, we can know what are the conditions of salvation, or who are to be it[s] subjects."¹⁴

Alister McGrath's book *The Open Secret* is an important work on Natural Theology and provides this insight:

"A Christian natural theology is thus about seeing nature in a specific manner, which enables the truth, beauty and goodness of God to be discerned, and which acknowledges nature as a legitimate, authorized and limited pointer to the divine. Natural Theology addresses fundamental questions about divine disclosure and

¹⁰ Hodge, 22.

¹¹ Hodge, 23.

¹² Hodge, 24.

¹³ Hodge, 25.

¹⁴ Hodge, 25-26.

human cognition and perception. In what way can human beings, reflecting on nature by means of natural processes, discern the transcendent?"¹⁵

Historical Thinking about the scope of General Revelation and Natural Theology

One of the most powerful proponents of examining man's relationship with God in terms of general and special revelation was Thomas Aquinas. "Thomas Aquinas, rejecting the Platonic scheme of innate ideas, favored the Aristotelian method of rational induction from temporal effects. Aquinas created a metaphysical model consisting of **two realms** (nature and grace), **two kinds of knowledge** (natural and revealed), and **two independent methods of knowing** (reason and faith)."¹⁶ "With regard to the realm of nature, Aquinas argued that the empirical data of the sensible world interpreted by the principle of cause and effect lead to the proof of God's existence and the infinity of his perfections. Via rational induction from created effects, he sought to prove both that God exists (the famous Five Ways) and that God is infinite, eternal, incorporeal, immutable, intelligent, and so on."¹⁷

While this revelation was significant, it is insufficient to save. "Aquinas concludes; 'We have a more perfect knowledge of God by grace than by natural reason.'"¹⁸

Two historical traditions find general revelation far less adequate than Aquinas. Karl Barth and other Neoorthodox theologians, "deny the existence of any revelation outside of God's radical address through the Word."¹⁹

Dutch Reformed theologians also tend to be skeptical of general revelation. Abraham Kuyper argues that "sin has bolted shut the door to general knowledge of God; only those who approach nature and history with regenerate eyes and minds find the cosmos to be a legible book."²⁰

Yet this was not the case of many fathers and reformers of the church. They believed that the rational mind intuits God as "a first principle and therefore draws further conclusions about God's character and moral requirements by contemplating the magnitude and precision of the universe. This non-salvific knowledge of God

¹⁵ Alister E. McGrath, *The Open Secret: a new vision for natural theology*, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008) 4.

¹⁶ Lewis and Demarest, 62.

¹⁷ Lewis and Demarest, 62.

¹⁸ Lewis and Demarest, 62.

¹⁹ Lewis and Demarest, 62.

²⁰ Lewis and Demarest, 65.

establishes human responsibility and provides the basis for God's redemptive revelation in Christ and in the Scriptures."²¹

"Clement argued 'that there always was a natural manifestation of the one Almighty God among all right thinking men; Tertullian, who polemicized against philosophical speculation argued that knowledge of God is innate in the soul and subsequently enlarged by rational inspection of created things. Many church fathers.... insisted that although human beings cannot behold God's essence, they can observe the clear imprint of Deity from the design of the universe and from the works of providence."²²

"Luther likewise propounded a two-fold scheme of revelation and knowledge under the rubric 'general knowledge of God; (which he also called 'legal' and 'left-handed' knowledge) and 'particular knowledge of God' (or 'evangelical' and 'right-handed' knowledge). On the basis of immediate intuition of the divine Being and reflection on the data of nature, 'all men have the general knowledge, namely that God is, that He has created heaven and earth, that He is just, that He punishes the wicked, etc.' This universal general knowledge that establishes a person's accountability to God is incomplete, and so it cannot save."²³

"Of the revelation of God in nature Calvin asserts, 'Even wicked men are forced by the mere view of the earth and sky, to rise to the Creator.' Calvin therefore, believed that all persons know God as Creator- both from within themselves and from the World without."²⁴

Pantheism, Francis Schaeffer and Emerson

James Herrick, in his book *The Making of the New Spirituality: the eclipse of the western religious tradition*, helps us think in a current and historical way about what he calls the "New Religious Syntheses," the melding of Eastern religious ideas, especially Pantheism, into the American consciousness. "Pantheism has become an essential component in the New Religious Synthesis. God is no longer outside of creation, no longer either 'wholly other' or personal. Rather the new god is in all things as a divine energy, animating force or cosmic consciousness."²⁵

Francis Schaeffer

A work frequently cited by both Christians and Secularists is Francis Schaeffer's, *Pollution and the Death of Man: the Christian view of Ecology*.

²¹ Lewis and Demarest, 66.

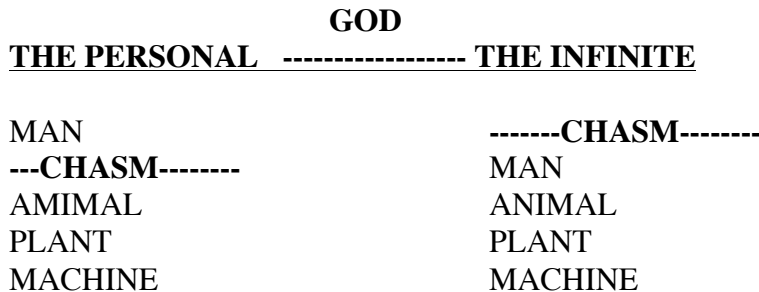
²² Lewis and Demarest, 66.

²³ Lewis and Demarest, 66.

²⁴ Lewis and Demarest, 67.

²⁵ James A. Herrick, *The Making of the New Spirituality: the eclipse of the western religious tradition*, (Downers' Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2003) 153.

Schaeffer talks about how eastern gods are infinite but impersonal while Greek gods are personal but finite. “So the Judaistic-Christian God is unique. He is Infinite, and He is Personal at the same time. On the side of His infinity there is the great chasm. He creates all things and He alone is Creator. Everything else is created. Only He is Infinite and only He is the Creator; everything else is the creature and finite. So man, the animal, the flower and the machine, in the biblical viewpoint are equally separated from God, in that He created them all. On the side of infinity man is as separated from God as is the machine. (see the chart below).



But there is another side- the Personal. Here the animal, the flower and the machine are below the chasm. On the side of God’s Infinity everything else is finite and equally separated from God; but on the side of His personality God has created man in his own image. **Therefore man’s relationship is upward rather than downward-** a tremendous factor that opens door after door for the comprehension for confused modern man.”²⁶

“Man is made in the image of God, who I is personal, and has two relationships- upward and downward. **Of course, if he does not find his relationship upward he will have to find his relationship (or integration point) downward.** As a Christian I say, who am I? Am I only the hydrogen atom, the energy particle extended? No, I am made in the image of God. I know who I am. Yet, on the other hand, when I turn around and I face nature, I face something that is like myself. I, too, am created; just as the animal and the plant the hydrogen atom are created.”²⁷

“Pantheism gives you an answer for unity, but it gives no meaning to the diversity. Pantheism is not an answer. First, any ‘results’ one does get from pantheism are obtained only by projecting *man’s* feelings in to *nature*. And that is simply Hoffer’s romanticism; an endowing of the lower with a human reaction. So when we see a chicken, we endow its love-life with human qualities. But that is to evade the *reality* of the chicken. This kind of an answer can get results from these motivation words only by projecting human feelings into nature.

²⁶ Francis Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man: the Christian View of Ecology*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1970) 35-36.

²⁷ Schaeffer, 37.

“What I am saying is that a pantheistic answer is not just a theoretically weak answer but it is also a weak answer in *practice*. A man who begins to take a pantheistic view towards nature has no answer for that fact that nature has two faces; it has a benevolent face, but it is also an enemy over and over again. Nature is viewed as normal, by the pantheist. There is no place for abnormality in nature. This becomes a very practical dilemma in Camus’ *Plague* (La Peste) where Camus comments on the dilemma facing Orion the ratcatcher; well, if he joins with the doctors and fights the plague, he is fighting against God, or if he joins the priest and does not fight God by not fighting the plague, he is not being humanitarian. If we accept this romantic and non-Christian mysticism, the difficulty is that we have no solution for the fact that nature is often not benevolent. If everything is one, and a part of the essence with not basic distinction, how does one explain nature when it is destructive?

“The Christian *can* fight it. When Christ stood in from of the tomb of Lazarus (John 11), He was claiming to be divine and yet He was furious. He could be furious with the plague *without being angry with himself*. This turns upon the historic, space-time Fall. Again, a pantheistic stand always brings man to an impersonal and low place rather than elevating him. This is an absolute rule. When anyone begins to propose the pantheistic answer, he ignores that fact that far from raising nature eventually to man’s height, pantheism will push both men and nature down together into a bog.”²⁸

Emerson, the Father of Modern American Pantheism

“Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1803-1882, was the son of a Unitarian minister. He was raised in a Deist family and his life paralleled that of Charles Darwin, born six years after Emerson and they died the same year. “The greatest early spiritual influence on Ralph Waldo Emerson was his aunt Mary Moody Emerson, a self-styled mystic, visionary and prophet compared by one writer to the German mystical writer Jakob Bohme. This strange woman wrote and traveled a great deal, wore a burial shroud when she traveled, and slept in a bed fashioned in the shape of a coffin. “It is no mere coincidence that Mary Baker Eddy, Joseph Smith, Henry David Thoreau and Emerson all were born around the same time an in the same region of the United States.”²⁹

“At 22 Emerson became a Unitarian minister. His views drifted even more liberally than the Unitarian church and soon he left his role as a minister and became what is now known as a motivational speaker. He became the father of the U.S. version of transcendental meditation. His best known work was a small book entitled “Nature.” He argued that, “subjective consciousness is the essence of religion. This unifying view of human religious experience was joined in Emerson’s thought to a pantheistic understanding of divinity itself. By the end of the 1830’s Emerson was beginning to be accepted as America’s heterodox prophet of pantheism, the divine self and reverence for Nature.”³⁰

²⁸ Schaeffer, 25-27.

²⁹ Herrick, 157.

³⁰ Herrick, 159.

“Influenced by Romantics, mystics and naturalists, his skepticism toward Christianity was also bolstered by German Biblical criticism. Emerson developed his spiritual system as a tool for overturning Christianity and replacing it with something he thought better—an American version of monistic pantheism.”³¹

THINKING

“Emerson wrote, ‘the whole of nature is a metaphor for the human mind.’ And if nature is a metaphor for the human mind, nature was identical with the divine mind. IN nature Emerson affirms two essences in the universe, ‘Nature and the Soul,’ with Soul being his name for the divine spirit in all things and in each individual. In *Nature* Emerson writes; ‘I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or partial of God.’”³²

“The world is the product of what Emerson terms ‘one will’ and ‘one mind.’ That ‘one mind,’ he writes ‘is everywhere, in each ray of the star, in each wavelet of the pool.’”³³

Indeed much of Darwinian science has opened the door to a form of religious pantheism. Daniel Dennett, a modern advocate and professor at Tufts University says, “The design of nature is itself a kind of divinity for Dennett that does not require positing the Revealed Word’s personal and wholly other deity in the cosmos. The cosmos is deity because the cosmos is design.” Quoting Dennet in summary he says, “‘is something sacred? Yes, say I with Nietzsche. I could not pray to it, but I can stand in affirmation of its magnificence. The world is sacred.’”³⁴

Perhaps a word from C.S. Lewis can give us a bit of closure on the topic, “Pantheists usually believe that God, so to speak, animates the universe as you animate your body; the universe almost is God, so that if it did not exist He would not exist either, and anything you find in the universe is part of God. The Christian idea is quite different.”³⁵

C.S. Lewis, *Four Loves and the Weight of Glory*,

In *Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis says two forms of love deserve special and cautionary treatment: love of nature and love of country. The love of nature is my focus for this paper.

This is the context of Lewis’ argument; “the nature-lovers who I have in mind are not very much concerned with individual beautiful objects of that sort (trees, flowers and animals).”³⁶

³¹ Herrick, 160.

³² Herrick, 160.

³³ Herrick, 161.

³⁴ Herrick, 175.

³⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Company, , 1952) 44.

³⁶ Lewis, *Four Loves*, 52.

“It is the ‘moods’ or the ‘spirit’ that matter. Nature-lovers want to receive as fully as possible what ever nature at each particular time and place, is, so to speak, saying.”³⁷

Lewis discusses how moderns have a habit of taking only what they want from nature, the positive and beautiful, even saying things such as flowers enjoying the air they breathe [Wordsworth]. If they take from nature what it really gives they may not like it’s moral philosophy. “They love nature in so far as, for them, she calls to ‘the dark gods in the blood’; not although, but because, sex and hunger and sheer power there operate without pity or shame.”³⁸

The following are key quotes in his treatment of this issue. They are found on pages 52-66. I have tried to underline what might be considered a limitation or warning about the love of nature and make **bold** what might be considered a positive element of the love of nature.

“If you take nature as a teacher she will teach you exactly the lessons you had already decided to learn; this is only another way of saying that nature does not teach. The tendency to take her as a teacher is obviously very easily grafted on to the experience we call "love of nature." But it is only a graft. While we are actually subjected to them, the "moods" and "spirits" of nature point no morals”³⁹

“The only imperative that nature utters is, "Look. Listen. Attend.”⁴⁰

“What nature-lovers— whether they are Wordsworthians or people with "dark gods in their blood"— get from nature is an iconography, a language of images. I do not mean simply visual images; it is the "moods" or "spirits" themselves—the powerful expositions of terror, gloom, jocundity, cruelty, lust, innocence, purity—that are the images. In them each man can clothe his own belief. We must learn our theology or philosophy elsewhere (not surprisingly, we often learn them from theologians and philosophers).”⁴¹

(Lewis’ reference to the “Dark Gods of the Blood” is a bit ambiguous. From other reading my understanding is that this is a reference to his contemporaries Emerson, Wordsworth and others, in terms of their support of pantheism. At other times it seems to refer to our lower view of our own nature and answering the call of our flesh.)

“Nature never taught me that there exists a God of glory and of infinite majesty. I had to learn that in other ways. **But nature gave the word glory a meaning for me. I still do not know where else I could have found one. I do not see how the "fear" of God could have ever meant to me anything but the lowest prudential efforts to be safe, if I had never seen certain ominous ravines and unapproachable crags. And if nature had never**

³⁷ Lewis, *Four Loves*, 54.

³⁸ Lewis, *Four Loves*, 57.

³⁹ Lewis, *Four Loves*, 30.

⁴⁰ Lewis, *Four Loves*, 30.

⁴¹ Lewis, *Four Loves*, 31.

awakened certain longings in me, huge areas of what I can now mean by the "love" of God would never, so far as I can see, have existed.

Of course the fact that a Christian can so use nature is not even the beginning of a proof that Christianity is true. Those suffering from Dark Gods can equally use her (I suppose) for their creed. That is precisely the point. Nature does not teach. A true philosophy may sometimes validate an experience of nature; an experience of nature cannot validate a philosophy. Nature will not verify any theological or metaphysical proposition (or not in the manner we are now considering); she will help to show what it means. And not, on the Christian premises, by accident. The created glory may be expected to give us hints of the uncreated; for the one is derived from the other and in some fashion reflects it."⁴²

"We have seen an image of glory. We must not try to find a direct path through it and beyond it to an increasing knowledge of God. The path peters out almost at once. Terrors and mysteries, the whole depth of God's counsels and the whole tangle of the history of the universe, choke it. We can't get through; not that way. We must make a détour—leave the hills and woods and go back to our studies, to church, to our Bibles, to our knees. Otherwise the love of nature is beginning to turn into a nature religion. And then, even if it does not lead us to the Dark Gods, it will lead us to a great deal of nonsense."⁴³

"Nature cannot satisfy the desires she arouses nor answer theological questions nor sanctify us. Our real journey to God involves constantly turning our backs on her; passing from the dawn-lit fields into some poky little church, or (it might be) going to work in an East End parish. **But the love of her has been a valuable and, for some people, an indispensable initiation.**"⁴⁴

"This love, when it sets up as a religion, is beginning to be a god—therefore to be a demon. And demons never keep their promises. Nature "dies" on those who try to live for a love of nature."⁴⁵

"Say your prayers in a garden early, ignoring steadfastly the dew, the birds and the flowers, and you will come away overwhelmed by its freshness and joy; go there in order to be overwhelmed and, after a certain age, nine times out of ten nothing will happen to you."⁴⁶

The Weight of Glory

C.S. Lewis is known for his "Argument from Desire." Much of this is laid out in his essay, *The Weight of Glory*. His point is that if we find ourselves with a deep desire that cannot be satisfied by anything we find in this world we must be made for another. To that argument, our view of nature is central. "Nature cannot and is not meant to, satisfy our

⁴² Lewis, *Four Loves*, 32.

⁴³ Lewis, *Four Loves*, 33.

⁴⁴ Lewis, *Four Loves*, 33.

⁴⁵ Lewis, *Four Loves*, 34.

⁴⁶ Lewis, *Four Loves*, 34.

deepest desires. Nature is a sign of something beyond itself, not a self-signifying and self-referential closed system. Things within nature- what we see outside ourselves or experience within ourselves- point beyond themselves to that indescribable something which they become for a moment the messengers.”⁴⁷

“The love of nature, when rightly understood, is thus a pathway to God; when wrongly understood, it is an impediment to the discovery of God.”⁴⁸

The Design Argument

In the early 17th Century, Paley made the Design Argument famous in his work, *Natural Theology*. This is what came to be known as the “Watch Makers” argument as stated by Paley:

“In crossing a heath, suppose I pitch my foot against a *stone*, and were asked how the stone came to be there, I might possibly answer, that, for anything I knew to the contrary, it had lain there for ever; nor would it perhaps be very easy to show the absurdity of this answer. But suppose I found a watch upon the ground, and it should be inquired how the watch happened to be in that place, I should hardly think of the answer which I had before given, that for anything I knew the watch might have always been there. Yet why should not this answer serve for the watch as well as for the stone? Why is it not as admissible in the second case as in the first? For this reason, and for no other, namely, that when we come to inspect the watch, we perceive (what we could not discover in the stone) that its several parts are framed and put together for a purpose.”⁴⁹

The argument has been oft debated but recently clarified by Peter Kreeft.

The Design Argument

“This sort of argument is of wide and perennial appeal. Almost everyone admits that reflection on the order and beauty of nature touches something very deep within us. But are the order and beauty the product of intelligent design and conscious purpose? For theists the answer is yes. Arguments for design are attempts to vindicate this answer, to show why it is the most reasonable one to give. They have been formulated in ways as richly varied as the experience in which they are rooted. The following displays the core or central insight.

1. The universe displays a staggering amount of intelligibility, both within the things we observe and in the way these things relate to others outside themselves. That is to say: the way they exist and coexist display an intricately beautiful order and regularity that can fill even the most casual observer with wonder. It is the norm in nature for many

⁴⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1949) 114.

⁴⁸ Alister McGrath, *The Intellectual World of C.S. Lewis*, (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014) 114.

⁴⁹ William Paley, *Natural Theology: or, evidences of the existence and the attributes of the deity*, 12th ed., (London: J. Faulder, 1809) 1-2.

different beings to work together to produce the same valuable end—for example, the organs in the body work for our life and health.

2. Either this intelligible order is the product of chance or of intelligent design.
3. Not chance.
4. Therefore the universe is the product of intelligent design.
5. Design comes only from a mind, a designer.

Therefore the universe is the product of an intelligent Designer.”⁵⁰

This argument has been revitalized by the contemporary interest in intelligent design. This has often led to an unnecessary divide between science and faith. Alvin Plantinga has done some important work on this issue.

Hume reduces Paley’s design argument to be inductive or analogical and others take his version to be an argument for the best explanation. “But there is quite a different way of interpreting it; this so-called design inference isn’t a matter of inference or argument at all. I encounter something that looks designed and for the belief that it is designed; perhaps this isn’t a matter of argument at all (anymore than in the case of perception or other minds). In many cases, so the thought goes, the belief that something or other is a product of design is not formed by way of inference, but in the basic way; what goes on here is to be understood as more like perception than like inference.”⁵¹

“We don’t arrive at the conclusion by a train of deductive reason; rather there is an immediate and direct impression.”⁵²

The Duke of Argyle, a contemporary of Darwin, is quoted by Plantinga as saying, “I said to Mr. Darwin with reference to some of his own remarkable works on the *Fertilisation of Orchids*,... and various other observations he made of the wonderful contrivances for certain purposes in nature- I said it was impossible to look at these without seeing that they were the effect and the expression of Mind. I shall never forget Mr. Darwin’s answer. He looked at me very hard and said, ‘Well, that often comes over me with overwhelming force, but at other times; and he shook his head vaguely, adding ‘it seems to go away.’”⁵³ What a powerful example of even the fittest minds ability to suppress the truth.

“Christian Theology and current science unite in declaring that human beings display a natural tendency to believe in God or something very much like God. According to John Calvin, God created us with a ‘*sensus divinitatis*,’ a natural tendency to form belief in God;

⁵⁰ “Twenty Arguments for the Existence of God: the Design Argument,” Peter Kreeft, accessed July 11, 2013, http://www.peterkreeft.com/topics-more/20_arguments-gods-existence.htm#5.

⁵¹ Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies, Science, Religion & Naturalism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 244.

⁵² Plantinga, 245

⁵³ Plantinga, 246.

and according to Thomas Aquinas, “To know in a general and confused way that God exists is implanted in us by nature.”⁵⁴

“Only half of Natural Theology comes from observing nature external to our persons. How we are made and perceive ourselves is the other half. Evolutionary Psychology speaks to this issue. “Evolutionary psychology is an attempt to explain important human traits and behaviors in terms of evolutionary origin of the human species. The heart and soul of this project is the effort to explain distinctive human traits- our art, humor, play, love, sexual behavior, poetry, sense of adventure, love of stories, our music, or morality, and our religion itself- in terms of adaptive advantages accruing to our hunter-gatherer ancestors back there on the plains of the Serengeti. Some of this can be a pretty tall order. Take our love of beauty, for example: here it isn’t easy to see what an evolutionary explanation would look like. There is the glorious beauty and grandeur of mountains- Mt. Baker, for example, or Mt. Shuksan, or the Grand Teton, or any of a hundred more. There is splendor of a craggy ocean shore, but also of a tiny highly articulate flower. Alan Shepard, the first American in space, grasped the sheer beauty of the earth as seen from space. It is hard to see how a capacity to find marvelous beauty in such things would be of adaptive use to our hunter-gatherer ancestors.”⁵⁵

In light of all this we ask the question, “How can anyone see the mighty Tetons, Big Sky Montana or the Royal Gorge; and not know/acknowledge there is a God?” Years ago I heard J.P. Morland quote Blaise Pascal, the famed French Mathematician, with what might be the best answer.

Pascal wrote, “Willing to appear openly to those who seek him with all their heart, and to be hidden from those who flee from him with all their heart, God so regulates the knowledge of himself that he has given indications of himself which are visible to those who seek him and not to those who do not seek him. There is enough light for those to see who only desire to see, and enough obscurity for those who have a contrary disposition.”⁵⁶

The Lord has made himself plain but will not coerce faith and therefore has made himself appropriately obscure.

Three Biblical Texts for Special Consideration

Psalm 19

- 1 The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.
- 2 Day to day pours out speech,

⁵⁴ Plantinga, 260.

⁵⁵ Plantinga, 131-132.

⁵⁶ Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, #430

- and night to night reveals knowledge.
3 There is no speech, nor are there words,
whose voice is not heard.
4 Their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.
In them he has set a tent for the sun,
5 which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber,
and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy.
6 Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them,
and there is nothing hidden from its heat.
- 7 The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the testimony of the LORD is sure,
making wise the simple;
8 the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is pure,
enlightening the eyes;
9 the fear of the LORD is clean,
enduring forever;
the rules of the LORD are true,
and righteous altogether.
10 More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey
and drippings of the honeycomb.
11 Moreover, by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.
- 12 Who can discern his errors?
Declare me innocent from hidden faults.
13 Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins;
let them not have dominion over me!
Then I shall be blameless,
and innocent of great transgression.
- 14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable in your sight,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.⁵⁷

This psalm of David consist of two books; the book of nature, 1-6, which teaches that God reveals himself to all people as *Elohim*, the God of creation, and the book of the law, 7-

⁵⁷ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. 2001 (Ps 19:title-14). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

13, which states that God reveals himself as *Yahweh* to the covenant community.

- The heavens declare
- The skies proclaim

These two participles indicate a continuous revelation. The heavens declare Glory (external manifestation of God's character). It is wordless yet universally preserved to the ends of the earth.

The sun is also an important testimony. The systematic rising, moving and setting is universally seen and felt, like the verse in Isa. 6:3, "the whole earth is full of his glory."⁵⁸

Acts 17:24-31

Paul Addresses the Areopagus

²² "So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. ²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷ that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us"⁵⁹

Paul was striving to find common ground in his witness of the truth of Christ. His citation of the "unknown god" is a clear testimony to the presence and yet inadequacy of general revelation. That said, there are several key assumptions Paul makes concerning what his audience knows.

1. God is the invisible Creator and Sovereign of the universe, vs 24
2. God is self-sufficient and dependent on the creature for nothing, vs 25a
3. God is the source of life and everything humans value as good, vs. 25b
4. God is an intelligent Being, for he has established the times and bounds of man's habitation on the earth, vs 26
5. God is immanent (or indwelling) in the world vs 27

"The Athenians had sufficient knowledge of God to move to a relationship of dependence and obligation. But because they chose to extinguish the light God had given them, Paul describe their condition as one of 'ignorance' and moral culpability, vs 31."⁶⁰

Romans 1:18-21

⁵⁸ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. 2001 (Is 6:3). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

⁵⁹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. 2001 (Ac 17:22-27). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

⁶⁰ Lewis and Demarest, 69.

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. ²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ⁶¹

Lewis and Demarest help us see four key assertions in this passage;

1. All People everywhere acquire a rudimentary knowledge of God as Creator, 18-21, “it is plain to them.”
 - a. Invisible attributes
 - i. Eternal Power
 - ii. Divine Nature (all of His attributes or perfections)
2. Knowledge of God as Creator is acquired by rational reflection on created effects, vs. 20, “in the things that have been made.” Again, this is all of nature both the nature we find around us and within us.
3. The sinful heart consistently suppresses the knowledge, derived from nature, of God as Creator, vv 21-22. Later vs. 28 says, “And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.”⁶² Rejection of known truth leads to sin and degradation.
4. Finally, humanities deliberate repudiation of the light of the knowledge of God establishes human guiltworthiness before the bar of divine justice, vs. 20 having rejected it they are “without excuse.”⁶³

Finally Lewis and Demarest have given us the following systematic understanding of what we see in scripture as to what is revealed in general revelation.

1. God is one. In spite of the diversity of peoples and cultures, the evident unity of mankind indicates one source (Acts 17:26), and the order of the cosmos similarly indicates one sustainer God (Ps 19:1-5; Rom. 1:20)
2. The Creator, who has life in Himself, is the source of all that has life (Acts 17:25).
3. God is eternal and independent of everything else (ps. 93:2; Rom 1:20; Acts 17:25).
4. God is invisible and powerful (Rom. 1:20).
5. God is personal and wise (Ps. 104:24).
6. Although distinct from the universe, God is active in it (Acts 17:24, 26-27).
7. The Creator of mankind is the continuous source of life-support system (Acts 14:15-16; 17:24-28).
8. The living and relating God is moral and just in himself and in his judgment of people and nations (Acts 14:17; rom. 1:32; 2:14-15)
9. God alone, as the ultimate source and support to values, is of supreme worth and

⁶¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. 2001 (Ro 1:18–21). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

⁶² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. 2001 (Ro 1:28). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

⁶³ Lewis and Demarest, 70.

deserving of the ultimate concern and worship. Idolaters exchange this truth for a lie (Acts 14:15; 17:23; Rom 1:25)⁶⁴

I might add to this list, that Nature, both within and without is fallen. We know from scripture that this earth is not as it once was. "For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now."⁶⁵ Romans 8:22

As we consider the things we examine we must also consider how this world is but a tarnished picture of the New Heavens and the New Earth to come.

Conclusions and Applications

The Lord didn't just give us the gospel to explain the World; He gave us the World to explain the Gospel. This means we have a significant revelatory power at our disposal in the backcountry. If general revelation is meant to point us to God, we need to ask some of the following questions when in nature:

1. What does this mountain range, tree, river, waterfall etc. tell us about the nature and power of God?
2. With Christ we have a new lens through which to more accurately interpret natural revelation, does anything we perceive around us tell the story of creation, fall, redemption and consummation?
3. What is the difference between seeing creation and seeing the God of creation?
4. How can we worship the God of Creation and not creation itself?
5. If general revelation is both perceived within us and around us, what can I learn about God by how I respond in my spirit to great and striking moments of natural beauty?

Based on what we have studied, we can know with certainty that there is a witness to God in creation to which all our clients have a rudimentary knowledge. We need to probe with questions about what they see and why, so we can understand if they have accepted this revelation or suppressed/denied it. We must be aware of our cultural leaning toward Pantheism and Spiritualism. On the other side of the spectrum we need to understand the current commitment to Scientific Naturalism. We live in a culture that is focused on what science can perceive and quantify, all the while rejecting the possibility of miracles and the presence of any transcendent being. When we have opportunities we need to quote scripture like the ones mentioned above to overlay the specific revelation of scripture over the general one. In this way we can demonstrate the concept of Luther, the right hand of revelation working with the left.

⁶⁴ Lewis and Demarest, 71.

⁶⁵ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. 2001 (Ro 8:22). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.