

General vs. Special Revelation
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General revelation is God's revelation of Himself and of right and wrong to all men everywhere, but does not give enough to be saved. It opens the door to man seeing the need for additional information.

General revelation comes in different forms such as the **majesty of creation** (Psalm 19:1-6, *The heavens declare the glory of God*, or Romans 1:19-21, *Since the creation of the world, His invisible attributes, eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen*). It also comes in the conscience through the **eternal awareness** He gives all men (Ecclesiastes 3:11, *He has set eternity in their hearts*). It includes their **general awareness of their own sin** (see Romans 1:18-25, *"the wrath of God is revealed from heaven"* and *"men suppressed the truth"* and *"although they knew God, they did not honor Him"* and *"exchanged the glory of God"*). We also see this in Romans 2:14-16, *"when Gentiles instinctively do the things of the law, these are a law unto themselves... they show the work of the law written on their hearts"*.

Special revelation is God's "more particular witness to particular people at particular times" (Rob Green, Faith Church, Lafayette, IN.), culminating in the scriptures. In times past, it took place in visions, dreams, appearances and visits. Today, the only special revelation we have is the scriptures.¹

Special revelation includes many things like God speaking to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:8-19, to Abraham in Genesis 12, 13, 15 and 17, to Moses in Exodus 3, Jonah speaking to the Ninevites, Gabriel speaking to Mary (Luke 1:26-38) and Zacharias (Luke 1:8-20), Simeon hearing from the Holy Spirit that He would not die until He saw the Lord's Christ in Luke 2, Jesus showing the two men on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24:27 how the Old Testament revealed Him, and Jesus speaking to Saul in Acts 9.

Apart from the kinds of stories indicated in footnote¹, God's special revelation ended with the closing of the canon around 90 AD. While some church fathers recognized and used most or all our 27 New Testament books before 200 AD, it was officially accepted by the Church at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD.

¹ There are many documented reports worldwide of a *type of occasional* special notification continuing today among unreached people groups. One such story was of an illiterate tribal people in Irian Jaya who after coming to faith in Christ, reported to the New Tribe missionaries that a teaching handed down from their forbearers for 100's of years had prepared them. This "tale" was that one day, a man would come with a 'speaking stick' to tell them of water that lived. When the missionaries first read from the Bible, they explained that 'paper' was made of wood and had words on it. Words on paper (made of wood) was at first translated to them as 'words on a stick'. When they heard John 4:10 and 7:38 and Jesus being 'living water,' the tribal people were thrilled – the Bible explained what their forbearers prepared them for. Notice that in this, the 'revelations' were not "new revelation" as in *adding to* the scripture, but a way to encourage the people to trust the Word.

Just as Psalm 19:1-6 makes everyone aware of God's majesty (general revelation), Psalm 19:7-13 make us aware of the sufficiency and superiority of the scripture (special revelation). It was superior because it is adequate to lead to life change (*law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul*, Psalm 19:7), while general revelation only caused people to become aware that worship and fear were due a God who could make such a world and made them aware that they would deal with that God.

We see general and special revelation and their role in convicting and liberating man in both the Old and New Testaments. Romans 1:20 reminds us of His general revelation, (*For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes... have been clearly seen... so they are without excuse*), so Romans 1:16-17 (*For in the gospel righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last...*) tells us the special revelation of the gospel. Likewise, in Psalm 19:1, we read of "the heavens declare the glory of God... and the work of His hands" (general), and in 19:7 that "the law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul" (special). While general revelation lets us know that there is a God and that we do not measure up, it requires special revelation of the Bible to know the righteousness of God alone comes by faith in Christ.

As Romans 10:14-17 reminds us, *How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?... Consequently, faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.*

To summarize, through the widely available general revelation of nature and conscience, God gives us adequate information to see we have a need for something outside ourselves to face eternity and a God who deserves to judge. However, because we are dead in sin and unable to know truth unless revealed to us by God through special revelation, we can only be saved by hearing and believing the word of God (*Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God*, Romans 10:17). Furthermore, that Word of God must focus on the person and work of Jesus Christ, since being saved requires knowing Jesus Christ (*There is salvation in no one else*, Acts 4:12) and as Romans 10:14 puts it, *How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard?*

Does God Give New Revelation Today?
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Some Christians speak of *continuing* revelation, by which they mean that God continues today to speak *outside of and in addition to the scriptures* – ostensibly to help unbelievers believe the gospel and to help believers trust in God. Three examples of continuing revelation to which they point are the “sign gifts” of working of miracles, tongues and prophecy.

By tongues, we mean people gifted with the tongues spoken of in the NT. While the NT was being written, tongues were earthly languages previously unknown by the speaker, given them by God as a testimony to non-believers that the things of Christ being spoken of were true (Acts 2:1-13, 1 Cor. 14:22). By miracles, we do not mean whether God sometimes works miracles like changing a verified malignant tumor to a benign cyst... He sometimes does. We mean people presenting themselves as spiritually gifted to work miracles as we read about in 1 Corinthians 12:10. By prophecy, we are referring to someone who claims God has given them a new revelation, a special word of knowledge, vision or prophetic utterance (which by their very definition would make them as authoritative as the scriptures), and which they are to give to others as an ambassador of Christ (1 Cor. 12:5-6).

One implication of the inspiration and authority of the Bible is that **it bears complete, sufficient and final authority** for the life of a Christian and **does not need to be added to**. When you point to a Bible and say, “This is God’s Word to us”, you distinguish it from everything which is *not* the Word of God and therefore *not* His authority. It is *not* saying there are no other true things in life. It is saying that there are no other things in life that God says a person needs to know to know him, follow Him, please Him and bear the fruit He has promised such as “life and peace” (Romans 8:6).

Part of why there is no “continuing revelation” emerges from three of the Bible’s claims for itself. The **first** is that the scriptures are the word of God and therefore authoritative (See 2 Tim. 3:16-17 and question #2). The **second** is that through the scriptures, a person has all she or he needs to know and follow Jesus Christ. John 5:39 says that the Scriptures *testify about Me* and John 17:3 says, *This is eternal life, that they may know Thee and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent*. A **third claim** from the Bible is that through knowing Him, we can experience a rich, joyful life. In knowing Christ, we are filled with *multiplied grace, peace, life and godliness* (2 Peter 1:2-3; cf., John 10:10).

With the authority of God and sufficiency for life and godliness (Psalm 19:7-12, 2 Pet. 1:3) resting in the completed canon of scriptures, there is no need for continuing revelation. One implication of these three clear teachings is to ask why more revelation would be necessary. What can tongues, miracles or prophecy tell an unbeliever or believer that the Word of God can’t tell them?

In each case, we have the same issue: People claim sign gifts help people believe God, when God has already given us *all* we need to believe Him (*John 20:30-31*). God's purpose for the sign gifts was to astound people into recognizing His words about the Gospel were true - the same reason that Jesus introduced His ministry with miracles. It pointed to His authority, power and grace – a great way for people to finally come to know God. With the close of the canon and a Great Commissioned Body of Christ empowered by the Holy Spirit, He no longer needs that purpose to be accomplished.

Finally, we have the Bible itself addressing continuing revelation. God says in 1 Cor. 14:21 that *people will proclaim Him in strange tongues and people still will not listen*. Partly as a result of that and partly because He was prophesying the completion of His canon which will contain all people need to know Christ and to live victoriously, God tells us in 1 Cor. 13:8 tells us that *tongues and prophecy will cease*.

Once I knew a couple with marriage difficulties in which the husband left his wife (admittedly an ungodly response) because she claimed to receive words and visions from God (including them getting married) which led her to self-righteousness and overpowering control. As a result, he could not lead her, could not reason with her, and in the end, would have no more of her. Sadly, when she was shown the biblical prescriptions to heal their marriage before he left, she would not go there because her confidence had been for so long conditioned around "God told me" that the Word of God was an insufficient competitor to her private audiences with God.