

TO KNOW  
THE SECRETS  
OF THE WORLD



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THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

To Know the Secrets of the World  
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## Introduction

*Will we ever know what the seven thunders said?*

*Now when the seven thunders uttered their voices, I was about to write; but I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, "Seal up the things which the seven thunders uttered, and do not write them."*

- Revelation 10.4

This passage fascinates me. Its message is plain enough: John heard the seven thunders; they sounded something, which he, in the Spirit, was able to understand, and was about to write down in the book he was compiling (Revelation), when a voice from heaven edited out that bit of content before it could reach the parchment. That's clear enough from the text.

But don't miss the important thing here: the thunders "spoke" in a way that John was able to interpret into words. That shouldn't surprise us. After all, the Scriptures teach us that the creation, in a wide range of forms, "speaks" to us clearly and continuously about the Lord (Ps. 19.1-4; Rom. 1.18ff). There aren't any words, but there is clear revelation of God, some kind of message that He intends for our good, and it displeases Him for us to disregard or take that message for granted (cf. Rom. 1.21ff).

This is why the discipline of creational theology is so important, and should be a part of our spiritual regimen.

*Doing creational theology*

In creational theology we position ourselves before some aspect of *creation* or *culture* (which is just creation in another form), or we meditate on some situation – the outworking of the actions of human will or *conscience* – in order to discern the presence of God or some indication of His will. Obviously, this can be a highly speculative and imprecise activity. We need to do it with patience and prayer, like John, allowing the Word of God to dictate how we "hear" the words of creation. Creational theology is best done in company with others, present and past, whose insights can help to clarify and contain our own. If we keep our work of observing and analyzing illuminated by the light of Scripture, in conversation with trusted friends, we may find that the object or situation we are considering will begin to yield some insight to God and His will that reinforces, enlarges, or clarifies something we know from God's Word.

Celtic Christians had great respect for those who, as a 15<sup>th</sup> century litany puts it, “had intelligence in the law of nature.” That “intelligence” was obtained by deliberate, determined effort. In the opening words of *Periphyseon*, that great 9<sup>th</sup> century philosophical and theological meditation on the divisions of created things, Eriugena wrote that he “often” had occasion to “investigate as carefully as I can and reflect...of all things which can either be perceived by the mind or surpass its concentrated efforts...” Investigate. Carefully. Reflect. Things that can be perceived by the mind. Things that surpass what the mind can perceive. Often. Creational theology requires this kind of commitment. We need to make time for it, regular time, and sufficient time to allow for the kinds of investigations and reflections that will allow us to penetrate into the glory of created things with our minds, and see beyond our minds into the eternal truths God has embedded there.

Our King delights in concealing mysteries in the things He has made. And He has tasked us with the duty of seeking out those mysteries so as to know Him better and love Him more (Prov. 25.2).

*The reward of creational theology*

The reward of creational theology is twofold.

First, our ability to know and enjoy communion with God is greatly enhanced, the more we are continuously aware of His presence in created things, and able to “hear” what He is saying to us through them.

But second, as we *experience* the reality of God in created things – say, His majesty or might or beauty or immensity – that experience becomes impressed on our souls, so that, when we come across those ideas in our reading of Scripture, that *experience* can be relived, making the Scriptures come even more alive for us.

These two reasons should be sufficient motivation to make us want to begin practicing creational theology as part of our regular discipline of seeking the Lord.

The chapters that follow will provide further introduction to creational theology, and examples of how we can practice this important and neglected spiritual discipline. Each chapter also includes questions for further reflection that can also be used individually or in group studies to enhance your appreciation of the created order and, hopefully, to impel some of us, at least, to take up the work of creational theology with more consistency and effects.

A world of revelation is all around us – God “speaking” to us continually, day and night. We can learn to hear and see something of His glory, not only in crashing thunders and brilliant sunsets, but in all the ordinary, everyday objects and situations with which the Lord is pleased to fill our days.

Our prayer is that you will discover in creational theology an exciting new discipline to increase your love for God, so that, knowing Him better – and more continuously – you will serve Him with greater faithfulness and effects.

Susie, who edits all my published books, and I send this little volume out with the hope that the presence, joy, and pleasure of the Lord might be your more constant companion, as you hear Him speaking or catch a glimpse of His glory in the things He has made.

T. M. Moore

# 1 The Glory of Kings

*Searching-out the Glory of God in Creation*

*Understand the creation, if you wish to know the Creator...*

- Columbanus, *Sermon I*

In the widely-circulated medieval hagiography, *Vita Brendani*, there is a quaint anecdote about the 6<sup>th</sup>-century Celtic saint's perplexing over the will of God for his mission, following a difficult time, and during a season of rest and recuperation on the island of Ailbe. A blackbird came to light where Brendan was seated, singing and beating with his wings, "as an organ." As he meditated on this unusual sight, Brendan began to have insight into God's will for him and his band of missionaries. He suddenly understood how long his mission must last, what the course of it should be, and what would be the outcome of their journey. "On hearing this Brendan bowed himself to the ground, and wept and cried and gave thanks and praise to God, the Creator of all things."<sup>2</sup>

Celtic saints like Brendan were renowned for their sensitivity to the creation, especially to the ways that animals, lakes, rivers, hills, trees, and other created things could affect their understanding of God and His will. Brendan, Colum Cille, Kevin, Cuthbert, and many others seem to have had a knack for reading in created things some insight into divine revelation, or, as in the Brendan story above, of having the creation bring to greater clarity some aspect of the divine character or will. These quaint vignettes were traditional Irish ways of using fiction-embellished history to make a true point, memorably.

Contemporary writers on Celtic Christianity often remark on the relationship between these ancient believers and the created world, citing this penchant for interacting with creation in a manner very similar to the way we interact with the Bible. William Drummond, a 17<sup>th</sup>-century descendant of those medieval Celtic Christians, expressed this phenomenon in his poem, "The Booke Of The World":

Of this faire Volume which wee World doe name,  
If wee the sheetes and leaves could turne with care,  
Of Him who it correctes, and did it frame,  
Wee cleare might read the Art and Wisedome rare?  
Finde out his Power which wildest Pow'rs doth tame,

His providence extending everie-where,  
His justice which proud Rebels doeth not spare,  
In everie Page, no, Period of the same:  
But sillie wee (like foolish Children) rest  
Well pleas'd with colour'd Velame, Leaves of Gold,  
Faire dangling Ribbones, leaving what is best,  
On the great Writers sense ne'er taking hold;  
Or if by chance our Mindes doe muse on ought,  
It is some Picture on the Margin wrought.<sup>3</sup>

There is revelation of God in created things, Drummond insists, but we are only inclined to seek such knowledge from books, especially the Bible (envison the gold-gilt edges and ribbon markers of your own Bible). If we could learn to “read” the “Booke of the World” we might be able to discover more of God’s wisdom, power, and justice. But we would need to learn how to turn the “sheetes and leaves” of this book – how to study and interpret the creation, like Brendan and the Celtic Christians – if we would gain this benefit and not remain “sillie Children” all our lives.

#### *Revelation in creation*

Christian theology has maintained from the beginning that God is revealing Himself and His will in the things He has made. The revelation of God in creation is *real* revelation, as Berkouwer insisted, following the Westminster divines and Calvin.<sup>4</sup> But these were merely following Aquinas, Eriugena, Augustine, and the Apostle Paul in developing the Biblical teaching that God, indeed, is making Himself known in the works of creation and providence. As Psalm 19.1-4 (ESV) has it:

The heavens declare the glory of God,  
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.  
Day to day pours out speech,  
and night to night reveals knowledge.  
There is no speech, nor are there words,  
whose voice is not heard.  
Their measuring line goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world.

Paul insisted that this revelation is clear and compelling (Rom. 1.18-21). Everyone receives it, and everyone perceives in it a word *from* God *about* Him and His will. But most people refuse to accept the *hors d'ouevres* God offers through the creation, which He holds out to whet their appetites for the banquet of revelation to be discovered in His Word. They prefer to remain blissfully indifferent to God and to pursue their own idolatrous

way in life. Those who *do* know the Lord, and who understand that He *is* revealing Himself in the creation, act too often like “sillie Children.” They will not add to the banquet of Scripture the condiments, sauces, and side dishes God passes to them, every day, every moment of every day, from the kitchen of creation. Or, if they do, what they “taste” is a mere trifling, some “Picture on the Margin.” And so their theology – their knowledge of God and His will – suffers. Nor does it produce the kind of spontaneous and rich worship and adoration of God as did the *creational theology* of Brendan and other Celtic saints.

Every Bible-believing Christian will affirm that God is making Himself known through the things He has made. But very few of us have even the slightest clue concerning what to make of this creational revelation, nor any inclination to do so.

### *Creational theology*

There is a discipline in the regimen of theological studies which is again beginning to receive proper attention. This is the discipline I have elsewhere<sup>5</sup> referred to as *creational theology*. By this discipline a believer, standing on the foundation of Scripture and Jesus Christ, may expect, as an heir of Christ and vice-regent in His Kingdom, to discover the glory of God in created things, and be enriched thereby in wondrous and edifying ways.

Solomon wrote cryptically of this delightful discipline: “It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out” (Prov. 25.2). By his own testimony, Solomon invested much time and effort in this very project (Eccl. 1.13). God has “concealed” His glory in all kinds of created things. He is making Himself known through the works of creation – the so-called natural world – and providence – the workings of *creation*, the wonders of *culture*, and the outworking of human *conscience* in all kinds of spheres.

Solomon’s Proverbs are filled with observations of divine truth drawn from these disparate arenas of the realm of creation. Jesus was perhaps the greatest “creational theologian” of all time, seeing in lilies, falling sparrows, coins, tragedies, the work of farmers, and much, much more eternal principles and divine truths which, as He pointed them out, left people amazed and awe-struck at His insight and authority.

Some today are beginning to call the followers of Christ to a more responsible approach to His revelation in created things – whether the creation itself, the evidence of transcendent truth in film and novels, the



echoes of deity in the machinations of the human psyche or the practice of law, or the wisdom of God in everyday situations and circumstances. In what follows I would like to propose a working procedure for beginning to take up the practice of creational theology in your own life, so that you, too, might enjoy the delight and benefit of being able to turn the sheets and leaves of the book of creation, and search out the glory of God concealed there.

*The activities of creational theology*

As I have practiced this discipline over the years, it involves six activities. These are not completely isolated steps, but interact with one another, refer to one another, and build on one another to produce a satisfying encounter with the glory of God, one that can enrich our knowledge of Him and our understanding of His will. I will outline those activities in what follows, and illustrate from one of my own exercises in creational theology just how these may be followed.

*1. Observation.* The first step is observation. Find an object or focus on a situation, and examine it carefully, at some length. I spent one Saturday morning not long ago musing on an old stump at a retreat center not far from my home. I counted its rings, noted from the cut marks the type of saw used to fell the tree, and considered the various growths that had begun to spring up in the niches and nooks created by the passage of time. I made notes on everything, commenting on textures, colors, indicators of time and the times in which the tree was alive (as expressed in the width or narrowness of its rings, and any indication of trauma in them).

In the observation phase you will want to make note of everything. Write down details. Draw out some preliminary associations. Carry a notebook or note cards with you, because you will not remember everything you will want to as you proceed to the next steps in the work of creational theology.

In particular, pay make note of the effects of what you are observing within you. Does what you are seeing or hearing cause you to fear? Wonder? Laugh? Delight? God is using these effects to begin the process of speaking to you. As you continue through the work of creational theology the Word of God will help you to understand how the Lord intends to use those effects for His glory in your life (cf. Ex. 20.18-10).

*2. Association.* In the work of creational theology we must never drift very far from Scripture. The Bible is the great light in which we will be able to

search out whatever God is revealing to us in the lesser light of creation (Ps. 36.9). As I contemplated that stump I began to let various Scriptures about time, history, and the generations waft across my mind: “Number your days...” “Generations come, the generations go...” “Whatsoever things were written aforetime...” I thought about the sovereignty of God over all of creation, and the Lord Jesus’ work of upholding the universe and all things in it by the Word of His power, as well as the pattern of history revealed in such passages as Revelation 12. I associated the little pine and oak seedlings, sprouting from the stump, with the generation born in the wilderness whom Joshua led into the land, and thought about how these little plants were drawing their initial nourishment from the dead wood of a plant from a previous generation. A lesson about history and my relationship to it began to form in my mind, as I kept taking notes and recording my thoughts and impressions, now in the light of God’s written revelation.

Don’t forget to consider the effects of your experience and how the Scriptures speak to these in your life. Are you experiencing great delight? How does that relate to God, His Word, and your relationship with Him (cf. Ps. 16.11; Ps. 119.97)? Are you perplexed and confused? Look beyond your confusion and uncertainty to the order and peace of the Lord (1 Cor. 14.33). Scripture speaks to our affections and helps us to understand how God intends to use them in our lives for His glory.

*3. Integration.* Association leads easily to integration, in which you try to bring together into language some conclusions based on your observations of the situation, thing, or event, and the Scripture it has provoked in your mind. I began to form some initial sentences to express what I was seeing and thinking: “We in our generation stand on the foundation of those who have gone before, and must be nourished by them.” “There are lessons from history that God wants us to learn. We must not ignore our heritage.” “The struggles and sacrifices of those who have gone before provide the direction and strength for the generations that succeed them.” “New life springs from death in God’s way and time. It is fragile, and must get firmly rooted in the earth, or it will not survive.” And so forth.

*4. Meditation.* By now you should have lots of notes, questions, Scripture references, and the beginnings of a cogent argument. Take some time to seek the Lord in prayer, offering up to Him your observations and conclusions, listening for any other thoughts or passages of Scripture His Spirit may prompt, writing down additional impressions. Pray back to the Lord the sentences you have recorded, and begin in prayer to formulate them together into a statement that will capture in language the sum of

your experience of God's revelation. Pray this back to God over and over, allowing Him to shape and clarify and form and perfect it until you arrive at a settled sense of what God has been showing you through His work.

5. *Celebration.* Like Brendan, celebrate what God has shown you. Praise Him. Sing and worship. Shout out, jump up and down, get hilarious. Draw a picture, compose a song, take some photographs – whatever it takes to express to God the thrill of actually hearing Him speak to you and make Himself more fully known in this way. Typically, my celebration takes the form of a poem, because in a poem I can bring together my thoughts and feelings into a form that expresses the world as I see it, and I can revisit that part of my world to relive my experience over and over. Here's the poem I wrote to celebrate my time listening to the Lord speak to me through that stump:

Frail Saplings

Old stump, old archive of a faded past,  
your rings reveal the barest hint of lean  
and fruitful years. Across your surface green  
moss here and there appears, implanted fast  
upon the legacy that former years  
bequeathed. And in your niches I can see  
frail, struggling saplings, like you used to be  
so many years ago. Old stump, who hears  
your muted witness? Who takes time to heed  
your subtle warning, to decode the clues  
inscribed upon you, or to learn your views,  
discern your wisdom, or embrace your creed?  
We stand, the frailest saplings, rooted on  
the legacy of generations gone.

6. *Proclamation.* Don't keep your experience to yourself. Tell someone else. That Saturday I was part of a group on a kind of creational theology field trip. So we all took time to share our experience and encourage one another by our encounter with the Lord. This led to a time of worship and praise which drew us all closer to the Lord.

*Practicing creational theology*

Becoming adept at this cat-and-mouse game of creational theology takes a little doing, and a certain amount of preparation. It helps to read widely – about all manner of things in creation, culture, history, and so forth – and to reflect as you are reading on how these different subjects might speak

to you about the glory of God. It's also helpful to read the works of others who have practiced this discipline: Alexander Schmemman, Phil Ryken, and Vigen Goroian come to mind, as do Gerard Manley Hopkins, Albrecht Dürer, and a few others from the past and present, some of whom we will meet shortly. Such writers can help you "learn to look and listen" to what God is making known. Set aside some time each month for an exercise in creational theology. Keep a journal, with a section for conclusions as well as one for "observations-in-process." You might begin that journal by using the journaling pages at the end of this book, just to get you started on this important discipline. Talk to others, and see if you can't encourage a friend to take up this discipline with you. Learn to listen to fine music or to appreciate art; these can be rich sources of divine revelation. And make sure you keep studying and searching the Scriptures, for these must always be the touchstone for any work in creational theology.

When I was a kid, I had a 6-week stint at home with rheumatic fever, during which time I discovered a fascinating TV game show called "Camouflage." Contestants would be shown a line drawing and told that in it was a picture of, oh, say, a cat. But the line drawing was something totally different – a busy downtown intersection with people, cars, buildings, kiosks, and lots of stuff beside. The contestants observed the drawing carefully, then they had to answer a question from the host. If they got it right, a little of the line drawing was peeled away. This went on until one contestant was ready to take the pointer and trace out the image of the cat. At that point it was game over, and the amount of money won depended on how early in the game the sought-for object could be identified.

I lived for "Camouflage" each day. I loved the thought that something was concealed in there for me to search out and find. Many times I beat the contestants, and then I knew not only deep satisfaction, but a kind of pride that was, well, uplifting. It was great fun for a sick kid, even though it didn't amount to anything lasting or truly substantial.

Unlike creational theology. As Brendan and the other Celtic saints knew, great joy, insight, faith, and hope can be known by seeking out what God has concealed of His glory in the creation around them. May we in our day re-discover this game of divine "Camouflage," not just as an amusing pastime, but as a means to real growth in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord.

*For reflection or discussion*

1. Have you ever had an experience in which you encountered the glory of God in the created world? What was that like? How did it make you feel?
2. You can begin to practice creational theology right in your own yard, or a nearby park. What are some objects of the creation you might expect to encounter there? Thinking ahead, what are some aspects or features of those objects that might yield some glimpse into the glory of God?
3. Meditate on Psalm 19.1-4, Romans 1.19 and 20, and Psalm 145.5-12. How might you expect such passages to guide your activities in creational theology?

## 2 Interpreters to the World

### *God Revealed in Creation*

*Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, "The dreams of Pharaoh are one; God has shown Pharaoh what He is about to do."*

- Genesis 41.25

The world is awash with the glory of God. Day and night, in the things of creation, the events of history, and the actions of human conscience, God is pouring forth revelation about Himself (Psalm 19.1-4). He is declaring plainly, for all to see, the witness of His eternal being and power (Romans 1.18-20). In His works the glorious splendor of God's majesty is visible; the awesomeness of His deeds may be observed; and His goodness and righteousness are on display (Psalm 145.4-7). So clear, and so compelling is the glory of God in His works, that Paul tells us they convince every human being of the reality of His existence, their frequent protests to the contrary notwithstanding (Romans 1.19, 20).

Why is it, then, that so many people yet deny the existence of God, or claim that we can know nothing certain about Him?

For one, it's their own fault. Seeing the glory of God in the works of His hand is a little like looking at one of those "magic eye" pictures. First, you have to believe that the hidden object is truly present. Then, you must resolve to invest some time and attention, concentrating hard to find it.

On both counts many people fail. The world and everything in it presents a variety of interesting patterns and themes – just like a "magic eye" picture. God is there in the midst of them, manifesting His glory. But many viewers, under the influence of secular education and the media, refuse to consider the caption which declares the presence of God's glory hidden in the maze. So, while they admire the patterns, they miss the point of it all. As William Cowper noted, over two centuries ago, many people, though quite familiar with and admiring of creation around them, fail to see the divine hand upholding it all: "such a veil/Hangs over mortal eyes, blind from the birth/And dark in things divine" (*The Task*, III.233-235). What they need is someone to come alongside them who will point

out the caption and guide them through the maze of patterns to the larger reality embedded in it all, the glory of God.

Here is where we come in. For we also have a role to play in helping the people around us increase sensitivity to the voice of God coming to them in the everyday things.

*A maze of confusion*

The dreams that descended on Pharaoh presented a curious pastiche of patterns and themes – cows and corn, lean and fat, one group consuming the other. But neither Pharaoh nor his magicians were able to make sense of what he had seen. The dreams were a maze of confusion, and nothing more. Had it not been for the cupbearer, who recalled his experience with Joseph, Pharaoh might – tragically – have written his dreams off as strange visions, perhaps engendered by having gone to bed hungry.

But Joseph saw at once that God was speaking to Pharaoh through this nocturnal medium, revealing His will and setting up the next stage in His plan. Ultimately, Joseph would come to see the significant way God used this situation to care for the needs of His people. Joseph spoke boldly to Pharaoh, interpreting his dream in terms that Pharaoh could understand, and then pointing him in the direction of action appropriate to what the Lord was revealing (Gen. 41.25-36).

Because he walked in a relationship of faith and favor with God, Joseph was able to see the hand of God in the maze of confusing images and patterns of Pharaoh's dream. He perceived that God was warning the king of upcoming events. And he was sufficiently disciplined to discern the voice of God, as well as wise and creative to recommend a course of action that led to the preservation of Egypt and the deliverance of the budding people of Israel.

Joseph did not shun his role as interpreter of God's revelation to him who had, albeit unwittingly, received it. Nor should we be in our own day.

*Still speaking*

God continues speaking to men and women today through all manner of ordinary media – a brilliant sunset, the fresh verdure of spring, the tedium of a job, a broken relationship, some artifact of culture or historical event. He who upholds the world and all things in it cannot help but leave traces of His character and purpose on everything He touches, calling out to our contemporaries to discern His witness and seek Him more intently (Acts 14.17; 17.26, 27).

But the natural blindness of unbelieving people leaves them in the dark about such light from God. How shall they know that God is speaking to them, or what He is saying, unless someone comes alongside them to interpret, the meaning of God's ordinary revelation (Acts 8.31)?

Believers are the mouthpieces of God to a generation blind to the light of truth and deaf to the call of God. The majority of people today look upon the everyday events of their lives as mere routines, meaningless events and circumstances, produced by mere chance, with no larger significance than the effect these have on their personal lives. But God, who works all things according to the counsel of His will (Eph. 1.11), is whispering to the people around us, hinting of His existence, warning of His wrath, enticing them to seek His beauty, and exposing their despair. We are His interpreters to the unbelieving world; not only must we proclaim the Word of truth as revealed in the Scriptures and the Gospel, we must be prepared to discern the voice of God going forth in the everyday events of people's lives. We must invite them to consider what He may be saying to them.

Let us grant from the beginning that we may struggle to get all the details of God's creational revelation correct. But a "ballpark" interpretation is better than none at all. Some years ago I was involved in an automobile accident on a busy portion of I-95. A woman passed me on the right and returned to my lane well before her car had passed mine, clipping my right front fender and sending me whirling off to the median and her to the grassy incline on the other side of the road. By the time I was able to get to her across the highway she was sitting in the driver's seat, the door open and her feet on the ground, with her head in her hands. I asked, "Are you all right?" She looked up with a blank stare, as though she did not understand what I had said. I thought she might have been foreign, and, as we were in South Florida, I asked again, in Spanish, whether she was injured. She continued staring at me. I asked if she spoke English or Spanish, to which she at last replied, "Ya gavryu paRuski" ("I speak Russian"). I had studied Russian for two years in college and, sending up a prayer for grace, proceeded to try to comfort her while we waited for the highway patrol to arrive. When the officer came, we sat in the back seat as he took down our information. While I was not able to understand all that she said to the officer, I could make out just enough to interpret her name and condition to him, to ask her for the name of someone we could call, and to relate her view of what had happened (which, happily, cohered exactly with mine). As he radioed in his report, the woman and I continued to converse, I in very broken Russian, and she responding kindly, and with great patience and understanding, happy to be able to



chat with someone – such as it was – in her native tongue. The end of the story involved my being able to share the Gospel with her, to assure her of God’s love for her, and to send her a Bible in Russian, as she told me she did not have one. A week later I received a tearful but grateful phone call at my office from this woman, thanking me for the Bible, and for taking the time to help her during her moment of crisis.

It wasn’t a perfect interpretation, and the conversation was limited, but it enabled the officer to do his job, and I can’t help but feel that it was meaningful and important to her. Just so might we be able to intervene as God’s interpreters with the people around us to whom He is continuously calling out that they should seek Him while He may be found.

*Listening for the voice of God*

As God’s interpreters to the world we are called to sharpen our skills of discernment. While unbelievers may deny the existence of God and refuse to look at the evidence of His presence in all the things He has made and upholds, we who know Him are without excuse. If we can discern the presence and glory of God in the ordinary events and everyday circumstances of our own lives, we might be able to serve others as His interpreters with greater consistency when the opportunity to do so presents itself to us.

“The LORD is righteous in all his ways and kind in all his works” (Ps. 145.17). Here is a good place to start: look for the evidence of God’s righteousness and kindness in the things He has made and the events of our lives. Learn to respond with wonder, thanksgiving, and praise. Tell another believer what you have seen. God has hidden His presence in every created thing, every situation. It is His glory to do so (Prov. 25.2). But it is our glory and calling to search out what God has hidden (Prov. 25.2; cf. Eccl. 1.13). This is not the work of specialists alone. All who know the Lord are called to seek Him earnestly (Ps. 63.1) and to make His deeds and glory known to the world (Ps. 105.1). Let us develop the discipline of paying more careful attention to the line of God going out to us through the things He has made, always being careful to let our thinking and discerning be informed and guided by the Word of God in Scripture (Ps. 36.9).

We must not embrace conclusions beyond what we may know of God’s goodness, righteousness, power, and kindness. And we may not insist on dogmatic interpretations of what we see; we will always be but poor interpreters of the revelation of God in creation, culture, and conscience.

Yet let us not fail to point out the broad parameters of what we find there, and to be ready, as opportunity presents itself, to help our unbelieving friends see the hand of God in their own lives as well.

*For reflection or discussion*

1. Meditate on Acts 14.17. How many different activities – both of the creation and men – are involved in agriculture? How might each of these activities serve as a “witness” to God? What do they suggest about Him?
2. Are the people around you interested in the things of creation? Do they appreciate the beauty, complexity, wonder, and goodness that unfolds all around them, all day long? What would suggest to you that they do? Why might you do in order to stimulate such interest on their parts?
3. We are called to “seek the Lord” (Ps. 63.1) and even to “seek his presence continually” (Ps. 105.4). How might some regular activity of creational theology help you to fulfill this part of your calling to follow the Lord? What are some daily things you might do in order to incorporate creational theology into your spiritual disciplines?

### 3      Glory All Around

#### *Celts and Creational Theology*

*The heavens declare the glory of God;  
And the firmament shows His handiwork.  
Day after day utters speech...*

- Psalm 19.1, 2

We are currently in the midst of the latest renaissance of interest in Celtic Christianity.

These periodic revivals have come around with regularity since the halcyon days of Patrick, Colum Cille, Columbanus, Cuthbert, Maelruain, and Eriugena came to a close somewhere around the ninth or tenth century. Believers from within the Roman Catholic Church and various strains of Protestantism have, from time to time, tried to connect their roots to this dynamic, expansive, enduring period of Church history. And with good reason: the period of Celtic Christianity, which lasted some 400 years between the fifth and the ninth centuries, is one of the most fascinating and fruitful of epochs, and one which continues to appeal to Christians in all kinds of communions for a variety of reasons.

One of the very alluring aspects of the Celtic Christian experience is their acute sensitivity to the revelation of God in creation. Theologians from every era have acknowledged, to a greater or lesser extent, the teaching of the Bible that God makes Himself known through the things He has made. Most don't go much beyond that, however. Celtic Christians, on the other hand, not only emphasized the revelation of God in creation, but they celebrated it in poetry and the arts and incorporated what theologians refer to as "general revelation" into their devotional practices.

You get the impression, reading the works of Celtic Christians, that if God is making Himself known through the things He has made, then we need to be studying those things carefully, in order to discover His glory, encounter His presence, and learn what we can. Let's look at some examples from the Celtic Christian period of this commitment to what we're calling *creational theology*.

*Columbanus*

The greatest of the Celtic *peregrini* – those wandering preacher/scholars who re-evangelized much of Western Europe – was Columbanus (543-615 AD). Trained in the monastery at Bangor, where, for many years, he taught Hebrew and the classics, Columbanus, at nearly 50 years of age, set off with twelve companions on the defining mission of his life. For the next twelve years he labored at preaching, evangelizing, training missionaries, chastising irresponsible priests, and founding monasteries in France, Switzerland, and Italy. Columbanus left behind a string of disciples and provoked a flood of missionaries who followed him from Ireland to the continent, and whose work extended his own even further.

Columbanus' biographer, the monk Jonas, often remarked his intimacy with created things. He seems to have loved forests and animals and felt a close kinship with God in the company of all kinds of creatures. In one of his extant sermons Columbanus exhorted his monks to press on in seeking to know the Lord, beginning by discovering His glory and encountering Him in the creation 'round about. God, Columbanus declared, "is everywhere present and invisible...He fills heaven and earth and every creature... Therefore God is everywhere, utterly vast, and everywhere nigh at hand, according to His own witness of Himself." Many priests and theologians sought to know God mainly by prying into mysteries they could not understand and promulgating teachings that were more the constructs of their pet philosophical projects than their experience with the living God.

But Columbanus believed that to know God one needed to experience Him in all His multi-faceted beauty, wonder, and might. If his monks wanted to know the depths of God, they first had to meet Him in the shallows of the creation: "Seek no farther concerning God; for those who wish to know the great deep must first review the natural world...If then a man wishes to know the deepest ocean of divine understanding, let him first if he is able scan the visible sea, and the less he finds himself to understand of those creatures which lurk beneath the waves, the more let him realize that he can know less of the depths of its Creator..."

That is, look at the obvious, at what's right before your eyes. See what it can tell you about God, before you plunge into the depths of Scripture and theological speculation.

Columbanus did not mean to suggest that we could not know God by looking at the sea and its creatures; he merely wanted to say that taking a *creational theology* approach to God is an essential starting-point for

knowing God more deeply through the revelation of His Word. Columbanus insisted, “Understand the creation, if you wish to know the Creator; if you will not know the former either, be silent concerning the Creator, but believe in the Creator.” And let those who seek God in the creation pray continuously as they study, “that He would bestow some ray of His light upon our darkness, which may shine on us in our dullness and ignorance on the dark roadway of the world, and that He would lead us to Himself.”

*Celtic Christian cosmologies*

Theologians and poets writing after Columbanus picked up on his themes and elaborated them in a variety of literary forms.

Later in the seventh century an anonymous theologian pulled together a tract explaining the composition and nature of the created order as it was understood by the Fathers of the Church and embraced by Celtic theologians as well. The *Liber de Ordine Creaturarum* is one of the earliest theological cosmologies of the ancient world. While not exhaustive, it provides a concise explanation of the origins and nature of things, so as to enable men to know where they fit in the divine economy and to understand how they must comport themselves on earth in relation to the Triune God.

The purpose of this little exercise is not to provide a detailed account of every living thing or all the stuff of the cosmos. Instead, just enough information is provided to accomplish the Celtic cosmologist’s task, which is to magnify the greatness of “one everlasting God, who is wholly everywhere without limitation of place, disposing all movements without movement of His own, Who sees the past, present, and future ages of His creatures equally, for Whom nothing is past, nothing remains to come, but all things are present.”

Later, he interrupts his brief exposition on the tides to write, “But in this and many matters nothing else is granted to our knowledge except to proclaim the power and greatness of the Creator who has disposed everything in number, weight, and measure, and in the mean time to say with the illustrious teacher of the nations: *we know in part and we prophesy in part; but when what is perfect comes, then I will know just as I am known.*”

The writer known as “Augustine Hibernicus” – the Irish Augustine – took up a similar task at about the same time. His *On the Miracles of Holy Scripture* is an effort to explain the nature of miracles by insisting they are not magic, like much pagan Celtic lore embraced, but manifestations of God’s

sovereign working upon, in, and through things He had already made. God, by an “unaccustomed governance of things”, through sheer sovereign will and might, changed the natural way of things into something else, and all according to His own purposes. Hibernicus explains many of the miracles of the Scriptures in a way that exalts the power of God to do with His creation what He will. For the creation, he insists, was brought into being in the first place, so that God “might reveal through created things all the vast goodness and power and benevolence which beforehand He possessed within Himself alone.”

Creation exists to make God known. If we understand the creation, we will understand God, and how we are to relate to Him.

In a more popular vein, an anonymous tenth-century Irish poet celebrated the goodness and mercy of God as revealed in His many gifts of creation: lovely woods, ample food, the singing of birds and breezes, the peaceable environs of the countryside. Writing to a friend at royal court, he insisted, “Though you delight in your own enjoyments, greater than all wealth, for my part I am grateful for what is given me from my dear Christ.” This lovely song celebrating the glory of God in creation is one of many that extol the grace, wisdom, might, and wonder of God in everything from birds and berries to storms and seasons.

### *Eriugena*

John Scotus Eriugena (810-877 AD) was the only pure philosopher/theologian of the Celtic Christian era. Coming at the end of the period, his works are of varying importance and reliability, but he more than any of the other Celtic Christian writers devoted himself to the examination of God’s works, and the revelation of God hidden therein.

His massive *Periphyseon* (*On the Division of Nature*) is an attempt to categorize all created reality according to a strict philosophical and theological scheme. In it he can be seen to have been an early advocate of what today is referred to as “intelligent design.” Eriugena explained that the order, complexity, and beauty of the cosmos argue the case for an intelligent designer, and, further, that that designer must be nothing other than divine *and* triune. Nothing exists by itself; everything that is has its being, as well as its purpose and explanation, from God, the Creator. God the Word, Eriugena explained, “in an ineffable way runs through all things that are, in order that they may be.” In his series of devotional writings on John 1:1-14 he fairly echoed the words of Columbanus: “...the eternal light reveals itself in a twofold manner through Scripture and through creation...Observe the forms and beauties of sensible things, and

comprehend the Word of God in them. If you do so, the truth will reveal to you in all such things only He Who made them, outside of Whom you have nothing to contemplate, for He Himself is all things.”

The Scriptures explain that the glory of God is woven – even hidden (Prov. 25:2) – in the things of creation. This is real revelation, and the careful study of created things can yield valuable insights into the nature and will of God. Such studies must be undertaken in the *greater* light of Scripture, and the *focusing* light of Christ. When they are, they help to enlarge our experience of God and His grace, and to draw out from us deeper devotion and more fervent obedience.

The powerful witness of the Celtic Christian period – in piety, evangelism and missions, community life, and cultural expression – bears testimony to the potential of an active *creational theology* for bringing greater urgency, fullness, and power to our walk with the Lord and our mission in the world.

*For reflection or discussion*

1. Why do you suppose so few people are willing to take the time to “observe the forms and beauties” of the created world? How might you try to encourage people to join you in learning to make use of this spiritual discipline?
2. The wonders of creation can make for great conversation starters. Here are some things that most people experience. Beside each one, write a sentence you might use to initiate a conversation on the wonders of creation and the glory of the Lord from these items:
  - a stormy day:
  - a broken egg shell of some wild bird:
  - the sights and smells of spring:
  - flowers on someone’s desk:
3. Do you think it would be a good idea to keep a journal of your observations in creational theology? How would you do that? What would you include? How might this help you?

## 4 Line of Sight

*Anne Bradstreet and the Book of Creation*

In “The Booke of the World,” which we previously introduced, 17<sup>th</sup>-century poet William Drummond chided his fellow believers for the casual, even lazy, manner of their approach to God’s revelation, particularly that which comes to them from the creation:

Of this faire Volume which wee World doe name,  
If wee the sheetes and leaves could turne with care,  
Of Him who it correctes, and did it frame,  
Wee cleare might read the Art and Wisedome rare?  
Finde out his Power which wildest Pow’rs doth tame,  
His providence extending everie-where,  
His justice which proud Rebels doeth not spare,  
In everie Page, no, Period of the same:  
But sillie wee (like foolish Children) rest  
Well pleas’d with colour’d Velame, Leaves of Gold,  
Faire dangling Ribbones, leaving what is best,  
On the great Writers sense ne’er taking hold;  
Or if by chance our Mindes doe muse on ought,  
It is some Picture on the Margin wrought.<sup>6</sup>

Drummond complained that, rather than seek to understand what God may be saying to us through the revelation in creation (Ps. 19:1-4), we prefer to get what knowledge of Him we need from the pages of Scripture only. And even if we do pause and take the time to meditate on some wonder of glory from the world around, we regard it merely as a kind of illustration of the “real” revelation in Scripture.

*Revelation in creation*

Things haven’t changed much. Reading and studying the “faire Volume which wee World doe name” is of no more interest to Christians today than it was to Drummond’s contemporaries. However, as I argue in my book, *Consider the Lilies*,<sup>7</sup> the revelation of God in creation and culture is *real* revelation. Knowledge of God and His will can be gained from observing Him passing in the rustling grass, the rocks, the trees, and everywhere else.

Yet Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century seem as disinclined to seek out that knowledge as their 18<sup>th</sup> century forebears.



The reasons for this neglect are not hard to surmise: we're simply lazy. It's hard work to read, study, observe, experiment, and catalog the various ways that God speaks to us from the creation. If polls are correct, it's all most contemporary Christians can do to find time to read their Bibles with any degree of consistency, much less devote any effort to listening for the voice of God in the things He has made.

For those who may be so inclined, however, knowing where to turn for help can be a challenge.

I recommend, as a place to begin, poetry – Hopkins, Dickinson, Milosz, Levertov, Wilbur, and many more, Christians who have reflected on the creation, straining to discern the revelation of God there, and who have left us many engaging insights and meditations to strengthen and expand the horizons of our faith.

Poetry can construct a line of sight from the world of material reality to the unseen realm of God and His glory. It can teach us how to view the creation so as to discern the presence, or an intimation of the presence, of God, and even to reflect on aspects of His will for us. It's clear from Scripture that God intends us to note His presence in the things He has made, and, at the very least, to be more consistent in giving thanks to Him for the evidence of His grace (cf. Rom. 1:18-21). It behooves us, therefore, to look for guidance where we can in discerning the revelation of God in created things, and poetry can serve us well in this regard.

As an example of such guidance, I want to look at one poem by Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672), America's first lady of verse. The poem is "Contemplations," and it is constructed of thirty-two stanzas of seven lines each and one stanza, the concluding, of eight lines.

*Revelation in the structure*

From a glance at the structure of this poem we should be cued to expect a meditation on divine revelation. Seven is a Biblical number of perfection – the number for God plus the number for the creation and man. Each of the first thirty-two stanzas consists of four lines of A,B,A,B rhyme and a concluding tercet of C,C,C. Thus, three different rhyming sounds combine in a set of four lines and three lines. The first six lines of each stanza are in iambic pentameter; the final line adds an extra foot, breaking the rhythm of the "old" lines and taking up a "new" structure – a hint of the eighth day of creation introduced by the Resurrection?

The final stanza of eight lines is made up of four rhymed couplets, almost as if directing the poem to come to rest on the creation and the observer, whence it takes its flight through all the preceding stanzas. Yet, not to lose sight of the real object of these contemplations, the last couplet reads,

But he whose name is graved in the white stone,  
Shall last and shine when all of these are gone.<sup>8</sup>

Can it be merely a coincidence that the number of stanzas – thirty-three – corresponds to the age our Lord Jesus is traditionally considered to have achieved during His earthly sojourn?

### *Associations*

The key to understanding this poem as a guide to discerning the revelation of God in creation is to note the various associations between creation and Scripture Anne Bradstreet was able to observe.

Various aspects of the creation around her create points in a line of sight that lead her to reflect on the glory of God and the mysteries of the divine economy. Something in the creation prompts her to think about something in Scripture; the association thus made leads her to turn the pages of the book of creation in new and revelation-yielding ways.

Out on an autumn walk in the woods, Bradstreet is struck by the colors of the trees, and first of all, the golden leaves:

Some time now past in the autumnal tide,  
When Phoebus wanted but one hour to bed,  
The trees all richly clad, yet void of pride,  
Where gilded o'er by his rich golden head...

Immediately, in the second stanza, she begins to associate the “golden head” and other rich colors with God:

How excellent is He that dwells on high,  
Whose power and beauty by his works we know...

A “stately oak” over a hundred years old (Stanza 3), turns her thoughts to eternity as she moves her eyes up the trunk into the high boughs. There she observes the sun, glistening through its top boughs, and leading her to ask, “What glory’s like to thee?” (Stanza 4) In the next stanza she associates the sun with its mention in Psalm 19, leading to a reverie that

lasts for three stanzas, and ending in a paean to the greater glory of God in Stanza 7.

In Stanza 8 Mrs. Bradstreet wants to respond to what she has observed. She considers making a song to celebrate the glory of God, doubtless the beginnings of “Contemplations” itself:

My humble eyes to lofty skies I reared  
To sing some song, my mazed Muse thought meet.  
My great Creator I would magnify...

Her initial effort is joined by a grasshopper and a cricket, each contributing its tune and encouraging her on in her determination to praise God in song (Stanza 9):

They kept one tune and played on the same string,  
Seeming to glory in their little art.  
Shall creatures abject thus their voices raise  
And in their kind resound their Maker’s praise,  
Whilst I, as mute, can warble forth no higher lays?

The pristine setting thrusts Mrs. Bradstreet’s thinking back in time to creation, where she imagines the first couple in such a setting as she was enjoying, more beautiful at first, but its perfect beauty and innocence lost in the fall into sin (Stanzas 10-12). The mention of sin leads her to reflect further into the initial chapters of Genesis, then from there through the years of her forebears, and back to her present (Stanzas 13-17). This rapid survey through history leads her abruptly to comment on the brevity of life and how we tend to waste it in frivolous undertakings. While the creation repeats an eternal cycle of birth, maturity, death, and rebirth, human beings “darken, perish, fade and die...” (Stanzas 18-20). Yet she knows that we were made for eternity.

Sitting now to contemplate a stream, her thoughts turn to the River of Life and the blessings abounding on either shore (Stanzas 21-24). Then her meditation is interrupted by the birds, flitting above her head (Stanzas 25-28). She is caught up in the joy of their flight and song, and the apparently carefree way they go about their daily business. This turns her thoughts to the world of men and the miseries they, the noblest of God’s creatures, foist upon themselves because of sin (Stanzas 29-32). Men are fools who seek to find their greatest happiness in the pleasures of this life:

Fond fool, he takes this earth ev’n for heav’ns bower.

But sad affliction comes and makes him see  
Here's neither honour, wealth, nor safety;  
Only above is found all with security.

And so, from earth to heaven to earth and heaven again, she settles on time, “the fatal wrack of mortal things,” which corrupts and corrodes all man’s noblest endeavors. Time seems almost to have the victory over the best that men can muster:

Their names without a record are forgot,  
Their parts, their ports, their pomp’s all laid in th’ dust  
Nor wit, nor gold, nor buildings scape times rust...

But then, as the poem comes to rest on creation and the observer, as a member of the race of sinful men, the final couplet recalls the redemption of Jesus Christ and hope of those who have been given a white stone with a secret name engraved on it for all eternity (Rev. 2.17). Thus, viewing a stone, she brings her contemplations to an end by fusing creation and Creator, time and eternity, sin and redemption, death and eternal life in a white stone which she perhaps was holding in her hand.

### *Seeking the Lord*

God is continually calling us to seek Him, and He promises that we will find Him when we seek Him with all our heart (Jer. 29.13). We must certainly seek Him in the pages of Scripture; yet we must not neglect the multitude of daily ways the Lord invites us to glimpse His glory through the things He has made. As Anne Bradstreet demonstrates, here await many prompts and provocations to meditate on the greatness and glory of God and to reflect on our place within the divine economy.

### *For reflection or discussion*

1. Meditate on two poems from Scripture: Psalm 8 and Psalm 19. How do these poems help us to think about the revelation of God in creation? How do they connect that revelation with what God has spoken to us in His Word?
2. Do you have a favorite poem or hymn about creation, or some aspect of it, that helps you in thinking about the Lord? Be prepared to share and discuss it.

3. How might reading good poetry help you to “slow down” and pay a little more attention to the creation around you? How could you incorporate reading good Christian poetry into your spiritual disciplines?

## 5 The World in a Ray of Sun

### *Poetry and Creational Theology*

*Who knows the secrets of the world? Not the learned men, but poets.*

- Esther De Waal

Let's pursue a little further this discussion of poetry and how it can help us in the work of creational theology.

It was said of the great Celtic missionary/monk, Colum Cille, founder of the monastic community on Iona (d. 597), that he possessed "second sight", the ability to see through mundane circumstances, events, and things to the larger spiritual meanings they represent.

The idea of "second sight" is as old as Homer: in *The Iliad*, the seer, Calchas, renowned for possessing second sight, was approached to explain the reasons behind the blighting of the Greek armies and the frustration of their purposes at Troy, to see beyond or through the circumstances of the Greek armies into the counsel and will of the Olympian divines.

By the time "second sight" began to be valued by Celtic Christians, it had come to be associated with the gifts of prophecy and poetry, in part because of the traditional role of poetry in pre-Christian Celtic society, in part because so much Old Testament prophecy appears in poetic form. In the Celtic Christian worldview, poetry and prophecy often went hand-in-glove. Poets could see things normal people could not, and this qualified at least some of them to speak with a prophetic voice concerning the will of God. Colum Cille was celebrated both as a prophet and a poet.

It may be more than merely coincidental that poetry and the ability to discover transcendent meanings in everyday things and situations are frequently associated. By its very nature poetry is designed to make us reflect more deeply about everyday realities. As Molly Peacock puts it, "Poetry is the art that offers depth in a moment, using the depth *of* a moment."<sup>9</sup> Wallace Stevens elaborates: "One is always writing about two things at the same time in poetry and it is this that produces the tension characteristic of poetry. One is the subject and the other is the poetry of the subject."<sup>10</sup> At any time, therefore, a poet is confronted with a "subject" – a situation, an object of the creation, a conversation.

Something is going on right before her eyes, which she can observe, analyze, and describe. But the poet sees more. Behind every “subject” is a deeper meaning – the “poetry” of the subject. The event or object comes to stand for larger truths and realities, more significant than the subject itself, and to invoke grander visions, or to conjure deep affections or profound insights into life. A bird floating on unseen currents of air suggests the sovereign care of God for all His creation. The onset of blindness reminds us that God does not need any of our works but receives even our most humble service as a way of honoring Him. Those whose minds are trained to “freeze” such subjects and explore their larger significance, then to point toward that significance in verse, are often able to guide their readers into an experience rather like second sight, in which unseen things emerge out of what is seen, like the 3-D images concealed in a “Magic Eye” picture.

#### *Christians and unseen things*

The privilege of second sight inheres to all the followers of Jesus Christ. Christians are commanded to set their minds on the unseen realities of the spiritual world, where Christ rules as King at the Father’s right hand (Col. 3.1-3). By developing this ability to “see” beyond the mundane, believers can find strength, peace, and hope, even in the face of the most untoward circumstances (2 Cor. 4.16-18). The ability to “practice” the unseen verities of the spiritual world is an indispensable component of true faith (Heb. 11.1; 12.1, 2). And we have the testimony of God Himself that He has set His glory in the visible things of creation, culture, and the actions of human conscience (Ps. 19.1-4; Ps. 68.18; Lk. 13.1-5). There are profound, unseen mysteries to be discovered in the careful contemplation of the things and situations we encounter every day. Indeed, God glories to “hide” the revelation of Himself in mundane situations and things; He challenges us to seek out that glory by careful observation (Prov. 25.2), so that we might render to Him the thanks and worship He is due (cf. Rom. 1.18-21).

It would seem, therefore, that every believer in Jesus Christ should be eager to nurture at least a modicum of “second sight” as a discipline for victorious and joyful Christian living. And we might reasonably expect the reading and study of poetry – particularly Christian poetry – to aid us in nurturing this ability.

#### *Examples of poetic second sight*

Let’s consider three examples of poetry working to facilitate second sight. In each of the following poems an everyday situation or event is the focus of the poet’s reflection. But in his or her skilled hand, the “subject” takes

on deeper significance; and, as the poet explores the “poetry” of the subject, deftly bringing images and words together, the “subject” becomes a vehicle for transporting us into the deeper and more real world of spiritual truth. It becomes less important as a thing or an event *per se*, and more important for what it reveals about eternal verities.

Let’s look first at Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889). Here is his poem, “Let me be to Thee as the circling bird”:

Let me be to Thee as the circling bird,  
Or bat with tender and air-crisping wings  
That shapes in half-light his departing rings,  
From both of whom a changeless note is heard.

I have found my music in a common word,  
Trying each pleasurable throat that sings  
And every praised sequence of sweet strings,  
And know infallibly which I preferred.

The authentic cadence was discovered late  
Which ends those only strains that I approve,  
And other science all gone out of date  
And minor sweetness scarce made mention of:  
I have found the dominant of my range and state –  
Love, O my God, to call Thee Love and Love.

The subject of this poem is a bird or bat circling a light, probably a gas street lamp, singing or chirping as it flies in repetitive rings around its focus. The idea of that “changeless note” gives Hopkins the opportunity to make a comparison with himself, with his “music.” He sings poetry like the circling bird sings his own unique note. Only late in life did Hopkins discover his own voice and style in writing poetry, and he offered it to God as the greatest gift he could give Him. None of Hopkins’ wonderful verse was published in his lifetime; for him it was enough to offer his verse as a gift of “Love” to the God who was “Love” to him. He was satisfied to circle ‘round the God Who loves him and to compose songs of love to Him in return.

This poem is a sonnet – 14 lines in three stanzas, the first two quatrains pose the situation, the last stanza, a sestet, provides the resolution. The rhythm of the lines is consistent throughout; the rhymes of the first two stanzas agree while a new rhyme scheme is introduced in the final sestet. Hopkins composed his observation and what it suggests about finding



one's unique "voice" for loving God in a traditional form that is almost musical when read aloud. He invites the reader to enter his "song" and, in the process, to reflect on his or her own calling from the Lord. The circling bird becomes the "sightline" for a glimpse into unseen verities, not only for Hopkins, but for each one who enters his reverie with the eye of faith.

Our second poet is Denise Levertov (1923-1997):

From *Below*

I move among the ankles  
of forest Elders, tread  
their moist rugs of moss,  
duff of their soft brown carpets.  
Far above, their arms are held  
open wide to each other, or waving –

what they know, what  
perplexities and wisdoms they exchange,  
unknown to me as were the thoughts  
of grownups when in infancy I wandered  
into a roofed clearing amidst  
human feet and legs and the massive  
carved legs of the table,

the minds of people, the minds of trees  
equally remote, my attention then  
filled with sensations, my attention now  
caught by leaf and bark at eye level  
and by thoughts of my own, but sometimes  
drawn up to gazing – up and up: to wonder  
about what rises  
so far above me into the light.

The poet is in a forest, looking up at the trees high above her, and recalling a childhood episode of being in a different kind of "forest" – of human and table legs. Notice how deftly she interweaves the two experiences – "rugs of moss", "duff of their soft brown carpets", "a roofed clearing". She has learned since her childhood that adults know so much, have much wisdom to offer, and converse over great perplexities and profound matters. As a child the "trees" of her "forest" drew her on and up to the world of adult realities and a fuller life. Were the trees,

towering above her late in life, doing the same, pointing her far beyond, “into the light” of an altogether different realm of mystery and wonder? What glories and perplexities awaited her there?

This poem is in a kind of modified free verse; it has no discernible rhythm or rhyme, although the three stanzas are meant to suggest shifts in thought. Nevertheless, the skilled use of enjambment – wrapping a sentence to the next line – helps to emphasize key thoughts and to create a “sightline” for the reader: “open”, “perplexities”, “unknown”, “filled”, “drawn”, “so far above.” Ms. Levertov’s meditation in the woods reminds us that unseen realities beckon to us in the things that are seen, and, at the very least, urge us to contemplate their meaning and significance (cf. Ps. 19:1-4).

Our final guide to unseen things is Wendell Berry (1934 -):

To sit and look at light-filled leaves  
May let us see, or seem to see,  
Far backward as through clearer eyes  
To what unsighted hope believes:  
The blessed conviviality  
That sang Creation’s seventh sunrise,

Time when the Maker’s radiant sight  
Made radiant everything He saw,  
And every thing He saw was filled  
With perfect joy and life and light.  
His perfect pleasure was sole law;  
No pleasure had become self-willed.

For all His creatures were His pleasures  
And their whole pleasure was to be  
What He made them; they sought no gain  
Or growth beyond their proper measures,  
Nor longed for change or novelty.  
The only new thing could be pain.

Berry mixes rhyme schemes to create a delightful invitation to enter the realm of second sight. Light playing on and around a leaf speaks to him of the glory of God, and transports his mind back to the first days of creation, when every created thing was content to be what God had made it, without self-willed ambition. All was peace and delight and pleasure in the perfect law of God. The only thing the creatures could add would be

disruption – “pain.” Berry sees a good deal of “pain” in the world today, most of which is the result of selfish ambition and a desire to exercise God-like dominion over creation and others, but without the grace and wisdom that only God can possess. Less confrontational than his many essays on this theme, this “Sabbath Poem” allows Berry an opportunity to lament what our economic greed has wrought, and to bring us into his lament with him.

These three Christian poets demonstrate clearly how seeking out the depth of a moment – observing and meditating on a mundane subject in order to explore its spiritual associations and unlock its transcendent meanings – can discover the poetry of that moment and lead to an experience of second sight. Reading and reflecting on this kind of poetry can thus be a kind of spiritual discipline, training us to see along a sight-line of creation, Scripture, and our own reflection, beyond our immediate experience into the second sight world of unseen things.

#### *Poetry as spiritual discipline*

Spiritual disciplines are those exercises and regimens that train our souls – mind, heart, and conscience – for greater sensitivity toward and receptivity of the things of God. Prayer, Scripture reading, meditation, fasting – these are a few of the tried-and-true means of engaging the Lord in our souls so that we experience the transforming power of His glory and Spirit (2 Cor. 3.12-18). Reading Christian poetry can have a similar effect, by leading us to discover the glory of God in everyday things and training us in the exercise of second sight.

Take up reading good Christian poetry as part of your practice of spiritual disciplines. An excellent place to turn is, *A Sacrifice of Praise: An Anthology of Christian Poetry in English from Caedmon to the Mid-Twentieth Century* (James H. Trott, ed., Nashville: Cumberland House, 1999, 2006). Here are over 700 pages of the finest English Christian poetry to help nurture second sight as part of your own regimen for spiritual growth. Allow me to offer just a few guidelines for reading poetry as a spiritual discipline.

First, read the poem slowly and, preferably, aloud. Listen to the sounds. Try to feel the rhythm. Let the music of the poem emerge and begin to move your soul in rhythm with it. Look for rhymes – both at the ends of lines and in the middle, and of ideas as well as sounds. As you read and begin to *feel* the poem, picture the subject of it in your mind. What is in the poet’s focus? What is the unfolding story or description contained in the poem? How would you summarize the *subject* of the poem?

Second, try to discern the connections the poet is making to unseen realities – the “poetry” of the subject. Do you hear terms or phrases that remind you of spiritual things? Are there any echoes of Biblical truth? Any direct comparisons with or subtle allusions to spiritual realities or transcendent truths? What spiritual meaning is the poet trying to suggest? How does he connect that meaning to his subject?

Third, establish a “sightline” for second sight. Your sightline will run something like this: *subject to associations with spiritual things to spiritual lessons to personal significance*. By garnering a clear sense of the subject and observing the way the poet connects its details to spiritual matters, you should be able to derive the spiritual lessons or implications the poet is making for himself. Then you will be able to reflect on what those might imply for you. Thus you may enter into the poet’s experience of the *subject*, and allow the *poetry* of the subject to let you look along his outstretched arm and pointed finger at his own exercise of second sight. This, in turn, can help to nurture in you that valued ability to see through your own mundane reality into the realm of unseen things – the exercise of second sight.

The more you read poetry like the selections in *A Sacrifice of Praise* as a spiritual discipline, the stronger will become your ability to observe and appreciate the glory of God in the everyday situations and objects of your own life. You may begin to find that, increasingly, the world around you looks different, brighter, more fraught with beauty and spiritual meaning. As you nurture the ability to see with second sight, your sense of the whole world will be greatly enlarged, and your awareness of the presence of God will become more consistent and acute.

Colum Cille was celebrated by his contemporaries and spiritual heirs for his great ability to discern the will of God in some ordinary object or event. His skill in the exercise of second sight was so pronounced that Adomnán, his primary biographer, recorded, “in some speculations made with divine favour the scope of his mind was miraculously enlarged, and he saw plainly, and contemplated, even the whole world as it were caught up in one ray of sun.”<sup>11</sup>

This is the poet’s work, as well as his gift to us. As he contemplates the whole world in a ray of sun, the poet encourages us to join him in the exercise of second sight, of seeing through to transcendent realities by means of everyday situations and things, thus to discover the glory of God as our constant companion.

*For reflection or discussion*

1. Why do you suppose so much of the Bible is written in poetry? What is it about poetry that particularly makes it a valuable tool for divine revelation?
  
2. The arts – like the creation around us – are a solid resource for the work of creational theology. What would you expect to learn about God and His glory from
  - reading poetry:
  
  - listening to classical music:
  
  - learning to appreciate paintings:
  
3. What is your plan for making creational theology more a part of your personal growth and ministry? If you don't have a plan, should you? Even a small one? If you had a plan, what would be your goals? How would you hope, over time, to benefit from a more disciplined and consistent approach to the practice of creational theology?

## 6 Can I Get a Witness?

### *Making God's Glory Known*

*"Nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness."*

- Acts 14.17

I was standing in front of a new painting by Andrew Wyeth admiring that familiar technique and those crisp, careful strokes, when I suddenly became aware of someone standing next to me. I turned to see, and it was one of the docents who stroll the galleries of the Brandywine River Museum in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania. I said, "Man, 90 years old, and he's still got the stuff." He said, "Yeah, well, you should have been here yesterday." "Oh?" I replied. "What happened?" "Well," he said, pointing to the painting, "you see that shadow there just beneath the fence? The day before yesterday there was a deer there. But Mr. Wyeth came in yesterday, paints in hand, and painted it out!" "You're kidding!" I was astonished. "No," he continued, "He just felt the presence of the deer was larger and more palpable by the *suggestion* of it rather than its actual *depiction*. So he left some indicators, but not the deer itself, and the painting is strengthened by his having done so."

I had to agree. As I studied it more carefully, I could sense the deer's recent presence – literally and figuratively – and the sense of that filled more of the painting than if it were still where Mr. Wyeth had originally set it.

I would probably not have noticed that subtle, beautiful touch had the docent not pointed it out to me. Andrew Wyeth wanted to bear witness to a deer, and he wanted the sense of the deer to occupy the whole canvas, not just a place by a fence. By painting it out and leaving just the indicators of its former presence, he accomplished a witness to something greater than the actual presence of it in the painting would have suggested.

Just so, God is bearing witness to Himself, not by being Himself visibly present on the canvas of this world, but by leaving traces and indicators of His presence and His character, and calling men and women to take note and to respond.

From the foundation of the world, Paul tells us, God has been making Himself known to us in the things He has made (Rom. 1.18-21). And God is a good “painter.” His existence, Paul says, is clearly seen and certainly known by every person, even those who are the most outspoken in denying the reality of God. God’s witness is compelling, and it resonates powerfully with the image of God in each person, so that everyone, Paul says, has enough of the knowledge of God to give thanks for what they have received, and to seek out more of Him.

Most people don’t, however, preferring instead to create “gods” of their own – whether pot-bellied, wild-eyed idols on the shelf or the more subtle and mundane deities of success and sensuality. The knowledge of God in each person drives us to seek some experience of the transcendent and to live as though our lives really had purpose and meaning. God continues bearing witness to His existence, and His testimony is just as clear and compelling as ever (Ps. 19.1-4). Yet most men spend a good deal of their conscious and unconscious energy searching out and propping up alternative explanations for what they see and alternative deities for their time, attention, and strength.

What they need is for some “docent of glory” to come alongside and point out the obvious for them.

#### *Paul in Lystra*

This is what we find Paul doing in Lystra in Asia Minor. The people there – rank pagans – were astonished by a miracle of healing and the power of Paul’s speech, and wanted to make him out as a local pagan god, and offer sacrifices to him. Paul protested that they misunderstood him. He was not God, but he had come to tell them about God, the true and living God.

In fact, Paul insisted, God has been bearing witness to Himself since time out of mind, showing Himself to be a wise, good, powerful, and loving God, suggesting His presence with the Lystran people by a wide range of “indicators” “painted in” to the canvas of their lives, year-in and year-out.

Paul alludes to three particular *loci* in which the touch of the divine artist could be seen.

First, there is the *creation* around them – the rains and soil, the plants and their fruit, the times and seasons, the tastes and textures of food. The wonder, variety, mystery, power, orderliness, usability, beauty, and abundance of the created order testify to the wisdom, power, and goodness of God. He created all these, and He sustains them by His

constant decree and command. Every created thing is a “servant” of the Lord (Ps. 119.89-91) and suggests something about the One Who created and sustains it.

Second, there are the works of human *culture* – agriculture, in this case. The movement of a plow through fresh soil, the care of the sower, the timing of the harvest, the processing of food: all these human activities require divine gifts, and God has lavished His gifts on all men – even on those who despise Him (Ps. 68.18) – so that He might make Himself known thereby. The Lystrans, doubtless like most of us, had come to take the wonder, beauty, and efficiency of their inherited cultural forms for granted, and, in so doing, probably saw their work as a drudge rather than as a gift from God. But God is in culture, leaving hints and indicators of His existence, calling all men to acknowledge His existence and give Him the thanks He is due.

Finally, there are the activities of human *conscience*. The Lystrans experienced *good* and *gladness* in their souls because of the goodness of God in creation and culture, and this led them to set patterns and priorities for how they used their time, what their goals should be, and what things mattered most. Their consciences – the valuing center of the soul – were informed and shaped by God’s goodness and their desire to experience goodness and gladness, and here, Paul insisted, was yet another witness from God, Who is always working to make His glory known to men.

God has been very active and wondrously consistent from the beginning of time in making Himself known through the things He has made. He has made a clear and compelling witness to His existence and character. But most folks seem to be not paying attention. They stare at the painting which is the world, and their lives in it, and they do not – or will not – note the indicators of divine presence, filling the canvas of life. So they make up their own stories to explain what they see.

Such people need a docent of glory, like Paul, to come alongside and point out the obvious.

*For the knowledge of God’s glory*

It is significant that God says, through the prophet Habakkuk, that “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (Hab. 2.14). He does *not* say, which I think many people mistakenly *understand* Him to be saying, that the earth will be filled with the *glory* of the Lord. The earth is already filled with the glory of the Lord, as Psalm 19.1-4 makes clear. God’s glory fills the earth, in every



nook and cranny of creation, culture, and the consciences of men. He is there sustaining, supporting, upholding, caring, providing, blessing, bestowing, and doing all manner of wondrous, wonderful things. His glory pervades the creation because *He* pervades it: in Him we live and move and have our being, as Paul, quoting an insightful and honest pagan philosopher (Epimenides of Crete), reminded the Athenians (Acts 17.28).

It's not that the glory of God will one day fill the creation; it already does. Rather, it is that the *knowledge* of that glory will increasingly become the common possession of the world of men, filling their minds, arresting their attention, intruding on their reveries, denying their denials of God, and appealing, appealing, appealing to the image of God in their souls, beckoning them to face the music, drink in the sense of God, and fall down before Him in worship. Should they ever reach the point of wanting to do that, they will find their way to Jesus, and find in Him the way into the Father's presence and grace, the Father Whose glory they are coming to know and Whose presence weighs on them with greater and greater force each day.

But how will the *knowledge* of the glory of God come to the attention of distracted, denial-plagued men?

When the *docents of glory*, like Paul at Lystra, take it upon themselves to point out the indicators and evidence of the Divine Artist, and call their neighbors to acknowledge Him and give Him thanks. We are the docents of glory who daily have the opportunity, like Paul, to use the evidence of God in creation, culture, and conscience to celebrate the glory of God and turn the minds of people to consider Jesus.

Now this takes a little practice and preparation, to be sure, but what glory and beauty, what majesty and sense of transcendent presence await those who take the time to "consider the lilies," as Jesus recommended, and find everywhere and in everything the evidence of the God Who stands back of it all.

The more we work at contemplating the glory of God in the things He has made, looking for the indicators of His presence and worshipping Him for the beauty we discover, the better prepared we will be for the opportunities to make known His glory to others.

And the more of us who take up this work of being docents of glory, the harder it will be for our unbelieving friends and neighbors to escape the

constant reminders of the God Who loves them, made them, cares for them, and daily, hourly calls them to seek Him while He may be found.

The path to Jesus for many people has been found along the road of creation, culture, and conscience. Augustine is a classic example. His own conscience haunted by a senseless childhood prank, and years of self-indulgent frivolity, he reached a crisis in which his heart was turned to God by the lilting strains of music.

First, it was the soaring music of the psalms, sung in Ambrose's church where he, to please his mother and fit in with the culture, was an occasional attendee. The singing of psalms soothed his troubled soul and led him to think that getting beyond his guilt, shame, and meaninglessness might still be possible.

Then it was the simple song of an unknown child, wafting over his garden wall – “Take up and read, take up and read” – that led him to grab a Bible, open it randomly, and read those indicting words of the Apostle Paul that drove him to profess faith in Jesus Christ: “But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”

Docents of glory, working with the Spirit and Word of God, brought Augustine to his senses, and to Jesus.

For whom might you be a docent of glory, to stir their souls to seek the Lord as well? Can God, and your neighbors, get a witness out of you this week?

*For reflection or discussion*

1. Have you ever thought of yourself as a docent of glory? In what ways might taking up this challenge help to enhance your witness for the Lord?
2. Do you think that taking up the work of a docent of glory would affect your worship of God? Why or why not?
3. What are the primary obstacles presently keeping you from becoming a docent of glory? Should you allow these to continue standing in your way? How might you begin to remove these? How could some Christian friends help you in this?

## My Creational Theology Journal

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Activity \_\_\_\_\_

Observation (*What am I seeing or hearing?*):

Associations (*Does this remind me of anything in Scripture?*):

Integration (*How can I bring my observations and Scripture together? What is God saying to or showing me?*):

Meditation (*Further questions, thoughts, reflections*):

Celebration (*How will I celebrate what God has shown me?*):

Proclamation (*With whom will I share this?*):

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## End Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> In G. S. M. Walker, ed. and tr, *Sancti Columbani Opera* (Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies, 1957), p. 5.
- <sup>2</sup> Charles Plummer, ed. and tr. *Vita Brendani*, in *Lives of Irish Saints* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1922, 1997), Vol. II, pp. 59, 60
- <sup>3</sup> In James H. Trott, *A Sacrifice of Praise: An Anthology of Christian Poetry in English from Caedmon to the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Nashville: Cumberland House, 1999), p. 195.
- <sup>4</sup> Cf. G. C. Berkouwer, *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), pp. 131, 132.
- <sup>5</sup> T. M. Moore, *Consider the Lilies: A Plea for Creational Theology* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 2005).
- <sup>6</sup> In James H. Trott, *A Sacrifice of Praise: An Anthology of Christian Poetry in English from Caedmon to the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Nashville: Cumberland House, 1999), p. 195.
- <sup>7</sup> T. M. Moore, *Consider the Lilies* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R,2005).
- <sup>8</sup> All quotations are from Jeannine Hensley, ed., *The Works of Anne Bradstreet* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1967).
- <sup>9</sup> Molly Peacock, *How to Read a Poem...and Start a Poetry Circle* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), p. 13.
- <sup>10</sup> Wallace Stevens, "The Irrational Element in Poetry," in Reginald Gibbons, ed., *The Poet's Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 52.
- <sup>11</sup> Alan Orr Anderson and Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson, ed. and tr., *Adomnán's Life of Columba* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 19.