God's Wrath against Unbelievers Proved and Justified

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Introduction

Paul's epistle to the Romans contains the longest, most systematic and profound exposition of the gospel in the whole Bible. The apostle's letter is the closest thing to a systematic theology that we find in the New Testament. These points raise the question: Why does Romans contain such a complete and detailed presentation of the gospel? While there is no explicit statement in Scripture telling us why this epistle is so carefully crafted, conservative scholars have noted some good reasons why this book is unique. (a) Romans is the only letter written by Paul to a church that he did not start and that he had never even visited (cf. Rom. 1:10-15). Therefore, even though he had some knowledge as to what was occurring in the Roman church (e.g. see 1:8; 14:1-15:13; 16:3, 7, 11, 17, 19), he does not spend a lot of time answering questions and dealing with local issues. (b) The epistle was likely written in early A. D. 58 before Paul took relief money to the saints in Jerusalem. The letter was written at the close of his third missionary journey from Corinth (Ac. 20:2, 3). It was a period of time (about 3 whole months) in which the apostle did not have pressing commitments. Therefore, Paul had adequate time to craft his theological masterpiece. (c) Paul was writing to believers who lived in the very center of the Roman Empire. Given the fact that the apostle had never preached to the Roman church, the city's great strategic importance and the apostle's providential time of rest, Paul was able to write a more complete exposition of the gospel. He wanted to make sure the Roman Christians knew the details, the fullness and the answers to the main objections to the gospel.

While the book of Romans does not deal solely with justification (e.g. chapters 6-8 deal with sanctification and victory in Christ; chapters 9-11 deal with the calling of the Gentiles, Israel and election; chapters 12-16 contain practical exhortations and personal greetings) there is no question that justification is the central theme or core of the book. Paul makes the theme quite clear in verses 16 and 17 of chapter one. "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of God, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'The just shall live by faith.'" The gospel or good news is that everyone, whether Jew or Gentile, who believes in Jesus Christ is saved and reconciled to God. This doctrine is the central teaching of the whole Bible. It is taught from the beginning to the end of Scripture. As Paul says in Romans 3:21: "But now the

¹ In Martin Luther's famous *Preface to Romans* (1552) he writes, "This Epistle is really the chief part of the New Testament and the very purest Gospel, and is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul. It can never be read or pondered too much, and the more it is dealt with the more precious it becomes, and the better it tastes" (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1976], xiii).

righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets." In chapter 4 the apostle even points to Abraham as an example of justification by faith alone apart from the works of the law.

Because Romans contains such a clear, detailed exposition of justification we will consider the main core of Paul's presentation of the gospel from 1:16 through 3:31. In our day when new heretical theories abound regarding the nature of the gospel, it is very important that we understand the apostle's teaching. As we do so we will interact to some degree with popular heretical concepts of justification. This section of Scripture covers two main areas of thought. First, Paul will discuss the need for the gospel (1:18-3:20). He will demonstrate that all men, whether Jew or Gentile, are sinners, guilty before God and unable to rescue themselves from their predicament. There is no hope of salvation apart from Jesus Christ. It is essential for us to understand our hopelessness and helplessness apart from the Savior. Second, Paul turns his attention to the remedy for man's predicament: God's plan of salvation (3:21-8:39), more specifically justification by faith (3:21-4:25). The "but now" of 3:21 is perhaps the greatest adversative in the Bible. There is hope because what we could not do, Christ did. By His death He satisfies divine justice, by His obedience He merits eternal life. We are not saved by doing but by believing in Jesus.

The Wrath of God against Mankind

In verse 18 and following Paul turns his attention to a detailed demonstration of all men's need to embrace Christ. If a person does not admit their condition before God as sinful, guilty and under the just sentence of condemnation, he or she will see no reason to trust in the death and merits of Jesus.

This whole section which comes to a climax in Romans 3:19-20 contains brilliant biblical reasoning and demonstrates beyond a shadow of a doubt that both Gentile and Jew are guilty and without excuse, as Paul says "that every mouth may be stopped." Paul anticipates objections to his argumentation so he divides the human race into two classes (Gentiles, i.e. those without the law or written revelation; and Jews, the covenant people or those who possess written revelation). He sets before each group the knowledge of God and ethics they do have and then confronts them with the fact that they have not at all lived up to the knowledge they possess. Those men who think they are innocent are actually hypocrites and just as guilty as everyone else. Those people who plead ignorance are really not ignorant at all. They suppress the truth they have and turn to idols. After proving the guilt of both Gentiles and Jews the section comes to a crescendo with a stinging indictment of the whole human race in 3:9-20.

Before we consider Paul's case against the Gentiles we need to briefly examine God's wrath. To do this we will consider: (1) What is the wrath of God and how is this wrath revealed? (2) What is the wrath of God directed against? (3) Why is the declaration of God's wrath important in gospel preaching and witnessing? In the New Testament the two primary words for wrath are *thumos* and *orge*. *Thumos* is used only to describe God's wrath throughout the book of

Revelation. (In Revelation *orge* is used five times [6:16, 17; 11:18; 16:19; 19:15] and *thumos* is used five times [14:10, 19; 15:1, 7; 16:1] to describe God's indignation). *Thumos* comes from a root word which means to breathe hard and is used to describe humans losing their tempers (Gal. 5:20; Eph. 4:31; Col. 3:8; Heb. 11:27). It is the word to use for rage or sudden flaring up of anger. When used of God it refers to intense indignation or judgment in process. The word *orge*, which is the word for wrath used throughout the book of Romans (1:18; 2:5,8; 4:15; 5:9; 9:22; 12:19; 13:4,5), comes from a root word which means to swell. It indicates not a spur of the moment rage but rather a strong and growing anger or holy revulsion by God against sin. The moral law is a reflection of God's nature and character. Therefore, God can only react toward sin with anger, wrath or indignation.

The wrath of God can only be understood as a manifestation of the holiness and righteousness of God. Because God is holy. He hates sin and cannot dwell with sinners. "You are of purer eyes than to behold evil and cannot look on wickedness" (Hab. 1:13). "You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness, nor shall evil dwell with You. The boastful shall not stand in Your sight; You hate all workers of iniquity" (Ps. 5:4-5). God's hatred of sin and His wrath against unrepentant sinners is a very unpopular subject today even among professing Christians. People like to talk about the love of God—a love made in their own image: permissive, tolerant of sin and thoroughly corrupt. The God of modern post-Christian America has nothing to do with the God of the Bible. The Bible says that: "God is angry with the wicked everyday" (Ps. 7:11); "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23); "the soul who sins must die" (Ezek. 18:4); "knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death" (Rom. 1:32); "he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on Him" (Jn. 3:36); "they [unrepentant sinners] will be tormented day and night forever" (Rev. 20:10). Sin is a radical, obnoxious contradiction of Jehovah's moral character. Therefore, He must of internal necessity react against it with holy wrath. Wherever sin exists, God's holy hatred and indignation rest upon it. If it didn't God would be denying Himself, in particular, His holiness, righteousness, justice and truth.

God is a righteous judge (Ps. 7:11). He will judge the world with righteousness (Ps. 96:13). Jehovah does not look to some standard outside of Himself in some supposed realm of ideals. He is the very standard of truth, righteousness and justice. It is for this reason that violations of His law cannot be overlooked. The revelation of God's righteousness in the gospel cannot be properly understood unless considered against the backdrop of the revelation of God's wrath against sinners. "[T]he righteousness of God consists of both his saving and judging righteousness...The saving and judging righteousness of God find their resolution as 3:21-26 illustrates in the gospel. The revelation of God's saving righteousness exposes the full wickedness of human sin and the depth of God's wrath against it." Hodge writes,

The whole argument of the Apostle in his Epistle to the Romans is founded on the principle that justice is a divine attribute distinct from benevolence. His argument is: God is just. All men are

² Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 77-78.

sinners. All, therefore, are guilty, i.e., under condemnation. Therefore no man can be justified, *i.e.*, pronounced not guilty, on the ground of his character or conduct. Sinners cannot satisfy justice. But what they could not do, Christ, the Eternal Son of God, clothed in our nature, has done for them. He has brought in everlasting righteousness, which meets all the demands of the law. All those who renounce their own righteousness, and trust to the righteousness of Christ, God justifies and saves. This is the gospel as preached by Paul. It all rests on the assumption that God is just.³

The holiness, justice and wrath of God are emphasized in Scripture much more than His "popular" attribute of love. The God with whom we must deal has an infinite hatred of sin. If we do not understand God's hatred of sin we will never understand the necessity of the cross. In our very permissive, antinomian, pluralistic culture the gospel is mocked or ignored because people do not have an understanding of the sinfulness of sin. Paul had to deal with similar problems in his own day and thus emphasized the wrath of God. In the book of Romans he refers to God's wrath ten times. Jehovah has a strong, firm, hatred of all unrepentant sinners right now and this hatred is building up. Someday everyone will stand before God. Jehovah will in flaming fire take vengeance on all those who do not know Him, who do not obey the gospel (2 Th. 1:8). "But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God" (Rom. 2:5).

Wrath Revealed

Now that we have some understanding as to the meaning and necessity of God's wrath, let us turn our attention to the meaning of the revelation of God's wrath. How is this wrath revealed?

The Bible teaches that God's wrath is revealed throughout history through personal, national and world-wide acts of judgment. God's wrath was manifested in the world-wide flood in the days of Noah (Gen. 7:4-24); the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:14-28); the destruction of the seven Canaanite nations (Dt. 12:2; Josh. 23:3, 9; 24:18); the many "days of the Lord" against the apostasy and idolatry of Israel and Judah (e.g. Joel 2:1ff); the judgment against Egypt (Ex. 12:12ff); Babylon (Isa. 13:4ff) and the covenant nation in A. D. 70 (24:1-35; Lk. 21:5-24).

God's wrath is revealed in history with the fact that all men suffer, grow old, get infirmities and die because of sin. The world is a place of intense suffering both physical and emotional. History is full of examples of wicked men who were crushed in the winepress of God's wrath (e.g. Pharaoh, Saul, Ahab, Nero, Hitler, Mussolini, etc.). Paul even speaks of the lawful administration of the sword by the state as a ministration of God's wrath against evil doers (cf. Rom. 13:3ff.).

³ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 1:424.

God's wrath is revealed at the end of history on the final day, the day of judgment. The revelation of God's wrath or judgment as a future event is predominant in Paul's letters (e.g. Rom. 2:5, 8; 3:5; 9:22; Eph. 5:6; Col. 3:6; 1 Th. 5:9; 2 Th. 1:7-10). The wrath of God exhibited throughout history in judgments, in the various days of the Lord all point forward and anticipate the great and final day of wrath when Christ divides the sheep from the goats and casts all workers of iniquity into the lake of fire. We all remember the shock and awe of the events of 9/11 when we could scarcely believe what our eyes were seeing. Yet all such events pale in comparison to the day when Christ returns in flaming fire. Only those who believe in Jesus and trust in His merits will be able to stand in that day.

While God's revelation of His wrath is often extraordinary and dramatic, the revelation of wrath spoken of by Paul in Romans 1:18 is the non-spectacular everyday variety. We know this because Paul uses the present tense. God's revelation of wrath is a continuing process. Paul is not just speaking of acts in history but of a present reality. The context indicates that God's wrath is exhibited by His allowing men to wallow in their own sin so that they are further enslaved, perverted and destroyed by their own commitment to autonomy. Stott writes, "It is revealed from heaven now, he says (18), and he goes on to explain it by his terrible threefold refrain God gave them over (24, 26, 28)....God abandons stubborn sinners to their willful self-centeredness, and the resulting process of moral and spiritual degeneration is to be understood as a judicial act of God."

Paul teaches that obstinate rebellion against God carries its own punishment or sanctions. The essence of sin is to leave God behind, to ignore His laws, to forge one's own ethic, standard and meaning of life. This is what Eve did in the garden when she ate the fruit and determined for herself the definition of good and evil. To such people in rebellion (who are not objects of God's grace) the Lord says, "If you want human autonomy, if you want to live without regard to Me, then I will turn you over to your own folly. I will let you fall into the pit of destruction that you have dug by your human autonomy."

We see this wrath in person after person and culture after culture. As the Psalmist says, "The nations have sunk down in the pit which they made....The LORD is known by the judgment He executes; The wicked is snared in the work of his own hands....the wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God" (Ps. 9:15-17). The suffering of Germany during World War II or the incredible suffering caused by communism was all self-inflicted. We must keep in mind that God's judgments do not have to be dramatic and miraculous. His wrath is exhibited against all ungodliness and unrighteousness through the normal course of degeneration that follows "going it alone."

Tragically, we see this process occurring in America in our own generation. The more America turns its back on Christ and His law, the more the nation has problems, ethical chaos, family degradation and so on. The people see what is happening to an extent and want solutions. But because the state, businesses, so-called scientists and so forth cannot and will not seek

⁴ John Stott, Romans: God's Good News for the World (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1994), 75.

solutions in God and His Word, the current crisis can only become worse. This nation is rapidly becoming a new Sodom and Gomorrah, a nation rushing headlong into destruction.

Wrath against All Ungodliness and Unrighteousness

Paul says that God's wrath is directed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness. The apostle uses these terms because they are descriptive of the two main aspects of sin.

Ungodliness or godlessness refers to impiety, irreligion and a complete lack of reverence for God. Ungodliness corresponds more with the first table of the law. (However, keep in mind that it is ungodly to violate the second table and it is unrighteous to violate the first table of the law. "All ungodliness is also unrighteousness and vice versa." Ungodliness manifests itself in idolatry and immorality. Every sin has these two aspects.) A person who is ungodly has no regard for God in his thoughts, words or actions. The Psalmist writes, "The wicked in his proud countenance does not seek God; God is in none of his thoughts" (Ps. 10:4).

Unrighteousness refers to any and all violations of God's moral law. A person who is not righteous is lawless. He has no regard for the laws of God and breaks them whenever he pleases. In our society someone is regarded as unrighteous or immoral when he or she is a murderer, thief, prostitute or rapist—the kind of people one would see on *America's Most Wanted*. While such super-deviant sinners are indeed unrighteous, one should not restrict the meaning of the word to the Charles Manson's of society. Everyone who lies, fornicates, lusts illicitly, or commits any violation of God's law is unrighteous. Only people who are in Christ and have repented are called righteous by God. Their righteousness is the imputed righteousness of Christ.

It is important to recognize that Paul places ungodliness before unrighteousness. The order is significant. Ungodliness is the logical foundation or precursor to unrighteousness. We see this fact in the Ten Commandments themselves where right belief, trust, love and devotion toward God are placed before our love and duty toward other men. If men do not love God they cannot love each other biblically. If people do not regard their creator, then they have no reason whatsoever to care about their neighbor. Everything under such circumstances degenerates to a self-serving pragmatism and utilitarianism. Without a biblical acknowledgement of God, then logically our ethic becomes "do whatever you want, just don't get caught." In such a society every man becomes his own god determining what he thinks is right or wrong; every man does what is right in his own eyes (Jdg. 17:6). Such a culture is on a path to chaos and destruction.

Noting Paul's order of ungodliness first and unrighteousness second is very important today because for the most part the modern church believes that societies, cultures and nations can have reform in areas of unrighteousness without first dealing with ungodliness. Evangelicals and even most Reformed churches have bought into the idea of political pluralism where the affairs of state are treated as a neutral sphere outside of Christ. One prominent evangelical leader even told a PBS news interviewer that he did not want a Christian America but rather a moral America. Such an idea is unchristian and absurd. Why we ask, should anyone want to be moral if God does not exist and we evolved from pond scum? Why should anyone "love thy neighbor" if

once we die it's all over, eternal nothingness? The whole idea of morality, of right and wrong presupposes the infinite, personal, holy triune God of Scripture. If the righteous, holy and just God of the Bible doesn't exist, all ethics are relative, arbitrary, changing and evolving constructs of finite, fallible, human minds. The rule of law historically understood cannot exist within a secular, pluralistic philosophy.

It is a frustrating yet fascinating thing to watch prominent evangelical leaders debate important ethical topics on TV such as abortion or homosexuality. Because these men accept the idea of religious neutrality in the public or civic square, they go through all sorts of intellectual gymnastics to prove that homosexuality or infanticide is wrong. They talk about family values, common law, historical tradition, natural law, the founding fathers and so on. Because they stand on the presupposition of a Christ-less constitution they fight with both hands tied behind their back. Christians can never win the so-called culture wars until they appeal directly to Scripture and speak with an authoritative "Thus saith the Lord." If the Lord Jesus Christ is not explicitly acknowledged as the Lord God of America, then the nation will remain ungodly, that is, without Christ. As long as Christians accept the idea that a nation can have righteousness without godliness they will be salt-less and impotent in civil affairs. They will be satisfied to sit beside the table of the secular, pragmatic, non-Christian Republican Party and catch the crumbs which fall under the table. Without a biblical understanding of godliness before righteousness, Christians will remain on the periphery in social affairs, dealing with symptoms without treating the disease itself. Our nation's first need is to "Kiss the Son" (Ps. 2), to acknowledge, know and love Christ, then and only then can a return to the rule of law and biblical love between neighbors, classes and races occur. The radical root trouble is ungodliness of which unrighteousness is the symptom.⁵

As we consider the relationship between ungodliness and unrighteousness it is important to note that this relation is further explained in verses 19 through 32. Paul will demonstrate that ungodliness is not a result of ignorance but is a deliberate act of suppression of the truth. "[T]hey did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do these things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness" (Rom. 1:28-29 NASB).

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⁵ The importance of godliness before righteousness can be seen throughout American institutions. Public or state schools are attempting to teach ethics to children but in this process they are not permitted to mention God who is the very foundation of ethics. Senators and congressmen make laws that are supposed to help society but these laws are not permitted to be based on God, "religion" or biblical law. The result is socialism, vote buying, looking to corrupt Europe, following the will of Hollywood and an increasingly evil populace. This charade is called "the rule of law." Courts in America increasingly are making laws based solely on the ethical standard of the judge. If the judge thinks abortion or homosexuality is okay then he simply changes the law. As one new perversity becomes acceptable to Hollywood, the media and the leftist politicians, judges simply follow suit. This so-called "rule of law" is whatever the courts arbitrarily decide at any given time. The true rule of law can only be based on the infinite, personal, holy, triune God of Scripture who has spoken infallibly in His Word—the 66 books of the Bible.

Suppressing the Truth

In versus 19 and following Paul explains why the wrath of God is deserved on everyone, even people who could claim they have never heard of God or His law. The apostle does this by explaining the fact that everyone without exception has a true knowledge of God from the observable creation. Theologians refer to the revelation of God in the creation as "natural revelation." Sometimes this form of revelation is called "general revelation" because it is addressed generally to all men. It is accessible to everyone in the world without exception. The Bible or the Word of God is called "special revelation" because it is addressed to sinners, is verbal and is designed to give a saving knowledge of the truth. Special revelation can only be appropriated by faith. Romans 1:19 and following raises a number of important questions.

First, what is natural revelation? Natural revelation refers to God's observable handiwork, His work of creation. Paul says, "His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made" (Rom. 1:20). The Psalmist writes, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork" (Ps. 19:1). In a similar vein Paul said, "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" (Ac. 14:17).

The Bible teaches that the knowledge of God is *inescapable*.⁶ The creation proves that there is a creator. The more man learns about the creation the more his unbelieving, apostate, God-hating presuppositions are exposed as utter foolishness. Anyone who has examined archeology, geology, biology or anthropology knows that evolution, atheism and materialism are utter nonsense. "The Bible does not take atheism as a serious position. We are told by Psalm 14:1, 'The fool hath said in his heart, "There is no God.'"

Second, what is the knowledge of God that all men have from natural revelation? The knowledge of God that the heathen have is certainly *not* a saving knowledge. Natural or general revelation does not tell us anything about the cross of Christ, His life or ministry. Further, Paul obviously is not using the word knowledge in the hebraistic sense of to know and love. There is no personal living relationship between God and the heathen.

Paul says His invisible attributes are clearly seen in the creation: His eternal power and divine nature. The first phrase "His eternal power" is easy to understand. The creation teaches that God is all powerful or omnipotent. That is, there are no limitations to God's power. This point, of course, also means that God Himself is eternal. "The implication is that the eternity of God as well as the eternity of His power is in view." The second term (*Theoites*), translated Godhead (KJV, NKJV), divine nature (NASB, NIV) or deity (RSV) is more difficult. The word used is unusual and is used only in this passage in the New Testament. The word which literally means "divinity" refers to all the invisible attributes which characterize God. "[I]t 'is a summary

⁶ Rousas John Rushdoony, *Romans and Galatians* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1997), 11.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 1:39.

term for those other attributes which constitute Divinity." "So, after all, the statement 'eternal power and divinity' is inclusive of a great many invisible attributes and reflects on the richness of the manifestation given in the visible creation of being, majesty, and glory of God." 10

Paul's statement is radical and merits our close attention. He is not merely saying that general revelation proves the existence of "a god" or some type of power or being; but, that the living and true God is revealed. God is defined by His nature and Paul says His unseen or invisible attributes are clearly seen or perceived in the created order. Not only is God revealed in the creation but the revelation of God is perspicuous. That is, it is unmistakable. It cannot be missed. It is everywhere about us and in us, pressing upon us the existence of the God of the Bible.

To those people who think that Paul goes too far in his statement of the knowledge of God we can only remind them of two things. First, Paul was speaking under divine inspiration. Therefore, we need to get our minds in line with what Paul says and not pervert Scripture to fit our own conceptions and reasoning. Second, we must keep in mind that man was created to know and love God. In Romans 2:15, Paul says the heathen "show the work of the law written in their hearts." There is something about the constitution of our own nature that makes this knowledge perspicuous and unmistakable. "Man was created as the image of God (Gen. 1:6-17) and thus cannot escape the face of God." Man would have to cease to be man and become a brute beast to escape the revelational presence of God. Calvin writes, "For we know that men have this unique quality above the other animals, that they are endowed with reason and intelligence and that they bear the distinction between right and wrong engraved in their conscience. Thus there is no man to whom some awareness of the eternal light does not penetrate...the common light of nature, a far lowlier thing than faith" (*Calvin's Commentaries*, tr. T.H.L. Parker; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1959). 12

Third, how is this knowledge suppressed? Paul says that the heathen have a true knowledge of the God of the Bible and that the proper response to this knowledge would be to glorify God and thank Him for His kindness (v. 21). But what do the heathen do? They suppress the truth in unrighteousness (v. 18). The word translated "suppress" (*katechein*) can mean to hold (1 Cor. 7:30), to hold fast (Heb. 3:6; 10:23), to possess (2 Cor. 6:10); or, to keep in memory (1 Th. 5:21). It can also refer to hindering or restraining something (2 Th. 2:6-7; Lk. 8:15). In the context of Romans 1:18 it is used negatively and means to hold down, suppress or imprison. Unbelievers have the truth about God but they hold it down or imprison it because that knowledge is an impediment to their sinful autonomy. Because unbelievers are depraved and hate God they refuse to acknowledge Him. The grammar indicates that the suppression is continual. If there was a button that unbelievers could press to abolish the God of Scripture, their finger would always be on that button.

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⁹ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 81-82.

¹⁰ John Murray, *Romans*, 1:39-40.

¹¹ Greg Bahnsen, Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith (Texarkana, AR: Covenant Media Foundation, 1996), 36.

¹² Ibid.

We have a tendency to view unbelievers, especially people in remote places, as poor, ignorant souls who have not had the opportunity to learn about God. According to Paul the situation is more complex. The apostle teaches that "self-consciousness presupposes God consciousness;" that unbelievers simultaneously possess and suppress the truth. On the one hand, the unbeliever (because he is created in the image of God and because every fact of the universe points to the true God) possesses the truth. On the other hand, the unbeliever continually suppresses the truth because he has committed himself to a position of autonomy. He wants to live his life totally without God because he is depraved and hates God and His authority. Therefore, he approaches everything in life with "an ax to grind" against God. Every fact, which is a God-revealing, God-glorifying fact must be subjected to apostate human reason and interpreted in a God-denying manner. Paul teaches that all men are exceedingly guilty and without excuse because no one can successfully escape the truth about God. Man's sin is always a sin against better knowledge. Man willfully chooses to view reality and live his life in a God-suppressing, God-denying, God-hating manner. Therefore, his condemnation before God is just. He fully deserves the wrath of God that abides on him.

Fourth, what is the result of the suppression of this knowledge on the part of unbelievers? Paul says that philosophically unbelievers are fools and ethically they are idolaters, sex perverts and wicked. The apostle writes, "Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things" (Rom. 1:22-23). Paul goes on to describe the vile sexual behavior and unrighteousness of the heathen. (This section of Scripture will be examined below.) The suppression of God always involves replacement. One either worships and serves the true God, or one is an idolater.

Fifth, how is this information important and useful for Christians today? There are a number of important things that we should learn from Paul's teaching. (1) The main point is that no man is innocent. Everyone is guilty. Paul completely destroys a very common objection or argument against the justice of God. We often hear people say things like: "What about the Indians who live in the middle of the Amazon rain forest, who have never heard the gospel? Aren't they innocent?" The apostle answers with an emphatic no! They also have sinned against the knowledge of God they have and have turned to idolatry. They are guilty before God. These Indians have not rejected special revelation and gospel preaching and therefore have sinned against less light than a Christ-denying Westerner. Nevertheless, they are still guilty of serious sin and cannot go to heaven unless they hear the gospel, believe in Jesus and are saved. The apostle Paul emphatically rejects Modernist notions about missions being solely about health care, agricultural and social progress. Everyone from the Eskimo in Alaska to the native in the Congo is guilty before God and is in dire need of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

(2) Paul teaches that there is no neutrality. Many Christians mistakenly present unbelievers as people who simply lack knowledge. Their problem is ignorance. If we point out the various evidences for the existence of God they will be able to arrive at the correct conclusion. Many apologists even argue that we need to assume a position of neutrality with the

unbeliever and use logic and empirical evidences to show the probability of the existence of a higher power, an intelligent designer. But is this procedure what Paul does in Romans 1? No. The apostle says that the problem with unbelievers is not simply ignorance. It is ethical rebellion; they are willful rebels against God's throne. They are not neutral; they have an axe to grind against God. They have purposely cemented rose-colored glasses over their eyes. Their blindness is self-inflicted. Yes, it is true that they are ignorant of many crucial doctrines including the gospel; and, they do need gospel preaching to be saved. However, they must be approached as guilty, depraved God-hating rebels, not innocents.

- (3) The logical corollary to the previous point is that we must expose the unbelieving presuppositions that the non-Christian uses to suppress the truth about God. As Van Til would say, we want to make him "epistemologically self-aware." According to Paul, unbelievers know the God of the Bible, yet they suppress that knowledge and in the process create idols. They create an anti-Christian worldview as a rationalization for their unbelief, their suppression of the truth. This point is true of the blond cocktail waitress as well as the doctor of philosophy. Some worldviews are a carefully crafted, attempt to be logically consistent and are quite clever while others are not thought through at all. But everyone has a system by which he views the facts of reality. As Van Til would say, "There is no uninterpreted fact." Every fact points to the God of Scripture. The unbeliever in his desire to avoid facing the reality of the infinite, personal, holy God of the Bible views the facts through his unbelieving paradigm. Once we understand this truth we can do two things in our apologetic.
- (a) We can demonstrate that the unbeliever is perverting the evidence or facts in his pursuit of unbelief. This tactic is extremely helpful when debating professing atheists, naturalists and evolutionists who very blatantly distort reality in their suppression of the truth.
- (b) We can demonstrate that the unbeliever is self-deceived and schizophrenic in his beliefs and reasoning. The unbeliever in the suppression of his knowledge of God adopts some kind of autonomous theory of knowledge and interpretation of experience. He holds to a position of autonomy. If he were consistent he would abandon all ethics and meaning because a chance universe of atoms floating randomly in the void is not a suitable platform for morality or knowledge. What then does the unbeliever do? He must borrow from the Christian worldview in order to account for reality and argue against Christianity. As Van Til would say, "he must sit on his father's lap in order to slap his face." He must stand upon the Christian position in order to function in God's universe. He must operate in terms of presuppositions that accord with God's revelation to avoid looking like a total idiot. For example, he must presuppose unchanging laws of logic, or absolute ethics, or the uniformity of the created order in order to conduct science, fashion an argument or make positive contributions to his calling.

Greg Bahnsen writes,

Thus, in defending the faith to any particular unbeliever, the Christian must be aware that his opponent already believes in God, and indeed is borrowing the Christian's own beliefs in order to make sense of experience or to reason and argue at all. Nevertheless, this unbeliever will set forth conflicting beliefs and rest upon conflicting presuppositions in his argument with you as a

believer, even though he continually exhibits a failure to be fully and epistemologically self-conscious of what he says and assumes. Non-Christians simply cannot employ their methods consistently—a fact that makes the presuppositional challenge decisive, clear-cut, and over-powering. Unbelievers cannot make sense of reasoning, meaning, science, ethical absolutes, self-consciousness, or mental freedom without resting upon the presuppositions of the Christian worldview. "Thus there is absolutely certain proof for the existence of God and the truth of Christian theism. Even non-Christians presuppose its truth while they verbally reject it. They need to presuppose the truth of Christian theism in order to account for their own accomplishments."¹³

May God enable us to set forth the truth of Scripture that only Jesus Christ can save us from the present wrath and the even more terrifying wrath to come. (This study is continued in *The Consequences of Rejecting God*)

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HOME PAGE

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¹³ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1998), 453. The last three sentences are a quote from Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955), 120.