

Romans: God Revealed & Man Judged—Covenant Disobeyed, Part 3

by David Orton

<http://lifemessenger.org/romans-god-revealed-man-judged-part-3/>

EXPOSITION: Chapter 1:18-32

False Gospels.

Our passage under consideration is the opening one of a far larger section (1:18-3:20). This larger context demonstrates that man, universally (Jew and Gentile), is under sin and that there is no question of his justification apart from faith. It picks up the theme of the epistle presented in v. 17 that the Gospel is the "... revelation of the righteousness of God from faith to faith, as it is written, 'He that is just by faith shall live'". The burden of the whole section concludes with, "There is no one righteous, not even one" (3:10) and "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:23).

In this shorter passage (1:18-32) Paul sets the scene for the Gospel, painting the true picture of the human condition and society. *First*, it shows that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against man's unrighteousness; *second*, that man, universally, has always had a clear revelation of God; *third*, that this knowledge of God is so clear that it renders him accountable; *fourth*, that man actively suppresses this clear knowledge of the truth; *fifth*, that man's thinking is rendered futile, exchanging the truth of God for a lie and worshipping the creature; *sixth*, that dislocated from God, he is delivered over to his own passions, to homosexuality and diverse immoral behaviours; and *seventh*, that even though he knows God's penalty for these things is death, he pursues them and endorses others in them.

Paul knows that without fully apprehending each of these seven issues our preaching, our evangelism, our apologetics, and church growth will be fatally flawed. Sidestepping or diminishing any one of these will misconstrue the Gospel. The Christian church emerged from the first century preaching of the Gospel. In other words, the church is the product of the Gospel; it is the wineskin and the Gospel the wine. The church is therefore shaped by the Gospel and serves the Gospel. And so, working backwards, if the church is dysfunctional, our version of the gospel is dysfunctional: a defective gospel produces a defective church. To attempt to mend the wineskin without ensuring first that we have the wine is simply inept. And yet, that's what we do. We promote multitudinous structures and strategies for more authentic and effective evangelism and church life: missional church; relational church; multi-campus church; emerging church; citywide unity and transformation; university outreach and apologetics; radical spirituality; next level 'anointings' and experiences; charismatic, non-charismatic; contemporary worship, non-contemporary worship; presbyteral, episcopal, new apostolic models; and on and on, hoping for transformational change, societal renewal, and quantum growth, but all to little avail. Why? Because we haven't reformed our gospel. The old adage is true: *you get what you preach*. Ideas have consequences; if Christians are not thinking 'Christianly' – that is, thinking the thoughts of God after him – instead of transforming the world, the world transforms us. This is why Paul in his Epistle to the Romans doesn't switch gears until chapter 12, when he exhorts them to be "transformed through the renewing of the mind" (12:2). The first eleven chapters reveal the mind of God in propositional truth statements – that is, in teaching and doctrine – that provide categories of thought for the renewing of the mind. As we will discover in this passage, man's mind and thinking is radically affected by the Fall: it is at enmity with God and raises up proud reasonings against the knowledge of him.

The Gospel, as the revelation of God to man, is grounded in objective content, communicated through rational, propositional truth statements. Sadly large expanses of the evangelical and charismatic church have neglected this to their own peril, opting instead for the pursuit of an existential high, making themselves vulnerable to a gnostic and increasingly occultic counterfeit of the real. Certain spiritual experiences and phenomena are hyped and promoted as the *shibboleths* of a new and 'radical spirituality'. While, on the surface, this may seem valid, it unwittingly revives the Gnosticism of the first and second centuries, promoting higher levels of spiritual experience (spiritual elitism) through the impartation of a gifted leader's 'anointing' (the guru) and release to the next level (mystical initiation) of God's power (higher plain of enlightenment). Accompanying this is the lure to join their particular franchise, attend their conferences, and fund their ministry so as to access these higher levels. This is sadly endemic in the contemporary charismatic 'apostolic' and 'prophetic' movements. Paul addressed it in his Corinthian correspondence, confronting the "super apostles", and in his Epistle to the Colossians, and John in his First Epistle. It is sometimes mixed with legalism, neo-Judaizing elements within the church that promote Christian-Zionism, misconstruing Israel's role in God's purpose (explained later in the epistle) and insisting that Gentile believers keep certain Sabbaths, in addition to faith in Christ, to be more pleasing to God. This, Paul addressed in his Epistle to the Galatians. Legalism and

Gnosticism are often fellow travellers. They are both false gospels and find their entry through a flawed understanding of justification and sanctification, or, too often, from no understanding at all. Out of the believer's quest either to secure their status in God's sight (justification) or to please him (sanctification) certain rituals and/or spiritual experiences are pursued.

The apostolic writings are replete with exhortations to take heed to the teaching but also warnings to be aware of the false teachers. These commands are no less relevant in the twenty-first century as they were in the first. This is not to deny the authentic operation of the *charismata* and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. They are the Holy Spirit's equipping of Christ's body for apostolic purpose, the expansion of Christ's Kingdom in the world, not for our personal pleasure. They are not toys for the amusement of the spiritually immature.

Without our being grounded in the apostolic Gospel – as revealed by the ascended Christ to Paul – we will be party to yet more aberrations, adding to the litany of the errors and disasters of Christian history. We are playing for high stakes. The enemy knows his time is short and that through the power of the Gospel God's Kingdom is increasing and filling the earth. He will do anything within his power to seduce and distract us from the main game: the objective revelation of God in Christ and his purpose for the world. The seven principles of this passage are foundational to the Gospel and God's plan for the cosmos. Let us take heed.

1:18-19—The Incontrovertible Knowledge of God

18 *"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth."*—"For", as a conjunction, demonstrates a connection of thought between v. 17 and 18. Consequently, the *righteousness revealed* by the Gospel of v.17 explains the *wrath revealed* of v.18 and indeed forms the basis for the whole passage through to 3:20. The righteousness and wrath of God are integral to the Gospel; apart from them the Gospel has no meaning, indeed, it provides the solution to the plight of man under God's wrath. The reality of God's wrath is important to this epistle (*orge* is used 12 times: 1:18; 2:5, 8; 3:5; 4:15; 5:9; 9:22; 12:19; 13:4, 5). Therefore, God's wrath should not be confused with the uncontrolled emotions and fulminations of fallen men. Clearly, the whole biblical revelation of God's nature saves us from that. The wrath of God is an important biblical doctrine that the enemy would seek to confound and confuse. The parent who does not jealously protect their child from danger is not a good one. And furthermore, the parent who does not voice their righteous indignation – their wrath – toward a criminal threat to the child's safety is not a good one. As can be seen, wrath and goodness are not at odds; likewise jealousy and goodness. Both jealousy and wrath in this instance manifest the parent's sense of justice, what is right and good. And so, God's love and his wrath are not mutually exclusive.

In fact, the righteousness (or justice [*dikaiousune*]) of God demands his wrath. Only then is he seen to be truly good. 'Righteousness', in Scripture, is a covenant word. As we have seen in the previous study, the *dik* group of words – righteousness/justice/just/justify/justification – is covenant related, referring to Israel's obedience to God's covenant. Paul uses the term from the Septuagint (LXX, Greek OT) where it rendered the Hebrew *zedek* word group, carrying over its covenant connections into the NT. As we have also seen in our first study, covenant is the architectonic, or overarching, scheme of Scripture and of God's purposes within which 'justification by faith' falls; justification (righteousness) is a covenant concept and as such is also a judicial concept. Every government has a legal constitution; likewise, God's government, finding its constitution in the covenant. In other words, the Kingdom of God comes through Covenant. It is the instrument by which God's justice and peace will be established among the nations. This is why both Jesus and Paul reinstate the covenant law, which will be clarified later in the epistle. Therefore, the 'righteousness' revealed by the Gospel is in keeping with the revelation of God as a covenant-keeping God:

Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, **the faithful God who keeps covenant** and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations,

Deuteronomy 7:9 (also Neh 9:8; Isa 61:8)

This judicial aspect of covenant is highlighted in the five-fold structure of the suzerainty treaties of the Ancient Near East (refer to *Structure*, [Part 1](#)). A victorious king would make a covenant with his vassal king, establishing: 1) his supremacy; 2) his authority; 3) his laws; 4) his punishments and rewards; and 5) his succession. Divine covenants possess the same structure. Yahweh, as the victorious King, sets forth his laws (stipulations) and penalties or rewards for obedience (sanctions). No divine covenant is without law. God who is just and good will defend and uphold that which is right (Dt 32:4; 4:8); this is God's

justice or righteousness. Thus, we see the necessity of law (4:15). It is the outshining of God's own moral nature. To violate law (righteousness) is not only to violate the covenant but more significantly, to violate God himself. The holiness of his being is defied and disturbed to the core by sin (unrighteousness). "The wrath of God" is the depths of that moral nature stirred. And it demands justice, in fact, retribution. It is irresistible and destructive of both sin and the sinner. Nahum declares:

The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord is avenging and wrathful; the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies. The Lord is slow to anger and great in power, and the Lord will by no means clear the guilty. His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet.

Nahum 1:2–3

God's wrath "*is revealed*" (present tense); it is current, it is real, and it is known. There is no escape. Man may attempt to suppress its truth but the whole cosmos – his inner and outer life – are a constant and inescapable revelation of God and his wrath. The Greek and Roman mythology, representing their gods as wrathful and vengeful, is merely a perversion of this revelation. Man is under God's judgement. The Gospel now declares – and intensifies – what the cosmos already cries out. Furthermore, despite all attempts to escape God's wrath, every person will give account on that final "*day of wrath* when God's righteous judgment will be revealed" (2:5b).

The significance of God's wrath is visibly demonstrated in the cross. At the age of seventeen as a brand new believer, this writer, without any previous biblical understanding, was sitting under a message that was proclaiming the Kingdom of God when God's power suddenly entered the room. Interrupting the preacher, simultaneously demons began to cry out across the audience as I instantly slid to the floor – not very ceremoniously – experiencing an open vision and, without anyone laying hands on me, instantaneous demonic deliverance. With my physical eyes wide open I saw a large picture-frame 7-8' high through which I stepped into the very event of the crucifixion. The content of this vision was totally independent of the sermon's theme; it came from left field without any prior suggestion or emotion. As I stepped into the scene, I stepped into an atmosphere that was dark and foreboding; the air was thick with an overwhelmingly palpable presence of the wrath of God. It literally scared the hell out of me. Demons had no choice but to flee, and they did! Without any prior teaching, or a word spoken, my inner man was infused with the full weight and import of the cross. Also, I was filled with the fear of God.

As Paul explains, "For our sake he [God] made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). As our substitute – on the cross – Jesus bore our sin and suffered its just penalty. The Father's holy nature could not look upon sin, causing him to turn his face from his only begotten and beloved Son—to withdraw his favour. And in those incomprehensible moments, in what is called the 'cry of dereliction', Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mt 27:46, cited from Psa 22:1)—the cry of utter destitution as the wrath of God was poured out upon him. Leaving the glory he enjoyed with the Father before the world began, he was born in the likeness of men and became obedient to death, the death of the cross (Phil 2:7-8; Jn 17:5). And in that death he died as man, in our behalf, suffering not only the agonies of crucifixion but also the unfathomable torment of abandonment by God. Banished, he found himself outside of the eternal embrace of the Father, given over to all the consequences of our sin. Hanging on the tree, he was smitten, afflicted, pierced, and crushed as our iniquities were laid on him (Isa 53). To reject Christ is to reject his satisfaction of the wrath of God. Either he carries it for us, or we carry it ourselves. If the latter, as moral beings bearing his image, we carry the full force of God's retributive justice against sin, suffering "the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might" (2 Thes 1:9).

The Holy Spirit is committed to unveiling to us the full horror of the wrath of God, of his wrath "*against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men*". Covenant-breakers – all mankind – are declared guilty and under his wrath through the covenant sanctions. They come under the retributive justice of God, experiencing not only temporal punishments but also eternal; they are condemned to an eternal death, banished from the presence of God. With this realization we are pressed into God and the good news of deliverance from his wrath through the Gospel.

The revelation of the wrath of God is foundational to the Christian life—to the Gospel and to justification by faith, to the whole content and system of Christian truth and belief.

19 "*For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.*"—This thought connects to the last part of the previous verse showing that God's wrath is being revealed "*against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men,*

who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth" (v. 18). Despite the revelatory knowledge of God and his wrath man suppresses its truth. It is important to highlight several key words in these two verses: *first*, "known" (*gnostos*) means certain, incontrovertible, that which is cognizable or unquestionable; *second*, this kind of knowing is made "plain" (*phanerós*), meaning it is apparent, manifest, clear, known, or well-known; *third*, it is "known" and "plain" because of God's activity in his self-disclosure, he has "shown it to them" by revelation; *fourth*, in "their unrighteousness" men actively "suppress the truth", "suppress" (*katecho*) meaning to hold down, to hinder, restrain.

1:20-23—The Incontrovertible Prejudice of Man

20–21 *"20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. 21 For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened."*—Again some key words: *first*, "clearly" (*noeo*) means to perceive, observe; to understand, comprehend; *second*, "perceived" (*kathorao*) means to to look down, see from above, view from on high, referring to physical sight.

These three verses carry far-reaching implications for the Gospel, for Christian epistemology (theory of knowledge), for evangelism, and for apologetics (defence of the faith). Their misinterpretation continues to cause great damage to the cause of Christ, hindering the power of the Gospel to arrest the hearts and minds of men. It is therefore imperative that we be clear on their meaning.

But to clarify their meaning, we must first expose the most common misinterpretation. They have been used popularly to promote the notion of 'natural theology'. 'Natural theology' argues for the existence of God based on reason and observation of nature. With roots in Greek and Roman philosophy it was popularized in the medieval era by Thomas Aquinas (AD 1225-1274) and mainstreamed by Roman Catholicism, with increasing popularity among today's evangelicals.

This misinterpretation confuses and conflates 'natural theology' with what is called 'natural revelation'. 'Natural revelation' refers to the *self-disclosure* of the invisible God through the visible as per v. 20: *"For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made."* This is the key difference: one is the result of God's activity, the other from man's activity. 'Natural revelation' is, in fact, the immediate *supernatural revelation* of God to the direct apprehension of man, to his whole being; whereas, 'natural theology' is the opposite, it is developed through the intermediary of *natural reason* by a process of deduction from evidence. The former comes as a direct apprehension of God from God—by *revelation*, from without; the latter is made, it is humanly developed theology—by *reason*, from within. The former comes as a certainty, the latter merely as a probability.

To confuse things even further, 'natural revelation' is often also called '*general* revelation', in contrast to '*special* revelation'. 'Special revelation' refers to the special self-disclosure of God in Christ and in the Scriptures primarily to the elect (Psa 19:7-14), whereas 'general revelation' refers to the self-disclosure of God to all mankind in general, through the 'book of nature', creation (Psa 19:1-6).

So, why does all this matter? Because 'natural theology' has a fatal flaw: it assumes the neutrality of reason, that reason is objective and non-biased, and thus authoritative in determining what is true and false (epistemology). Cranfield comments pertinently on v. 21 when he says,

the intellect is not a part of human nature somehow exempted from the general corruption, not something which can be appealed to as an impartial arbiter capable of standing outside the influence of the ego and returning a perfectly objective judgement (Cranfield, Romans, Vol. 1, p. 17).

Apply this to evangelism and apologetics (defence of the faith): by appealing to the authority of reason the Christian is immediately attempting to fight fire with fire. They are assuming that the common ground, or point of contact, between believer and unbeliever is their shared neutrality of reason, that all they need to do is show the unbeliever the reasonableness of Christianity – its evidences – and they will believe. However, they have unwittingly placed themselves on the same footing as the unbeliever and robbed the Gospel of its power to convict and to convert. How? By denying or diminishing what Paul has said in v. 20: *"For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking..."*. This is sometimes called the 'noetic' (intellectual) effect of sin.

The presupposed neutrality of reason fatally ignores the full impact of the historic Fall. In the Garden mankind's first parents stood in judgement over the verbal propositional communication of God, judging autonomously between two supposed hypotheses: God's communication and Satan's counter-communication (Gen 3). Despite the knowledge of God which was made plain to them through both 'special' and 'general' revelation – God's verbal and visual communication – they pridefully presumed the authority and neutrality of their autonomous reason, tragically precipitating the Fall by "exchanging the truth of God for a lie" (1:25); i.e. for Satan's counter-communication, and so, "Claiming to be wise, they became fools" (v. 22). Through the use of their reason to autonomously stand in judgement over God's communication they actively suppressed what was clear to them, and consequently usurped God's authority with their own, becoming would-be gods (Gen 3:5). Thus, the supposed neutrality and authority of autonomous reason is central to humankind's fallen and rebellious status. The mind is now at enmity with God, it is congenitally biased in an arc away from God:

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, **God gave them up to a debased mind** to do what ought not to be done.

Romans 1:28

For **the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God**, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.

Romans 8:7

In their case the god of this world has **blinded the minds of the unbelievers**, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

2 Corinthians 4:4

3 among whom we all once lived in **the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind**, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

17 Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the **futility of their minds**.

Ephesians 2:3; 4:17

Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with **minds set on earthly things**.

Philippians 3:19

Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his **sensuous mind**,

Colossians 2:18

and constant friction among people who are **depraved in mind** and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain.

1 Timothy 6:5

Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men **corrupted in mind** and disqualified regarding the faith.

2 Timothy 3:8

This is not to say that man cannot think, that his mind is not capable. Clearly, man's reason is able to ascertain certain facts about the world. But as Cornelius Van Til famously remarked, "He can count but can he account for counting?" His

interpretation of the facts is congenitally biased in an arc away from God. Thus, atheistic scientism, rather than recognising the revelation of God in nature, concludes that, given time plus chance, man evolved as a mutation from one species to another through a completely random confluence of atoms. And so, man observes certain facts and then completely misconstrues them. Not only that, humanist man has a problem accounting for factuality at all (i.e. that facts exist and are constant); they explain them by arriving at the mindless notion of 'brute facts', that is, they just are, they hang on nothing. They cannot explain the cause nor the coherence of facts. Within their naturalistic closed system there is no explanation—they cannot account for counting, for natural laws, nor for reason itself.

Having rejected the myth of neutrality, we have discovered, rather, that reason is prejudiced against the knowledge of God, that it is biased as an interpreter of the facts of the universe, and therefore, not an infallible authority. Consequently, to appeal to reason as the point of contact between believer and unbeliever in evangelism or apologetics is a folly. And yet, this is exactly what 'evidentialist' or 'classical' apologetics attempts to do, to appeal to reason in considering the universe with its fine-tuning and constant laws (argument from design) and philosophical principles of first-cause, for example, why 'there is something rather than nothing' (cosmological argument). These follow in the tradition of Thomas Aquinas, Socrates, and Aristotle. Nonetheless, as already stated, its fatal flaw is the presupposition of the neutrality and authority of reason to determine what is true. Standing on the same ground as the unbeliever, the believer cannot confront the real issue: the *autonomy* of reason; man's rebellion and independence from God; his prideful standing in judgement over God's communication (word); and thus, exchanging the inerrancy of God's communication – *divine revelation* – with the inerrancy of *autonomous reason*. In this way man had made himself a would-be god. This is the crux of the whole human problem and this is what the Gospel confronts: it is the Gospel of God in antithesis to the Gospel of Man; either man is the ultimate reference point or God. Jesus said, "Whoever is not with me is against me..." (Lk 11:23). There is no common ground.

Consequently, the Gospel is proclaimed as the revelation of God. This proclamation presupposes – on the authority of divine revelation – the existence and ultimacy of God. It declares God as self-existent and self-revealing: the eternal, " I AM" (Ex 3:14). An aspect of that revelation, expounded in these three verses, is that, in creation, man already possesses a sufficiently clear knowledge of God, so much so, that it renders him morally culpable, but nonetheless, he vainly attempts to suppress it. The Gospel calls that knowledge forth, bringing it to the light; it exposes the futility of his thinking and the utter incoherence of his reasonings which he raises up against the knowledge of God. In other words, the Gospel doesn't submit to man's autonomous reason, it doesn't attempt to provide proofs for God's existence. Rather, it exposes autonomous man's worldview as impotent, lacking explanatory power.

22–23 "22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools, 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things."—In suppressing, holding down, the knowledge of God, man's wisdom has denied God as Creator and, instead, raised up the creature as would-be gods, worshipping idols—not only material but intellectual. Hence, the blurring of the Creator/creature distinction is fundamental to all humanist thought. This manifests in the conflict of the 'one and the many', expressed in the Greek philosophical tension between *universals* (Plato) and *particulars* (Aristotle). Once the Creator-God is removed from the equation, the cosmos – the structure of reality – is broken. Consequently, the Greeks attempted to construct a unified field of knowledge. Plato sought it in *universals* (the transcendent), in the ideal, the realm of the idea as absolute, while his student Aristotle, said, No, that voids the *particulars* (the immanent), the realm of matter and of the empirical. However, Aristotle's approach only served to then absolutize the particulars, resulting in atomism and fragmentation, thus voiding the universals. Nothing is resolved, the divided field of knowledge remains with the dialectic between universals and particulars and, furthermore, dualism between spirit and matter; and thus, also between the transcendent and the immanent. This philosophical dilemma is beautifully portrayed in the famous fresco by Raphael, 'The School of Athens', in which Aristotle gestures to the earth, representing his belief in knowledge through empirical observation and experience, while Plato gestures to the heavens, representing his belief in the idea as the source of knowledge.

With the Creator-God removed the creature now becomes god. The cosmos is turned on its head, the immanent now becomes transcendent—man and nature are absolutized. However, man is now trapped, imprisoned within a closed materialist system (i.e. a deterministic system of cause and effect). He has, in fact, "exchanged the truth of God for a lie" (v. 25); promised godhood, he has instead become a slave: a slave to nature, to his biological programming – and thus to his lusts and passions – and also to social engineering. Man is no longer a free moral agent but a victim. In a vain attempt to escape he turns to mysticism and to occultic power, searching for the lost universal. With the creature now transcendent, nature is divinized, imbuing it with supernatural attributes. Worshipping the creature, man is now one with the universe, realizing the god within and without. Thus, we have the schizophrenia of post-Christian Western culture, mixing hard atheistic scientism with pantheism and animism, and thus, of modernism with romanticism.

And so, man, "*Claiming to be wise, ... became fools*". The 1st century is now reiterated in the 21st century. As hardheaded materialists, they are now prisoners of their own closed system, tyrannized by nature and the demonic. Only the Gospel has the power to set them free. The age-old dilemma of the 'one and the many', of the broken cosmos, is solved in the Triune-God, who *is* the 'one and the many'.

Moreover, God's covenant people – the church – also engage in idolatry. It is *the* core issue of the human condition. Idolatry, by definition, is the breaking of the covenant in its first requirement: "You shall have no other gods beside me" (Ex 20:3). It is the rejection of the true God for false gods. But you may ask, *how do Christians do that?* Deceptively, like Israel, they worship false gods *alongside* Yahweh. There is no out-and-out rejection of God. While, on the surface, the normal corporate worship of the church continues unabated, underneath is a more insidious dynamic. Paul's whole relationship with the Corinthian church was compromised by the very same. He warns them:

2 For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. 3 But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your **thoughts** will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. 4 For if someone comes and proclaims **another Jesus** than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive **a different spirit** from the one you received, or if you accept **a different gospel** from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough.

2 Corinthians 11:2–4

Paul refers back to the deception of the Garden; it is the archetypal seduction, and it occurs in the mind: "But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your **thoughts** will be led astray..." (see Gen 3). In solidarity with our first parents, mankind stood in judgement over God's communication (word), autonomously determining its truthfulness. As we all know, they opted for Satan's lie, plunging their progeny into cosmic chaos. Here lies *the* source of the church's sectarian division and theological confusion. Rather than submitting to the authority of God in *his* word, God's people – through the exercise of *autonomous* reason – buy into a different Jesus, a different spirit, and a different gospel. Of course we still use the Bible but only as a source for what we want—for our sermons, for our healing, and for our comfort, using the text merely as a pretext for what *we* want to say; but rarely with any theological rigour to conform our thinking to the thoughts of God about himself and the cosmos. We still talk 'Jesus, spirit, gospel' but now with a different meaning. Superficially, it sounds 'Christian' but drill down to the true meaning and all has changed: Jesus is no longer the ruling Sovereign of the universe, demanding my obeisance, but my best buddy and therapist; the spirit becomes the *zeitgeist*, the sensate seduction of our culture; and the gospel becomes the good news of self-realization. Jesus, the Spirit, and the gospel are reinterpreted – always twisting scripture – to serve man as a would-be god. Whether it is through the *prosperity gospel* of health and wealth (e.g. the 'word of faith' movement etc.), the *gnostic gospel* of elitist spirituality (e.g. neo-orthodoxy, overemphasis on ecstatic & mystical experiences, the Wagner version of 'spiritual warfare' against prince powers etc.), or the *judaistic gospel* of legalism (e.g. Christian Zionism, Arminianism, open theism, self-help & recovery formulas, church growth formulas etc.), the dynamics are the same: man self-realizes as a would-be god. He places himself in the driver's seat – in control – blurring the Creator/creature distinction. Hence, he treacherously worships himself in the temple of God; he has become the idol. Failing to heed Paul's warning concerning the original seduction, leading to false gospels, contemporary Christianity has been seduced by baptised humanism.

The solution is the insight that the foolishness of God is wiser than men (1 Cor 1:18-2:5). He destroys the wisdom of the wise by choosing the foolish things of the world. This demands that the violation of the covenant by our first parents be reversed. This Jesus did by his "one act of righteousness" (Rom 5:18), by his obedient life and vicarious death; Jesus has been made for us the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:30). Rather than rising up in intellectual pride in judgement over the revelation of God, or treating it lightly by using the Bible as a text source for sermons and homespun theologies, we are to tremble at his word (Isa 66:2). When asked which is the greatest commandment (word), Jesus summed up the whole covenant by reiterating the *shema* of Deuteronomy 6:

29 Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30 And you shall love the Lord your God with all your **heart** and with all your soul and with all your **mind** and with all your strength.'

Mark 12:29–30

In God's biology the *heart* and *mind* are connected. And yet, in our ignorance, we treat them as dichotomous, as two competing and conflicting approaches to life; you are either a head person or heart person, or so we think. The only reason we go astray in our minds, embracing false gospels and theologies, is that we have first gone astray in our hearts. All theology is first done in the heart. The mind is the screen, the heart is the projector; rooted in pride, the heart projects onto the mind imaginations and reasonings against the knowledge of God. Accordingly, unbroken autonomous-man raises up self-realizing intellectual and theological systems that resist God, blurring the Creator/creature distinction; man, independently of God, self-justifies through his false belief-systems, becoming his own saviour. This is the core of idolatry and every false gospel. The solution is to love the Lord with all our heart and mind, to tremble at *his* word, and embrace the Gospel entrusted to Paul.

1:24-32—The Incontrovertible Judgement of God

24–25 *"24 Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, 25 because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen."*—When a culture changes its gods it changes its laws. Verse 24 makes it clear that the rejection of the Creator-God for the gods of nature results in a society's moral decline. This is mirrored in its laws as the codification of the society's values. And so, laws reflect the ultimate reference point – if you like, the god – of that society; and, as such, all laws, by definition, are religious. Nevertheless, v. 24 shows that, while man thinks he is in control, this cultural shift and social engineering is actually God giving that society over to their own lusts and immorality (v. 24, 26, 28).

26–27 *"26 For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; 27 and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error."*—A society's dislocation from the Creator-God – "exchanging the truth of God for a lie" – is manifest in the dislocation of sexuality. God hands them over to the full consequences of their apostasy; and thus, homosexuality is God's judgement of that society so that they might ultimately learn. The creation-order of man made in God's image, male and female, is disrupted. The polarities between male and female are neither accidents of evolution nor cultural conventions. And so, the male-female sexual union – the "one flesh" relationship (Gen 2:24) – is God's ordained design for human sexual relations. He has established heterosexuality as normative for the direction of sexual desire and behaviour. The fact that humanity is made in God's image as male and female has defined sexual function, and thus, refutes the claims of homosexual apologists that human beings have the right to define their own sexual identity. In the light of the creation account, to do so is an act of autonomous man, replacing God's distinctions with human decrees, and thus becoming as God. Man as a would-be god now defines his own reality by divine fiat: *I may be biologically male but I am really a female*. His thinking has become futile and, in fact, debased, plunging a whole civilisation into cultural insanity.

28 *"And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done."*—This verse is a parallel to v. 22f and v. 25. Because this society has suppressed the knowledge of God God has given it over to a "debased mind". In the Greek Paul uses a word play here: because they have considered God as worthless, unworthy of knowing, their mind has been rendered worthless, as untrustworthy in understanding the moral universe. Their reason is a fatally flawed guide to moral behaviour as v. 29-31 enumerates.

32 *"Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them."*—In summary, this society has brazenly pursued their immoral behaviours in the full, clear light of their revelation of God and his wrath, that his "righteous decree" demands the retributive penalty of death (Gen 2:17; Lev 18:22; 20:13; 1 Tim 1:8-11). This knowledge is certain, incontrovertible, cognizable and unquestionable (v. 19). It is known not only by the 'general revelation' that all humankind has received but also through the 'special revelation' of Scripture, but nevertheless, is actively suppressed. The suppression of this knowledge is such that society is not only given over to practicing these things but also endorsing them; they are supported by law. Consequently, the gradual shift in the West to legalise homosexuality, and its corollary same-sex marriage, is, in fact, a watershed in a society's formal rejection of God. By institutionally endorsing what God prohibits the West has formalised its apostasy and come under his judgement. Although,

the very fact of its endorsement is itself a judgement.

Returning to v. 24, 26, 28 – “*Therefore God gave them up*” – we see that humankind is not only morally culpable for the revelation received, but because of their culpability, they are handed over to the consequences of their choices.

This is in harmony with the covenant arrangement God made with man, first in Adam and culminating in Christ. If the commands of the covenant – “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart*” etc. – are disobeyed, the covenant consequences will then be applied. To be *given up* or *handed over* by God is exactly that. It is a covenant term describing God’s disciplines upon a society that has turned from the true and living God to idols (see Lev 26:25; Acts 7:42).

To cast the fight for the right of same-sex marriage as a “justice” issue can now be seen in its true light. God who *is* the Judge, through the dislocation of homosexuality, is, in fact, judging the culture.

According to Paul then, homosexuality is the result of a society’s rejection of the Creator-God and his turning them over to the consequences of their decisions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against man as a covenant-breaker. He has therefore come under the retributive justice of God and is worthy of the judicial penalty of death. Despite his clear incontrovertible knowledge of God he suppresses it through his unrighteousness. Dislocated from God, he is consigned by God to live in the full consequences of his apostasy, in captivity to his immoralities and the futility of his thinking. Thus, his mind has been debased and rendered incapable of judiciously ascertaining truth and ethics, of interpreting truthfully the facts of the universe. The cosmos is broken and only the Gospel has the power to restore the heart and mind of man to sanity.

While man has been justly condemned to death, the Gospel presents Christ as both “just and justifier of those who believe” (3:26). Even though covenant has been disobeyed, justice is promised; this, Part 4 will explore.

The Romans Series:

Part 1: [Kingdom through Covenant](#)

Part 2: [Caesar & Christ: Gospel Declared](#)

Part 3: [God Revealed & Man Judged: Covenant Disobeyed](#)

Part 4: [Judgement & Justification: Justice Promised](#)

Part 5: [De-Creation & Re-Creation: Paradise Restored](#)

Part 6: Disobedience & Dispossession: *Covenant Administered*

Part 7: Autonomy & Theonomy: *Covenant Obeyed*

Part 8: Personal & Cultural: *Dominion Regained*

Copyright © 2024 Lifemessenger Inc.

www.lifemessenger.org

Facilitating biblical teaching & thinking for church & culture

REPRINT AGREEMENT: Duplication and re-transmission of this writing is permitted provided that complete source and website information is included