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**The First Step in Missions
Training: How our Neigh-
bors are Wrestling with God's
General Revelation (Part I)**



Theological Accents
Theologische Akzente

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The First Step in Missions Training: How our Neighbors are Wrestling with God's General Revelation (Part I)¹

Thomas K. Johnson

If you very seriously want to fulfill your calling as a missionary, to bring the biblical message to a needy world, what is the very first thing you should learn? Is it the language of the people you want to reach? Is it how to adjust to different cultures, where people really think differently and do things differently? Is it the history of the people you want to reach?

If you read the life of the apostle Paul, you might think the most important thing for a missionary to learn is how to swim very well, in case a few of the ships on which you are riding sink. (See 2 Corinthians 11:25.) Or maybe, following Paul, you will want to learn how to walk distances that seem long to us. (The distance mentioned in Acts 20:13 was 32 to 40 km, i.e., 20 to 25 miles.) Or maybe you should learn how to sing very joyfully, in case you are beaten and thrown into prison for preaching the gospel. (See Acts 16:16–39.) I have wondered if singing while being beaten was standard operating procedure for Paul.

What is truly astonishing is Paul's first theme when he wrote a manual on missionary training. In a very broad sense, the book of Romans was written by Paul as a missionary training manual, one of the earlier text books in history, designed to equip the church for its history changing task of bringing the gospel to the nations. He wrote it as an organic part of his missionary work, to explain his mission efforts to the church in Rome, to gain support from the church, and especially to train the entire church in Rome to become a missionary church. Of course, Christians have used the book of Romans for other purposes, perhaps as a source book for Christian doctrine or as a summary of theology, and there is nothing particularly wrong with these uses of the book. However, the arguments are convincing that Paul wrote his great epistle to the Romans to be a missions training manual, to help the church in Rome become a missionary church. You see this from the way the book starts, finishes, and is organized around the topic

of the spread of the gospel to the entire world. The overwhelming theological, philosophical, and ethical content of the book does not stand alone; it is set within the framework of world mission and is properly called a “Charter of World Missions.”² If this claim is true, then the book of Romans should again become central for missionary training. We want all our missionaries (which means all Christians!) to be able to say, with Paul, “I am not ashamed of the gospel,” and to really know what they mean with these words, why they are convinced this is true, how this relates to human experience, and what kind of life flows from this message.³

What is truly astonishing is that the very first theme of the apostle, after his missionary framework (Romans 1:1–15) and gospel summary (Romans 1:16–17), is *not* the gospel. Paul’s first theme is the divine-human conflict which forms the background for all of human experience prior to faith in the gospel. This conflict has to do with God’s general revelation, the human suppression of that revelation, God’s wrath, and his common grace. Paul regarded understanding these truths about God and humanity as the first step to prepare the Christians in Rome to become effective missionaries who were proud of the gospel in relation to their multi-religious and multi-cultural society; this understanding is also strategically important for our time. Paul understood that the entire human race is wrestling with God prior to the time when anyone hears the gospel.⁴ Con-

flict with God is the central theme of human existence. Understanding this conflict, this wrestling match of the ages between God and humanity, is the first step toward serious missionary courage and power. Understanding this conflict also provides crucial intellectual tools needed by all Christians as missionaries.⁵ The human race is lost and is continually suppressing their God-given knowledge of God. Nevertheless, even when people suppress their naturally given knowledge of God, the created order of the universe continually impinges on human life and consciousness, so that human life is a continual wrestling match with God and his created order, regardless of the belief or unbelief of a person or culture

A word of self-disclosure is in order. As a young man, I studied religions and philosophies in a secular university with a view to bring the gospel into the secular universities. Soon I came to the very painful conclusion that some of the evangelical apologetics I had learned did not stand up in light of the various cross currents which dominated the university, ideas which advanced students might call critical philosophy, post-modernism, or deconstructionism.⁶ If my previously learned weak apologetics was all I had intellectually, then I had to become ashamed of the gospel, the exact opposite of what Paul experienced. This realization forced me to ask how Paul could be so pointedly unashamed, really proud of the gospel, even though he was obviously aware of the various lines of secular and religious

thought in his day, some of which were naively religious, while others were philosophically critical and skeptical. Learning from Romans 1 and 2 became a matter of personal spiritual survival as well as a matter of regaining thoughtful missionary zeal.⁷ But this experience was not only for me, since the philosophies and theories I encountered in the university represented similar ideas in many cultures. My experience may be similar to that of many other Christians. Understanding Paul's teaching on God's speech through creation, with the complex human response, offers answers that can change us all from being ashamed of the gospel to becoming confident in the gospel.⁸

To repeat: Paul's pride in the gospel, his intellectual courage in the gospel, and his missionary audacity were based on his understanding of the human condition before God. This is a condition of repressing God's general revelation, even though the entire human situation, including all of human experience, is made possible by a continual dialogue and conflict with God's word in creation. God's general revelation forms the hidden theological assumption for all of life for all people regardless of culture or religion, an assumption that is both used and denied at the same time by unbelievers as part of their conflict with God. Thoughtful missionaries (which we all should become) will make this otherwise hidden assumption explicit in their own understanding of life and the gospel; then we can use this understanding to present the gospel

wisely and boldly. This is a theory of knowledge, a philosophy of culture, a system of social criticism, an evaluative philosophy of religion, a complex philosophical anthropology, and a foundation for social ethics, all as a framework for world missions. Paul's complete worldview was unlike most philosophical theories we encounter, but this total worldview gave him both courage and guidance to lead the nations to faith in Jesus. Paul's God was continually speaking through creation in a manner that no one can avoid and which is the foundation for all of human consciousness, life, and experience, even if people often *want* to avoid God's presence and speech. It seems like people cannot acknowledge it. For Paul, God's self-revelation through creation, even when denied and suppressed, is fundamental for all that makes us human, including our internal contradictions, and especially our irrepressible religious drives and hard-to-deny ethical knowledge. Because Paul understood the complex, continuous, and universal divine-human encounter, he was proud of the gospel, confident in the truth and importance of the gospel, while living in a world of many religions, cultures, and philosophies. Paul's missionary intellectual courage was a gift of God which came by means of understanding God's general revelation and the self-contradictory response of people in conflict with God.

It is my impression that even we Christians, not only atheists and adherents of other religions, sometimes

neglect or ignore God's general word in creation, the word which eternally and continually precedes his special Word in Christ and in Holy Scripture; this weakness left me ill-equipped for our missionary calling, the main theme of Romans. This ill-equipped status can push us into either theological liberalism (which often appropriates a limited set of Christian truth claims on the basis of a philosophy of life, worldview, or narrative that is not biblical in its origin) or into extreme fundamentalism (which holds or presents Christian truth claims in an improper manner).⁸ We easily adopt a fight-or-flight relation to culture, education, and politics, unintentionally advocating either an ethics of holy withdrawal from the world or an ethics of domination over the world. Our evangelism, preaching, and educational efforts are weakened because we sound like there is no connection between the biblical message and the rest of human experience. The gospel can begin to seem irrelevant or marginal in importance, even to Christians. Minimizing God's general revelation dishonors God and implicitly expresses ingratitude toward God.

On the other hand, if we think more deeply, if we really meditate on God's general revelation, we will begin to receive God's gift of missionary courage, including confidence in the truth of the gospel and a renewed understanding of the relevance of God's twofold revelation to all of human experience. For me, meditating about what God is doing (and has been doing

throughout human history) in his creation, even before people hear the gospel, has become part of my worship to my heavenly Father, into which I invite you to join me. This study will be in four major parts: 1) an original translation of Paul's manifesto in Romans 1:16–2:5, which includes some matters of technical exegesis in the translation; 2) "Wrestling with God: The Human Condition," which is a targeted exposition of selected themes in this particular text; 3) "Faith Seeking Understanding," a multifaceted study inspired by Paul's method of thought, including reference to other biblical texts, addressing missionary questions related to philosophy, religions, and ethics; and 4) some academic appendices.

The goal is to take the first step to prepare believers to become missionaries: understanding the condition of the unbelieving world, which is continually in self-conflict and in conflict with God: fighting with God's general revelation while also depending on God's general revelation and God's common grace, so that everyone is responding to that God in manifold ways. This can increase our intellectual and practical courage in communicating and applying the biblical message in the midst of a world that is never really secular.¹⁰

Romans 1:16–2:5 (original translation)

(16) I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God intended for salvation for each person who believes, first for the Jew and then for the Greek.

(17) In it the righteousness of God is revealed by faith and unto faith, as it is written, 'The righteous will live by faith.' (18) For the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and injustice of men who suppress the truth by means of injustice, (19) since the knowledge of God is plain in them; for God has made himself known to them. (20) His invisible characteristics are received into consciousness through the creation of the world, namely his invisible power and divine nature, so that people are without an apology.¹¹ (21) Although they knew God, they did not glorify him or give thanks to him, but became worthless in their thoughts and their senseless hearts were darkened. (22) Claiming to be wise, they became foolish and (23) exchanged the glory of the immortal God for the image of the likeness of mortal man, birds, animals, and reptiles.

(24) Therefore God gave them over by means of the covetous desires of their hearts unto uncleanness to dishonor their bodies among themselves, (25) particularly the very people who exchanged the truth of God for a lie and deified and worshipped the creation in place of the Creator, who is blessed forever, amen. (26) Therefore, God gave them over unto dishonorable passions; for example, the women exchanged natural sexual relations for those which are contrary to nature, (27) as also the men left natural sexual relations with women and burned in their desires for each other, man for man, contrary to

the scheme of nature; and thereby they receive in themselves the repayment which was necessary for their delusion. (28) And since they did not recognize the knowledge of God that they had, God gave them over to a confused state of mind, to do those things which are inappropriate. (29) They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, and malice. They are gossips, (30) slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant, and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; (31) they are senseless, disloyal, lacking in normal affections, and merciless. (32) They know the requirement of God that those who do such things are worthy of death, but they not only do these things, they also approve of those who do them.

(2:1) Therefore, you are without a defense,¹² O human, everyone who evaluates any actions as inappropriate; for whenever you evaluate, you also condemn yourself, for you do the same type of things which you evaluate negatively. (2) And we know that the judgment of God is based on truth when it falls on those who take such inappropriate actions. (3) Are you really being logical, O human, to think you will escape the judgment of God when you both give a negative evaluation of the actions of others and also do similar actions yourself? (4) Do you despise the riches of God's kindness, indulgence, and patience, claiming not to know that this kindness of God should lead you to change your mind? (5) By means of your hard and unrepentant heart you are storing up additional wrath for

yourself at the day of the revelation of the wrath and just judgment of God.

Questions for study and discussion:

1. Compare the introduction to Romans (1:1–15) with the conclusion (15:14–16:27). Why do you agree or disagree with the claim that the whole epistle is designed for missions training?
2. Compare this translation with the translation in your Bible. What fine nuances are different? How do these nuances influence your understanding of God and people?
3. How do you know the gospel of Christ is true? How do you know that God is real? Why should we not believe in many gods?
4. What will equip you to comfortably explain the Christian message to:
 - a. people who claim to be atheists?
 - b. people who think we cannot know truth?
 - c. people who think we all find or create our own truth?
 - d. people who follow another religion?
 - e. people who substitute morality for faith?
 - f. people who may be much more educated than you?
 - g. people who are less educated than you?
5. Do you feel uncomfortable when you talk about your beliefs or your ethics with people who think entirely differently from you? Why?

6. Who needs an “apology,” a defense of his/her beliefs?
7. In what ways is being a Christian an education in itself?

The Human Condition

In Romans 1:16–2:5 Paul summarizes his assessment of the human condition without the gospel, which we are describing as wrestling with God’s general revelation. Readers are encouraged to repeatedly refer to this text, and to the original translation of this text in the previous chapter, in order to consider it deeply.

What follows is a targeted exposition of selected themes in this text that may be occasionally forgotten but which will enable believers to better grasp the condition of the people who need the gospel of Christ. Understanding the condition of people before God can equip Christians with missionary audacity.

Chapter Thesis: All of human life outside of the gospel is filled with the terrible contradiction of both knowing and not knowing God at the same time.

To understand Paul’s conception of life before God, one has to see the human condition as filled with truly terrible spiritual, moral, and intellectual conflicts, contradictions, and tensions.

At the center of these contradictions stands the problem that all people have a significant and content-rich knowledge of God, even though people without the Bible do not want to accept or

acknowledge that they have this knowledge about God and from God. Everything that people say, think, and feel about God, morality, and other important topics arises out of their deep, primordial conflict with God. All that people do in all the areas of life and culture is involved in this wrestling match of the ages.

Even the common claim of religious “neutrality,” that one can talk about God in the same way one talks about minor everyday matters, is itself a product of the human conflict with God, really an attempt to hide from God.¹³

Paul does not provide precise theoretical terminology, but he assumes a fundamental contrast between two types of knowledge of God.

This contrast is between a deficient knowledge and a proper knowledge of God, which is also a contrast between a rejected knowledge and an accepted knowledge of God. The first type of knowledge is what all people have by virtue of creation and general revelation, whether it is called improper, deficient, or rejected. This first type of knowledge of God is inseparable from conflict with God.

The second type of knowledge, whether it is called proper or accepted, comes only by the gospel. This second type of knowledge of God has to do with peace with God by faith in Jesus.¹⁴ All people have some type of knowledge of God, whether improper or proper, rejected or accepted. This distinction is at the center of human experience and influences all of life, particularly in rela-

tion to God himself. God is unavoidable. This means the knowledge of God in the gospel assumes the previously rejected knowledge, but gospel-based knowledge of God does not build on the rejected knowledge of God, as if gospel-based knowledge is a second level that builds upon a lower level.

The two types of knowledge of God are not like floors in a building, such that one stands on top of the other.¹⁵ The knowledge of God we receive in the gospel radically changes and redirects the rejected knowledge of God, as well as adding to it.

In the light of the gospel, we can acknowledge that we previously did not want to know God, even though he was making himself known to us through all of creation.¹⁶

Paul claims that God really is revealing himself through creation to all people on earth, and the language Paul uses is in two verb tenses, including the completed past and also the ongoing present.

God effectively and sufficiently revealed himself through his initial work of creation at the beginning of time, and God is also actively continuing to speak through his creation to humankind throughout all of history.

(In Romans 3:21 Paul uses similar terminology to describe the revelation of righteousness from God received by faith in Christ, thereby showing that there are two revelations from God with different contents and purposes.) God did not merely create the world and go into retirement (as some deists seem to

think);¹⁷ he is currently speaking to all men, women, and children, whether or not they want to listen to God or even claim to believe in God. And this speech of God to all of humankind, even when rejected, is crucial to understanding ourselves and our neighbors.

To avoid misunderstanding, one should notice that Paul sees this activity of God as coming before any human interest in knowing God or asking about God.

God has spoken through creation and is now speaking through creation. This is the word by which God created the universe and by which he keeps the universe in existence. It is the condition that made existence and life possible and which still makes existence and life possible. Christians have used several different terms to describe this work of God through his creation: general revelation, natural revelation, or creational revelation. (We will usually use the term “general revelation.”)

Each of these terms has certain strengths, since this revelation of God is general (to all people), coming through nature (including human nature), which is always understood to be God’s creation.

To repeat, Paul thinks this naturally given knowledge of God is received into consciousness by all people prior to the gospel as a primordial reality, not merely as a theoretical possibility, but this knowledge is rejected and suppressed, so that even unbelievers know God, though they also do not know God at the same time.

Short Definitions

1. General revelation: God’s speech to humankind through all of creation, which both renders all accountable to God and simultaneously makes life and culture possible. This is also called “natural revelation” or “creational revelation.”
2. Special revelation: God’s speech to humankind in the Bible and in Christ which has its center in the gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus to provide salvation.

The Content of General Revelation

As Paul describes God’s general revelation, it has a massive amount of content. It is not only a feeling of dependence or an awareness of something higher and holy, though this is surely included. Paul describes or alludes to at least seven distinct and specific aspects or dimensions of the content of God’s general revelation in this text, though not all seven are described with equal clarity. These are the seven aspects or content areas which Paul teaches that all people know in a rejected or deficient manner prior to hearing the gospel:

1. the invisible power of God (verse 20);
2. the invisible deity or divine nature of God (verse 20), which may refer to God’s moral nature or attributes;
3. the moral demands of God’s law, the natural moral law (verse 32);

4. the natural, created scheme or pattern for life (verse 27), which alludes back to the mandates given to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden;
5. the awareness that people deserve punishment for their sins (verse 32);
6. an awareness of human dignity and of that which is honorable about and for people, since the ability to recognize actions which are inappropriate for humans assumes a primal awareness, perhaps not articulated in words, of the dignity both of the people acting and of those receiving the actions (verses 29–32);
7. an awareness of God's common grace, meaning that on a daily level people often know they receive good gifts from God while they also know that they deserve the wrath of God (verses 2:1–5).¹⁸

It can be truly astonishing for us to begin to consider how much that we know, and that everyone knows, is known because of what God is continually doing. This content is much richer than what has been called “ethical monotheism,” a term scholars use to refer to the common content of the historical religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. According to the apostle Paul, there is a rich pattern of truth proclaimed by God through creation (as well as in the Scriptures). As proclaimed through creation, it forms the foundation and condition for all of human life and experience even when God and his general revelation are not acknowledged. Not to recognize that

God's general revelation is the necessary condition for all of human life and experience is ingratitude toward God.

As a result of this general revelation, there is an important sense in which all people in all times and in all places know God and make use of this knowledge of God continuously. Paul says the knowledge of God is plain in all people and to all people (verse 19), and this knowledge is taken into the consciousness of all people (verse 20). This is what makes us human and distinguishes humans from anything else in the world.¹⁹ Of course, there is also an important sense in which many people do not know God; this is what makes the gospel important. We are here considering the deepest self-contradiction and paradox of human experience: in this most important area of knowledge, a lack of knowledge is based on knowledge. People do not know God because they do know God. How can this be?

The Normal Human Response to God's General Revelation

Without the gospel, people normally do not like knowing God because God is frightening; all people are aware that they deserve God's wrath because they have not obeyed his moral law. This primordial knowledge of God is the basis for the most primordial and ultimate of human anxieties which influences all that people say and do. For this reason, this knowledge about God and from God is suppressed or repressed (Think of

a psychological/spiritual defense mechanism.), with the result that people can easily say they do not know God, while, at the same time, they really do know God, while holding this knowledge in a rejected status. All people know something about his power, his deity, his moral law, the created order for life, and that people deserve punishment in relation to God. People have a God-given impression of human dignity and sense that they receive better than they deserve. But without the gospel, people “suppress the truth” (verse 18), driving it into the murky underground of culture and subconsciousness, though it continues to condition all we do and to repeatedly pop back into consciousness.

Psychologists sometimes talk about the suppression of memories or truths that are frightening or deeply disturbing; sociologists of knowledge talk about the way in which even supposedly objective scientific truth claims are heavily influenced by our fears and expectations. The idea that what people think is true and claim to know is not based on objective or pure reason is not a new idea; though not articulated in theoretical language, this idea is already present in the Bible. The general revelation that people deserve the wrath of God because of sin plays a decisive role in what people think they know. People pretend not to know truths they prefer not to know. The truth is too frightening.

One can take the account of Adam and Eve hiding from God behind a bush or tree as a metaphor for the his-

tory of the human race, including Paul’s time and our own. (Romans 1:18–2:5 can properly be seen as an application of Genesis chapters two through nine, even if the book of Genesis is not directly quoted. There are numerous allusions to Genesis.) From our personal experience, one could think of the way small children imagine that if they cover their eyes so they cannot see other people, other people cannot see them; if people say they do not know God, they imagine that God does not exist or that God does not know them. Without knowing the gospel of Christ, it is too frightening to acknowledge that God knows us fully. Only when we grasp the gospel, that God is so gracious and forgiving that he sent his Son to purchase our redemption, can we then begin to recover from this illness of mind and soul that leads us to claim that we do not know God, when, in fact, all of us know God. It is terrifying to know we deserve the wrath of God; therefore, the default mode of consciousness of the human race is to pretend we do not or cannot know God, often by means of creating a vast array of idols and views of God or the Ultimate which are not so terrifying or which can be appeased by our best efforts.

- *According to Paul’s description of the human condition, our predicament is epistemological sin or epistemological injustice. This terminology requires explanation. If a witness in a criminal court trial does not tell the court all he or she knows about the crime under consideration, that witness will be guilty of*

a crime in the realm of knowledge. The witness does not publicly acknowledge all that he or she knows. Depending on the country in which the crime occurs, it may be defined legally as obstruction of justice or perverting the course of justice. This is an act of distinctly epistemological (related to knowledge) injustice. Something similar is happening continually in relation to God, though before God we do not have a right to remain silent to avoid incriminating ourselves. People say they do not know God, and they probably even say that to themselves, when they really do know God. This is lying, an act of injustice in relation to truth, so that it is not wrong to say that lying about God is the fundamental sin. Unbelief always involves sin, is a result of sin, and is itself sin. One can say that unbelief is the core of original sin, in such a manner that the many sins of the flesh and sins in relationships, which Paul describes at length, flow from unbelief.²⁰ The center of the human problem is in the realm of what we claim to know or not to know; this is epistemological sin and injustice. For many centuries Christians have said that the sins of the spirit, such as pride and ingratitude to God, are deeper than the sins of the flesh and contribute to the sins of the flesh. What we learn from our renewed study of Romans 1, that lying about God is fundamental to sin, is complementary to this traditional observation. Paul already noted the internal link among the sins of the spirit; the people who deny that they know God also do not give thanks to him (verse 21), showing the

internal spiritual links among ingratitude, unbelief, and lying about God.

- A sin of this magnitude has significant results in the entire life of those guilty of the sin. Some of the results that Paul mentions are closely related to the arena in which the sin occurs, the internal life of the mind and soul.²¹ He says, "... they became worthless in their thoughts and their senseless hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became foolish ..." (verses 21 and 22). One should not confuse cause and effect. Worthless thoughts, darkened senseless hearts, and claims of wisdom that cover up true foolishness are the result, not the cause. The cause is the epistemological sin of unbelief. People claim they do not know God when they really do know God. Their knowledge of God includes the entire rich and complex content that everyone receives into consciousness from God's general revelation.

Internal Contradictions Resulting from Simultaneously Accepting and Rejecting God's General Revelation

Knowing God (in a rejected manner) when they claim not to know God is the reason that people often act as if they do not really believe what they claim to believe. A person may claim to be a complete moral relativist, saying that there is no universal moral standard or moral law, but then that person may shout that terrorism or racism is terribly wrong and may also feel horrible

guilt inside; such people, who are very common, deny their own worldview by applying a known moral law to others and to themselves.

A person may claim to be a complete skeptic with regard to all knowledge, saying we cannot be sure of knowing anything, but then that person acts as if we all have a lot of shared true knowledge; whether we are crossing a traffic-filled street or doing our banking, we all act on the basis of a lot of information we think everyone knows to be true.

The anarchist may claim that all laws and governments are unnecessary, undesired, and harmful, but when his group is attacked by neo-Nazis on the street, the anarchist calls the police, wanting his freedom of speech to be protected by law. This step obviously makes the anarchist philosophy of life look like a game, not a serious conviction.²²

Part of the time people act and talk according to their repressed knowledge, which they receive from God's general revelation, instead of acting according to the beliefs they claim to accept. (We can be grateful to God that many people do not practice the beliefs they claim to accept, since it leads to many good results for all of us.

It is a dimension of common grace.) When a religion or ideology denies the truths which God proclaims via general revelation, its adherents do not fully believe their own words. They are of two minds, needing to trust the truths of general revelation in order to live, while they claim to affirm alter-

nate beliefs.²³ This is the origin of the conflict most people have between their professed beliefs and their practiced beliefs.²⁴ Paul's courage and pride in the gospel are related to how the gospel allows people who have become believers (and those on the way to faith in the gospel) to both accept and explain those truths which are in conflict with their professed beliefs and keep them from fully affirming and practicing their own professed beliefs.

It can be a significant step, both toward faith and toward intellectual integrity, when a person recognizes that he/she does not really believe his/her own philosophy of life and, in fact, lives on the basis of known truths that cannot be explained without reference to God and God's general revelation. Many fashionable religious and philosophical claims are in conflict with the truths (learned by general revelation) we all presuppose in order to carry on our lives.

Identifying this conflict, this status of being of two minds, can be painful for a person, but we should attempt to assist people through this process. This internal contradiction is part of the common spiritual defense mechanism people build against God's general revelation.

The gospel of forgiveness in Christ is the way out of this internal conflict and contradiction; as Christians, we can be of one mind within ourselves, with a real explanation of our experience; this is part of what we can tell people who are interested in the gospel.

A Personal Experience

Many years ago, when I was a nasty young lecturer in philosophy, I played a philosophical trick on a young woman in an ethics class I taught.

She wrote a course essay in which she argued brilliantly that all ethical concerns were a matter of taste; just as some people like ice cream while others like candy, some people like one set of actions while others like another set of actions.

It clearly followed from her essay that it is equally good to like genocide or to like protecting human rights. My nasty trick was to write on her paper, "Excellent essay; failure."

She was quite angry when she came to see me a few days later. "How can you fail me if I wrote an excellent essay?" she almost screamed.

I calmly responded, "It tasted good. Ethics is a matter of taste."

"But a good paper deserves a good grade!!" she huffed.

With a bored glance, I responded, "You convinced me. Everything is relative."

"BUT THERE ARE RULES!! GOOD PAPERS GET GOOD GRADES!! EVEN PROFESSORS HAVE TO FOLLOW THE RULES!!"

And then the light went on in her mind. Her anger at me showed her

that she did not really believe the things she had written in her philosophy essay. She really thought (contrary to everything she had written) that we all know a lot about right and wrong and there are real standards of proper behavior that are different from matters of taste.

I gave her a good grade for what she learned, but her whole relativistic philosophy of life was broken to pieces. Like most people, she not only believed in a standard of right and wrong (in spite of what she said she believed); she also knew that I knew the same standard of right and wrong, God's natural moral law. Her denial of a standard of right and wrong was only a fashionable game she was playing. By losing her game, she may have begun to recover her soul.

I wish I could claim that this philosophical trick was my own idea; honesty requires that I say I learned it from C. S. Lewis and Romans 1. This trick shows something important about our moral knowledge; with Lewis, I would claim it also shows something very important about ourselves and about the nature of the universe.

And these truths about moral knowledge, our selves, and the nature of the universe are best explained by the biblical account of God, the moral law, and human fallenness.

Religious Reversals

The worthless thoughts, darkened hearts, and general foolishness described by Paul lead to a profound and ironic exchange or substitution: People try to replace the Creator God with something he created, thereby also reversing the human relation to the rest of creation.

In verse 23 he explains, “... they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for the image of the likeness of mortal man, birds, animals, and reptiles, ...” using words that echo Genesis 2, where humans were to name (from a position of authority over nature) and be responsible for the rest of creation. This means that people create substitute gods to try to replace the Creator, but by this process they also reverse their own relation to the rest of creation, imagining something in creation to be an authority over themselves.²⁵

Unbelief does not lead to people becoming religionless; unbelief in the Creator/Redeemer leads to all sorts of religions, even atheist religions, though Paul’s description would lead us to expect to find the worship of some aspect or dimension of creation below the surface of consciousness, even among people who claim to be atheists. People are unavoidably religious, even if they may claim not to be religious and say they cannot or do not know God.

Paul’s analysis leads to saying that the many philosophies, worldviews, and religions of the world all involve a substitute or replacement for God. Paul’s

claims are an obvious echo of the invitation of the prophet Isaiah to compare God with idols, and God’s promises with the promises people hope are coming from idols, leading to a discrediting of idolatry. (See Isaiah 44:9–20 and Isaiah 46:5–9.)²⁶ Isaiah expected people to perceive the deception and foolishness involved in idolatry and then to draw back to reaffirm their faith in the God of the Old Testament covenants.

Of course, many of the ancient philosophers in Greece and Rome also ridiculed the polytheism of their day, regarding it as silly nonsense, but they lacked a compelling religious alternative and gospel.²⁷ Similar to the prophets and philosophers, Paul expects people to perceive the foolishness and lack of credibility of the many forms of idolatry. His message explains both idolatry and why people can become serious critics of idolatry in a manner which makes Paul’s gospel worthy of attention and consideration.

People are constantly creating new gods, and Paul’s language suggests a wide diversity of substitute religions. Sometimes people imagine gods or goddesses that are images of themselves, perhaps idealized or tragic images of themselves, as seen in many types of polytheism.

Sometimes people imagine a god or gods that are similar to something else in creation, as seen in various nature religions and fertility cults. Sometimes people create a god from a falsified and absolutized dimension of social experience, such as race, history, nation, or

economic relations, leading to many social/political ideologies. The history of western thought portrays a series of “Gods of the Philosophers,” each of which has only a few characteristics of the biblical God and is surely both less frightening than Paul’s God and not a source of a real gospel of forgiveness of sin.

Whether the philosopher’s god is created by a deist, a pantheist, or a representative of some other philosophical orientation, it, he, or she is not the God who exercises both wrath and grace in both nature and history.

The Gods of the Philosophers and the gods of the religions are projections arising from the divided minds of people who are suppressing the general revelation of the God of creation and redemption.

Whatever the type of substitute religion people develop, unbelief in the known but denied Creator drives people to replace him with something that attempts to explain the universe and also seems to promise the hope, comfort, meaning, forgiveness, reconciliation, and direction that only God can provide.

Primal Angst in view of the known but denied law and wrath of God makes irreligion truly impossible. Paul sees human life as filled with self-deception on a scale that few other people have imagined, and at the core of that self-deception is a wide-ranging set of substitute religions and a denial of the only God to provide a real gospel. This makes preaching that gospel truly urgent.

Missions Training

When the apostle Paul preached to people without the Bible in Athens (Acts 17:22–34), he first mentioned a reference to an “unknown God” in their community, but then Paul immediately assumed that the people of Athens both knew a lot about this God and also had a conflict with God at the center of their lives.

His audacious preaching was empowered by knowing the truths we have just studied. Even before Paul arrived in Athens, the people of Athens were wrestling with God.

The central internal conflict within human life is that of both knowing God and not knowing God at the same time because, without the gospel of Christ, people usually repress and attempt to avoid God’s general revelation which is filled with rich, complex content. People are dreadfully afraid of God’s general revelation because it includes the truth that we deserve God’s wrath for our sins, but this ongoing revelation provides the necessary condition for all people to live as humans and to remain human.

Therefore, people without the gospel are always of two minds, not really believing all the things they claim to believe, while they create all sorts of God-substitutes.

Should we not be proud of the gospel, which allows us to understand our experience of the world and also gives us substantial hope?

For study and discussion:

1. What is the central self-contradiction within human life? How do you experience this and also see it in the lives of others?
2. In what way does everyone know God? In what way do some not know God?
3. What contents does everyone know because of general revelation? How is this different from how you have previously thought about general revelation?
4. How does each of the seven content areas of general revelation form or provide a needed condition for human life and experience? How is culture dependent on general revelation?
5. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each term: general revelation, natural revelation, and creational revelation?
6. Describe epistemological injustice. Give examples from everyday life.
7. What is the difference between professed belief and practiced belief? Why are people commonly of two minds, living and thinking in tension with their professed beliefs?
8. Describe religious reversals and substitute religions in your experience or your community.
9. How do Isaiah chapters 44 and 46 form the background for Romans 1?
10. Why is everyone religious? In what creator and redeemer might you believe if you were not a Christian?

Annotation Anmerkungen

¹Copyright 2013 Thomas K. Johnson, Ph.D. This text is the first in a series of connected chapters excerpted from a forthcoming book and builds on the themes in the previous text. Permission is hereby given to download, print, send, and copy this text for individual, educational or church use, provided the entire text is used.

²Thomas Schirrmacher's observations bear repeating: "Paul wants to proclaim the gospel to all people without exception, regardless of language, culture, and ethnicity ('Greeks and non-Greeks,' Romans 1:14) as well as regardless of education or social class ('the wise and the foolish,' Romans 1:14). ... It is for that reason that he comes to Rome. ... Romans 1:15 is not a superfluous introduction. Rather, it gives us the actual reason for composing the book of Romans, namely to demonstrate that the expansion

of world missions is God's very own plan." Schirrmacher continues that it is the framework of Romans that confirms this missionary purpose of the letter. "The parallels between Romans 1:1–15 and 15:14–16:27 show that Paul does not lose sight of the practical missionary considerations of his letter during the entire epistle." Quotations from Thomas Schirrmacher, "The Book of Romans as a Charter for World Missions: Why mission and theology have to go together," a gift from the Theological Commission to the Missions Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance, distributed at the meeting of the Missions Commission, November 7, 2011. For his accompanying chart, see Appendix I.

³In the first decade after the end of communism in eastern Europe, I heard cruel jokes about missionaries, mostly related to the lack of training of

a few. One joke was that all a missionary needed to know was John 3:16 and *The Four Spiritual Laws*. Another, from the side of Christians who survived generations of oppression, was that missionaries were the people the sending churches could not endure in their own churches, so they sent them out. Paul clearly set a much higher standard of missionary preparation.

⁴I am borrowing the image of Jacob wrestling with God, Genesis 32:22–30, to describe the human condition.

⁵The currently used division into chapters in the New Testament probably began in the thirteenth century; the place of the division between chapter 1 and chapter 2 of Romans might cause us to miss the continuity of Paul's teaching. In this book we are treating the first part of chapter 2 as a continuing part of chapter 1.

⁶Paul's description of humanity in Romans 1 and 2 is a type of deconstruction of thought and consciousness but without a trace of the nihilism often suspected in normal deconstructionism. Paul's deconstruction is theologically based.

⁷My personal study of Romans 1 and 2 was prompted by reading multiple books by Francis A. Schaeffer (1912–1984).

⁸A continuing study of Romans 1 provided a crucial part of equipping me for 19 years of teaching ethics, religion, and philosophy in six secular universities in four different countries.

⁹In the several varieties of what I am calling "theological liberalism," the biblical message is appropriated and interpreted in light of a previously accepted worldview or philosophy of life, which generally rejects the idea of an objective moral law, a central element in general revelation. Extreme fundamentalism treats the people to whom the biblical message is brought as if they have no previous encounter with God or knowledge of God that will play a role in how the gospel is accepted.

¹⁰No bibliography and very few footnotes are included in this book, since that would unnecessarily extend its size and make it less accessible to readers. Implicitly, this essay is a dialogue with much of the history of theology and western philosophy, but to make that explicit at every

point might exceed the patience of the reader and the writer. Some of this is in the appendices.

¹¹Paul's term in Greek which I have translated as "without an apology" is a legal term, *anapologetos*, meaning "without a defense." This term situates the human race as the accused in God's courtroom. It has little similarity to our common apology, "sorry."

¹²Here Paul uses the same key word as in 1:20, *anapologetos*, showing that he is continuing to explain the same theme.

¹³Neutrality toward God is a modern myth spun by the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve in an attempt to cover up our status of being expelled from the Garden of Eden and in revolt against God.

¹⁴When a person comes to faith in Christ, that person has a status of peace with God, being legally justified before God, forgiven of sins, and adopted as a child of God. In a decisive sense, conflict with God has ended. But many believers do not fully appreciate their status of peace with God and do not yet live out their peace with God in daily life. We have to appropriate and learn to enjoy our peace with God in a process of intellectual, moral, and psychological growth.

¹⁵Occasionally Christians have talked as if the two types of knowledge of God are layers or levels, so that the knowledge of God received by special revelation builds on top of knowledge of God received by general revelation. This manner of speaking underemphasizes the way in which unbelief means rejection of God's general revelation. Therefore I do not recommend this two floor way of understanding the relation between general revelation and special revelation.

¹⁶When, in Romans 12:2, Paul tells believers to be "transformed by the renewing of your mind," this surely includes learning to acknowledge their previously rejected knowledge as coming from God in order to honor him properly. Obviously this must include giving thanks to God for his continuing preservation of human life by means of general revelation, the very thing which unbelievers, who do not glorify God or give thanks to him (1:21), refuse to do.

¹⁷One evening more than 30 years ago, I said something very stupid to Leslie, my wife. I said something like, “I don’t think God is very active in our lives.” Moments later I was struck by lightning while in our living room in Chesterfield, near St. Louis, USA. It did not take me very long to realize that though I was a Bible reading Christian, the way I talked about God was truly blasphemous and was rooted in my personal conflict with God. And slowly I came to the more painful realization that even an honest person without the Bible should not say something so stupid about God because God’s general revelation teaches us about some of the things God is continuing to do for all of us. See the following section on the content of general revelation. Of course, few people are honest about what they know from either God’s general or special revelations.

¹⁸There are other aspects of the content of God’s general revelation, described in other biblical texts, that are assumed though not directly mentioned in Romans 1 and 2; these include the way in which God asks questions of humankind (seen in Genesis 3) and the way God has “set eternity in the heart of man” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Some of these will be discussed in a later part of this book.

¹⁹Surprisingly, this truth about humans is sometimes even recognized by atheists. For example the nineteenth century atheist philosopher Ludwig von Feuerbach (1804–1872), who thought that God is a projection of mankind’s ideal character with no existence outside of human consciousness, nevertheless said, “Religion has its basis in the essential difference between man and the brute—the brutes have no religion.” In other words, the difference between humans and animals is that humans are religious. See Feuerbach. *The Essence of Christianity*. Translated into English by George Eliot, as excerpted in: Forrest E. Baird and Walter Kaufmann (Ed.) *Nineteenth-Century Philosophy*. Philosophic Classics. Vol. IV. 2nd edition. Prentice Hall, 2000. p. 135. Feuerbach’s book was originally published in 1841 in German as *Das Wesen des Christentums*. Christians can use Feuerbach’s critique of religious projection to describe the religions and ideologies created by various people and cultures as part of hiding from God.

²⁰Unfortunately, coming to faith does not immediately and completely bring our sins of the flesh and sins in other relationships to an end. Paul still has to address such sins among believers in passages such as Romans 12:9 to 13:14.

²¹Here, and throughout Romans 1, Paul is describing “the pattern of this world” (Romans 12:2), from which believers are to be continually turning away.

²²The anarchist described is a close friend before he came to faith; the other people described are composites of many students I have taught in various universities.

²³The inner conflict of being of two minds explains much of the religious and ideological extremism we observe in society. Inner conflict or uncertainty easily leads to hostility toward people who profess other beliefs. Real peace with God leads both to becoming peaceful people and to courageous gospel proclamation.

²⁴Among people who are not Christians, their practiced beliefs are often better than their professed beliefs because of the influence of God’s general revelation. Among Christians, our practiced beliefs are often not as good as our professed beliefs because of the continuing influence of sin and unbelief.

²⁵One can view many addictions as a current example of a reversed relation to some substance, practice, or instinct which was given in creation. Instead of people being in a position of authority over that substance, practice, or instinct (as was described in the account of creation in Genesis), people place themselves below the authority of that dimension of creation.

²⁶Using ridicule designed to make people think more seriously, Isaiah mocked, “No one stops to think, no one has the knowledge or understanding to say, ‘Half of it I used for fuel; I even baked bread over its coals, I roasted meat and I ate. Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left? Shall I bow down to a block of wood?’”²⁰ Such a person feeds on ashes, a deluded heart misleads him; he cannot save himself, or say, ‘Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?’”²¹ Isaiah 44: 19, 20.

²⁷Here I am thinking especially of Socrates and Plato.

The Author

Über den Autor



Thomas K. Johnson received his Ph.D. in ethics from the University of Iowa (1987) after being a research scholar at Eberhard Karls Universität (Tübingen). He has an ACPE from Missouri Baptist Hospital (St. Louis, 1981), a Master of Divinity (Magna Cum Laude) from Covenant Theological Seminary (St. Louis, 1981), and a BA (Cum Laude) from Hope College (Michigan, 1977). He is a pastor of the Presbyterian Church in America. Since 1994 he has served the International Institute for Christian Studies and is now IICS Professor of Theology, Philosophy, and Public Policy. He was a visiting professor at the European Humanities University in Minsk, Belarus, 1994–1996. (UHU is a dissident, anti-Communist university, forced into exile by the Belarusian dictator in 2004.) Since 1996 he and his wife have lived in Prague, where he taught philosophy at Anglo-American University (4 years) and at Charles University (8 1/2 years). He is MBS Professor of Apologetics and Ethics (2003) and Vice President for Research (2007). He is also Academic Council for the International Institute for Religious Freedom. His wife, Leslie P. Johnson, is director of the Christian International School of Prague.

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