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**The First Step in Missions
Training: How our Neigh-
bors are Wrestling with God's
General Revelation (Part 2)**



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 2)¹

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The Human Condition, continued

In this chapter we continue our targeted exposition and application of themes from Romans 1:16–2:5. Readers are again encouraged to read the biblical text carefully, including the original translation of this text which appeared in the first chapter of this study. Readers should also refer back to the previous chapter which explained some of the ways in which human life without the gospel of Christ is characterized by the terrible internal contradiction of both knowing and not knowing God at the same time. Even when people claim not to know God, they continue to wrestle with God, and that wrestling match is the most important factor in the life of individuals and communities. The rich and complex content of God's general revelation, which all people receive into consciousness, makes it possible for humans to live as humans, even though the normal human response is to repress God's general revelation from our consciousness because it is truly frightening if we do not know the gospel. This understanding of God's general revelation and the human response should help equip us with missionary audacity.

We have the privilege of bringing peace into the divine-human conflict.

In this chapter we present two main theses:

1. Conflict with God is a central and defining characteristic of human existence.
2. God's common grace is his call to repentance.

An understanding of these theses derived from Paul's missions manifesto should help the Body of Christ, which in its entirety is a mission agency in which every Christian is a missionary, to become much more courageous.

Though people may deny it, conflict with God is a central and defining characteristic of human existence

Unbelievers are guilty of a twofold substitution or replacement in their confrontation with God. The first part of this substitution, though already explained at length, bears repeating. People replace the truth about God

with a lie. This is the truth that comes from God and is about God. It includes the knowledge of the demands of God's natural moral law, the knowledge of the created moral order for human life, the knowledge that we deserve God's wrath for our sin, and the knowledge that we frequently receive better than we deserve. The lie which replaces the truth about God is that one can be truly wise without God, or that denies the power of God, or that denies his moral demands and creation order. The second part of this substitution or replacement is the worship of creation or some dimension of creation in place of God. If people are internally compelled to worship something, and if they are unable to worship God without knowing the gospel, it is unavoidable that people will worship something from creation or an imagined image of something created. Idolatry flows from conflict with God.

In this conflict with God at the center of every person's life, God does not remain passive or inactive. If we think God is inactive, it is only because we misunderstand his activity. This theme bears repeating: the God of the Bible is never passive or inactive. God's response to the way in which people suppress their knowledge of God's general revelation is a response that should worry us profoundly: to give people over to their sinful desires. Paul repeats this terribly disturbing claim in similar terms three times (verses 24, 26, and 28). This means that God lets people experience some of the results of repressing their knowledge of God already in this life.

In verse 24 Paul uses terms that echo the tenth of the Ten Commandments, which forbids coveting (having desires that are inappropriate). God lets people go into their own coveting and thereby into the self-destructive sins that flow from unrestrained coveting. In verse 26 Paul says that God gives people over to dishonorable passions.² In verse 28 Paul says that God gives people over to a confused state of mind. These are three complementary descriptions of the same set of acts of God, using literary parallels similar to those used in Hebrew poetry for the purpose of emphasis and content-rich explanation.

What unites these three descriptions is the claim that God repays the act of people dishonoring God (by not accepting their knowledge of him) by allowing people to dishonor and destroy themselves. In this way there is frightening but pure justice in the repayment. Dishonor to God is repaid by means of dishonor to humanity. To bring about this type of justice God does not need to intervene from outside by a special act. God does not always use a lightning bolt or a war to execute his wrath; God repays dishonor by allowing people to dishonor themselves assuming that people know something about human honor and dignity from God's general revelation. Sin is here conceived to be self-punishing, self-destructive, and self-dishonoring, though God gives people over to this process. Skepticism regarding the wrath of God, which is common, may arise because we assume that his wrath can only be implemented

in a spectacular manner, not in processes of self-destruction or social decay which we too easily regard as “normal.”³ If we understand the wrath of God in the way in which Paul describes it, we will begin to perceive the wrath of God all around us all the time.

A key assumption in this act of God, not always noticed by readers, is that there are proper ways for people to honor themselves, namely by recognizing the truth of God and living according to his plan for his creation. When people accept their status as image bearers of the Creator, placed in this world to fulfill his mandates, there is honor for all; when people create god-substitutes in their own image or in the image of some other part of creation, there is dishonor for all, including self destruction. Much of what Paul says about sinful actions in this text can best be understood as ways in which people dishonor or debase themselves, because God lets them do so. The inappropriate actions and characteristics described in verses 29 through 31 (e.g., greed, gossip, slander, insolence, arrogance, boastfulness, faithlessness, heartlessness, and ruthlessness) dishonor both the person acting and the people who receive such inappropriate actions. Appropriate human actions and characteristics are both honorable in themselves and express honor to the people receiving such actions.⁴

The assessment of the human condition in Romans 1 builds on a theme from the prophet Jeremiah, though Paul adds a significant development.

Jeremiah preached that the people of Judah had exchanged the God who had spoken to them in the Mosaic Law for various types of idols, including trusting in the governments of Egypt or Assyria, instead of trusting in God. As punishment for this sin of exchange, God was allowing the people of Judah to experience the consequences of their sin (see Jeremiah 2). The development from Jeremiah’s teaching to Paul’s teaching is that Paul says people from all nations exchange the God who has spoken through his creation for all sorts of idols, for which God allows people very broadly to experience the consequences of their sin.⁵ The principle, which Jeremiah applied to Israel in light of God’s deliverance of the people of Israel from Egypt, is applied to the entire human race by Paul in light of God’s general revelation to the entire human race.

Paul’s teaching on homosexuality serves as a particular example of self dishonoring. He claims homosexual desires and actions arise from a darkened heart and mind, a heart and mind that are or were deeply alienated from God and God’s creation order.⁶ There is a knowable scheme or pattern of nature, which means a created order that all people know they should follow, though this knowledge may be deeply suppressed, as all of God’s general revelation may be deeply suppressed. Paul expects that all people naturally know the creation mandate, that they should “be fruitful and multiply,” as stated in Genesis 1, and that sexuality and the

desire for intimate bonding is closely associated with this fundamental human mandate. Actions and desires contrary to this scheme of nature will be self dishonoring, assuming that actions which correspond to the scheme of nature will be self honoring. This means there is something deeply honorable and humane about marriage and childbearing. Though homosexuality could be described as sin, it can also be described as a variety of self punishment for the sin of disbelief and rejection of God's created order and mandate.

A similar principle of understanding applies to the entire list of sins in verses 29 through 31, most of which allude back to the Ten Commandments. (Unrestrained coveting leads to breaking all of God's commands.) Any of the sins in this list, such as greed, gossip, slander, insolence, arrogance, boastfulness, faithlessness, heartlessness, and ruthlessness, can be explained using the same painful detail which Paul used in regard to homosexuality. The confused state of mind and heart resulting from rejecting God leads people to do all sorts of things that are inappropriate, meaning contrary to the honor or glory of those who bear the image of the Creator. The problem is not primarily that people do not know that these actions and vices are wrong; people know that they are wrong and know that these actions are condemned by their Creator. But their actions arise from their confused state of mind arising from unbelief, not from what they know (but partly reject) about what is truly right

and wrong. The confused condition of people can go so far that they not only do what they know to be wrong; they sometimes even begin to excuse or condone those wrong actions which they know to be wrong.

Especially in verse 32 ("They know the requirement of God that those who do such things are worthy of death."), there is a development of an Old Testament theme, of which Amos 1 provides a good example. Amos preached a call to repentance to the nations surrounding Israel, specifically and graphically describing atrocities such as human trafficking and terrible war crimes, assuming that all people already knew that such crimes were terribly wrong. The preaching of Amos did not add new moral information, as if the people did not know that crimes against humanity were wrong, but his preaching made it much more difficult for his neighbors to repress the moral knowledge they already had. And his preaching increased the intensity of their awareness of the wrath of God which they deserved for their sins. In a similar manner, Paul explicitly says people know both the content of God's natural moral law and also that they deserve God's wrath, though this knowledge can be so deeply repressed people say they do not know. He then talks about these themes in a manner designed to increase their level of moral and spiritual discomfort with their repressed knowledge. Paul describes the way in which humans are wrestling with God in a manner that seems designed to move that wrestling match from being

something that is hidden behind a tree or deep within human subconsciousness to become a matter of open discussion. The most extreme form of human internal deception occurs when people not only practice evil but also “approve of those” who perform such evil actions (1:32). This is the point of calling evil good and calling good evil.

By the way he created us, God gave us the ability to distinguish between good and evil, along with the knowledge that we must do the good; these deepest moral principles were written into human reason, emotions, and relationships when God created us in his image. (The first sin, with the tree of knowledge of good and evil in Eden, brought the experience of and encounter with good and evil, not the ability to distinguish between good and evil.)

By his continuing general revelation, God constantly renews our knowledge of the difference between good and evil and reminds us of our duty to do that which is good and to avoid doing evil. When people deny the entirety of this God-given knowledge, they demonstrate that God has truly “given them over” so that they stand on the very edge of the abyss; hell is beginning to intrude into earthly existence. Normal social problems turn into genocide, the war of all against all, or the collapse of communities. Exactly when people imagine they have defeated God by obliterating him and his law from consciousness, they and their neighbors become the real losers, bringing destruction on earth, time and time again.

Definition: The Natural Moral Law

Already in ancient Greece and Rome, thoughtful and responsible people noticed that some actions were wrong, whether or not these actions were forbidden by social custom or civil law. Many said that the standard for recognizing such wrong actions is the natural moral law or the law of nature. Christians adopted this term and sometimes distinguished this natural moral law (which they saw as coming from God) from the “supernatural moral law” which God gave in the Bible. This terminology assumed we can usually recognize the difference between nature as intended by God and nature as it is distorted by sin.

The terminology of “natural law” is not in the Bible, but the reality of the natural moral law is assumed throughout the Bible. If we want to update our terminology, one could suggest “universal moral law” or “general principles of equity” in place of “natural law.” When used by Christians, the term “natural moral law” refers to the general revelation of God’s law coming to us via nature which is God’s creation. It was written by God into our minds, hearts, and relationships in creation and is a central part of general revelation, though sin makes people want to reduce or ignore it and especially to deny the source of the moral law. It is knowledge of the natural moral law, even if partly mistaken, which allows people of many nations to write civil laws which, at

least in part, restrain some sins, promote order, and protect justice and human well-being. Though some disagree, I think Paul referred to the old Greek and Roman ideas of the natural moral law in Romans 2:14 when he mentions “Gentiles who do not have the law do **by nature** the things required by the law (emphasis added).”

One of the demands of the natural moral law is that we protect the well-being of our neighbors, assuming there is a general revelation of the dignity of human beings. Using the language of our time, this means we have a duty to protect “human rights.” Though the language of “human rights” has sometimes been used inappropriately, we can talk about many demands of the natural moral law in the language of protecting the rights of others. Like all the truths revealed by God’s general revelation, awareness of the value or dignity of the lives of others can, of course, be suppressed by an individual or a culture.

There are several other moral languages, other than “human rights,” which we can use to discuss and communicate the demands of God’s natural law today. These other moral languages include matters such as the need for moral character, considering the personal and social consequences of our behavior, what contributes to the human good, and what principles can we reasonably expect all people to follow. When people describe their awareness of their sins, they often use a wide variety of moral languages, such as having a character

flaw, not thinking of others, not thinking of consequences, or practicing bad judgment. These different moral languages arise from the multiple ways in which the general revelation of God’s moral law is received into human consciousness.

God’s common grace is his call to repentance

At the point in the text which we call “chapter 2,” Paul transitions from teaching missionaries (and therefore all Christians) how to *think about* people who are without the gospel to demonstrating how he *preaches* to people who are without the biblical message. He shifts from speaking in the third person (“they” and “them”) to the second person (“you”). But the people he is addressing as “you” are probably not the initial readers of this epistle in the church at Rome. They are a hypothetical “you,” meaning their neighbors in the Greco-Roman world who need the gospel. They represent our neighbors around the globe or next door.

Most of the initial readers of this letter to the church in Rome had never heard Paul preach to the unbelieving world, and the texts we call Acts 14:8–18 and Acts 17:16–34, where we have a record of how Paul preached to the people in the Gentile world, had not yet been written. The missionaries in training, the members of the church in Rome, needed some type of input, whether as a role model or as general principles, about how to connect the

gospel which they believed with the lives and experience of their neighbors. Paul shifts to saying “you” to give a generalized example or role model of how Christian missionaries should connect the gospel to the moral/spiritual life of the people to whom they are bringing their witness.

We can read verses 2:1–5 as the outline of a sermon, lecture, or private discussion, the content of which could also be explained at great length. The content of these verses is pre-evangelistic, meaning it is designed to lead up to explaining the gospel about salvation by faith in Christ at a later time. Paul’s presentation in this paragraph assumes the previously described deep contradictions within human experience and the conflict of every person with God, but then Paul takes his discussion partners a step farther. There are at least two conclusions Paul wants his hearers or discussion partners to reach, either of which can prompt people to recognize they need forgiveness in Christ:

1. that the suppressed knowledge that they deserve the wrath of God stands in tension with their experience of God’s common grace, so they know they receive better than they deserve;
2. that they acknowledge that they know and use the natural moral law in evaluating their neighbors but refuse to use the natural moral law to point out their own sin, showing that their internal moral/spiritual life is knowingly a defense against important truths they suppress.

Though some of Paul’s hypothetical hearers or discussion partners may conclude that they are already experiencing God’s wrath in the form of being given over to sin, other hypothetical hearers may conclude they deserve wrath even though they have received undeserved common grace. Either of these conclusions, when reached, can begin the decisive change of mind (repentance) which has to accompany faith in the gospel. Though the wrath of God by which he lets people go in their sin can be observed, people should also sense or observe that they receive less of God’s wrath than they deserve. The goodness, kindness, and generosity in the universe and in society come from God, and even prior to the gospel, people should recognize that this kindness comes from God. As Paul preached in Lystra, God “has not left himself without testimony. He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.” (Acts 14:17) All good gifts come from God, and everyone would recognize openly that all good gifts come from God, were they not suppressing God’s general revelation. In a very important sense, people already know that they receive good gifts from God, though they may not be able to admit to themselves that they know this to be true.

This common generosity of God calls for both gratitude and a “change of mind.” (See 2:4.) Those who have read the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) will hear an echo of the words of

Jesus, “But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” (Matthew 5:44, 45) Whether or not a person knows the words of Jesus, he/she should be aware of being one of the unrighteous to whom God still sends the sun and the rain, but that awareness may need to be brought back into consciousness in pre-evangelistic discussion with a Christian.

In Romans 2:4 Paul uses four complementary words to describe the riches of God’s common grace, using one more descriptor than he used when he said God “gave them over.” It may not be possible to precisely define the exact differences among these four words in Paul’s Greek, but that is probably not the point of using four words. Rather, the extravagance of the description of God’s everyday common grace, in light of the preceding description of God’s wrath, is already a hint that grace can overcome wrath.

It is noteworthy that Paul does not in any way mention forgiveness of sin in relation to God’s common grace. God’s forbearance, by which God practices kindness when more wrath is deserved, is, at most, an indication that forgiveness may be possible. Paul does not mention true forgiveness of sin until he talks about the gospel. His description of God’s common grace prepares people to also repent and believe in the gospel of forgiveness by faith in Jesus.

Reminding people of God’s common grace, helping them to unrepress their knowledge of God’s common grace, is a crucial that prepares people to hear the gospel that Jesus died and rose in order to provide special, saving grace.

Short Definitions

1. Common grace is the undeserved kindness of God whereby he sends rain on the just and the unjust and also gives us all the other gifts that make life possible. People from many religions and philosophies of life acknowledge that what we receive is a gift from above but usually without saying that this grace is a call to repentance.
2. Special grace is the underserved kindness of God related to the gospel of salvation in Christ. We learn about and receive this grace through the message of the Bible and the related means God has given us, such as preaching, sacraments, prayer, and fellowship. Forgiveness of sin is central in special grace.

To bring about the kind of spiritual self-awareness that is a change of mind, Paul demonstrates how to help people consider their own moral/cultural experience in a manner that tends to “unrepress” knowledge that has previously been repressed into subconsciousness. (See verses 2:1–3.) He starts with the observation that we are all evaluating the actions of everyone around us, and we all know that everyone else is

evaluating us. We can see the sins and shortcomings of the people around us, even if we are too polite to say much about it. And we know that everyone around us can see many of our sins and weaknesses, even if they are too polite to say much about our sins. The normal human experience is that we condemn others for sins they commit, even though we expect to escape God's condemnation for committing similar sins ourselves. This is obviously illogical. And this standard illogical jump, observable all over the world, illustrates our suppressed knowledge of God's law and wrath! Paul's pre-evangelistic discussion helps people to acknowledge those truths they prefer not to acknowledge but which they must acknowledge if they are to come to real faith.

Paul assumes, if we are not psychopaths, that we all know that other people are constantly evaluating our actions in this manner. There is continuous social pressure, whether hidden or open, to make our outward actions conform to a socially accepted set of rules, so that others will not evaluate or judge us too severely. This total process of evaluating each other (and being aware of the process of mutual moral evaluation) has a huge benefit: much of the time it makes life in society possible, so that we behave like civilized humans according to the standards of some civilization, not like wild beasts. And in many people who become truly good people, according to the standards of a society, profession, family, or role, this process of evaluation becomes truly

internalized, so that people truly want to be "good" within their roles and situation, whether as good family members, good citizens, good role models, or good professionals. It is one of the means of God's common grace which partly restrains people from fully following all their sinful tendencies, while they also practice many moral virtues which correspond with God's natural moral law; this total process is part of the basis for every culture.

Because this process assumes a vague but significant knowledge of God's natural moral law, older writers on Christian ethics used to talk about the "civil use of God's law" in this regard. But regardless of which culture a person inhabits, whether more collectivist or individualist, whether more shame-oriented or more guilt-oriented, inside the person there is this terribly illogical process of condemning others when we expect to escape condemnation for the same actions. Jesus warned about judging others precisely because we are all doing it all the time in order to make ourselves look good in our own eyes and avoid having to think about God's demands and wrath.

Paul's method of discussion bears a distinct resemblance to the method reportedly used in ancient Greece by Socrates and Plato. They used questions and dialogue to help people clarify what they thought and knew, and often to discover that people knew truths they were not aware of knowing. Even though it is portrayed so briefly, Paul's method of dialogue goes much deeper

than did that of Socrates or Plato, to consider the wrath and grace of God, not merely the unchanging principles and sources of knowledge which Plato brought to mind. Plato might use the “Socratic method” to demonstrate that even the simplest person knows what a perfect circle is, even though no one has ever seen a truly perfect circle. Paul’s missionary method of discussion takes an ultimate step deeper than Plato, to the truly overwhelming consideration that even the person who claims to be an atheist or a polytheist knows much about God’s wrath and common grace. When he says, “... we know that the judgment of God is based on truth when it falls on those who take such inappropriate actions...” (2:2), the “we” is probably all people, not only believers. He writes “we know” in the sense that all people know, hold down, and suppress these truths, while these suppressed truths also form the moral condition of normal human experience.

The suppression of knowledge leaves people with constant cognitive dissonance, the condition of holding two contradictory beliefs or opinions. Conflict with God is the basis for this cognitive dissonance, which forms Paul’s starting point for his preaching. He both explains the dissonance (by his explanation of normal human experience) and offers the solution, peace with God by faith in the gospel of Jesus.

Jesus’ statement, “Do not judge or you too will be judged” (Matthew 7:1), is well-known and uses the same Greek terminology which Paul uses in Romans

2:1. Both Jesus and Paul assume that mutual judging or evaluating is common in all societies, because people are both sinful and aware of a moral standard. The point of Jesus’ command seems to be that we must stop putting ourselves in the place of God, as if we are the judge of others, that we must stop assuming we are morally superior to others (who only have a speck of dust in their eyes compared with the wooden plank in our eyes), and that we must stop thinking that God will not hold us accountable, if we happen to be able to excuse ourselves from our sins. Paul takes the teaching of Jesus and applies it globally as a starting point for world missions, connecting Jesus’ teaching with Paul’s understanding of how God’s general revelation and common grace work in life and society.

The Solution: Thoughtful Pride in the Gospel

The people to whom we have to bring the gospel of Christ are already wrestling with God’s general revelation. Though it is repressed, so that they are not always fully aware of it, our neighbors know a lot about God. What they know from God forms the foundation for daily life and makes society possible, even though this knowledge may be rejected. As part of their conflict with God, people are now experiencing God’s temporal wrath and probably even know they are experiencing God’s wrath, while at the same time people receive better than they deserve

from God and probably know that they receive better than they deserve from God. People are constantly using God's natural moral law to evaluate each other, while, in a totally irrational manner, people hope to excuse themselves on the basis of this same moral law.

Paul's understanding of the human condition before God forms the background and foundation for his short outline of themes for a pre-evangelistic dialogue with people who need the gospel. We can learn to talk with our neighbors about these themes as well. Paul's mission work assumed that the people to whom he was speaking already had a long history of conflict with the God whom they knew, whose law they knew, needed, used, and alternately liked or disliked, but whom they pretended not to know. They were experiencing both God's wrath and his common grace. This understanding made Paul unashamed of the gospel. He was proud of the gospel, and this pride in the gospel was central for being prepared for his mission work.

The gospel is the message that God has not left the human race in the predicament we have made for ourselves. It is the message of forgiveness and reconciliation with God, the end of conflict with God, leading to the beginning of a new way of life that is marked by a renewed heart and mind, replacing the darkened heart and mind. This new way of life is in closer conformity with the law of God and the scheme of nature, and for this reason it is also much more honorable. Paul's assessment of the

human condition before God has obvious deep roots in the Old Testament. In addition to being a commentary on the early chapters of Genesis and picking up themes from Isaiah, it also appropriates the claim of the prophets, that the human problem is not primarily that people do not know right and wrong but that people do not want to follow the knowledge of right and wrong that has been given by God to all people. Paul expects that his readers will be able to see that thoughtful people should be ashamed of and embarrassed by their many substitute religions, and therefore Christians can become unashamed of the Christian gospel. And as a role model in missionary dialogue, Paul shows believers how to lead unbelievers through their moral experience to perceive their repressed knowledge of God's wrath and common grace; this perception is the change of mind, the repentance that accompanies faith in the gospel.

A person on the way to faith in the gospel should accept Paul's message because it simultaneously allows a person to understand and also to accept his/her previously rejected knowledge of God and all of God's general revelation. The biblical message allows us to understand human experience, including both our own personal experience and also the moral experience of life in society. The biblical message presents a promise in which we must trust (the gospel), but before presenting the gospel, the biblical message explains the conditions that have to be true if we

are to understand everything else, especially ourselves and the unbelief of our neighbors. And at the center of our certainty and confidence is the experience of being called to the Father through the gospel of Jesus, instead of being “given over” to self-destruction in his wrath. There is a solution to the human condition. The gospel of Jesus Christ is worthy of proclamation! We can be unashamed.

For study and discussion:

1. To what does God “give people over?”
2. How is Paul’s description of the wrath of God in this text different from other descriptions of God’s wrath you have heard? What complementary descriptions of God’s wrath are found in the Bible?
3. How can sin be self-punishing?
4. In what ways are the sins listed in verses 29 to 31 self-destructive or self-dishonoring?
5. Read Jeremiah 2 and compare it with Romans 1. What are the similarities and differences?
6. Why do biblical writers such as Amos and Paul tell people about God’s law when they assume people already know about God’s law?
7. What would it look like to imitate Amos 1 today?
8. What does the process of mutual moral evaluation tell us about ourselves and the universe? What is the totally illogical part of this process?
9. What questions will help unbelievers to acknowledge to themselves what they already know about God’s wrath and God’s common grace?

Interlude on Contemporary Theology: representative distortions from the twentieth century that Christians must avoid in the twenty first century

In the first sections of this study we have engaged in a targeted exposition and application of selected themes from Romans 1:16–2:5 which elucidate the description of the condition of the human race as “wrestling with God’s general revelation.” There is no other option for people who do not know the gospel of Christ; God’s general revelation is truly central, honestly essential, to all of human experience, even though much of the human race is investing their time and energy into pushing their awareness of all the contents of God’s general revelation out of consciousness. This is the divine-human wrestling match that has continued throughout all of history since the fall into sin. But we are not the first Christians to think about and describe God’s general revelation. Much of what previous generations of Christians have said about God’s general revelation has been very good and has been included into our exposition of this theme from Romans. But in the 2,000 years of Christian history there have been various distorted directions related to thinking about and responding to God’s general revelation. We will briefly examine three representative distortions from the

twentieth century which are very different from each other and which illustrate the range of problems which can be expected to recur among Christians in the twenty first century. Many of the other misunderstandings of God's general revelation are similar to one of these three. Two of these distortions were represented by widely respected theologians, Karl Barth (Protestant) and Karl Rahner (Roman Catholic). Obviously the influence of Barth's ideas can be expected more widely among Protestants and Evangelicals, whereas the influence of Rahner's ideas can be expected more commonly among Roman Catholics, but their influence and the ideas they represented can be found far beyond their own churches. A third distortion is represented by a terrible mix of misguided ideas about general revelation with National Socialism and stands as a permanent warning for Christians in regard to political ideologies which combine isolated themes of Christian teaching (separated from other important themes in our faith and ethics) with racism or nationalism.

During the Nazi era in Europe (1933–1945), some Protestant theologians combined a confused theory of general revelation with aspects of the Nazi (National Socialist) ideology and thereby formed the foundation for the "German Christian Movement." While the deeply disturbing details of this movement are beyond our purview, the "German Christians" claimed there was a general revelation of God's law through the law of the "Volk," the

Nazi-Germanic people, or, alternately, there was a revelation of God's grace in the work of Adolf Hitler. The different varieties of people and ideas within this movement agreed in claiming there was a revelation from God that came through their people, their nation, or their political party that was not given to other peoples, nations, or parties. Some of these people became the most enthusiastic promoters of National Socialism, saying that supporting Hitler and the Nazis was a duty for Christians or an expression of real Christian faith.⁷ When I first read a book by one of these writers, already many years ago, I felt sick and could hardly believe my eyes. I hope your reaction is similar.

Very few Christians today will mix the biblical faith with the German National Socialist ideology from the 1930s and 1940s, but the tragic mistakes of these theologians (and the churches they served) stand as a warning for all time; we must be very careful about how we think about general revelation and its relation to political ideologies and secular worldviews. It was a dreadful mistake to associate the demands of the Nazi state and political party with the real demands of God's natural moral law given to all people through general revelation. It seems to me that they interpreted and appropriated the message of the Bible in light of and on the basis of the Nazi ideology, which both filtered out themes from the Bible and distorted how they understood other themes from the Bible. This theological mistake contributed to the

humanitarian disasters of World War II and the Holocaust. Bad theology has astonishingly wide social consequences. And if we do not consider the mistakes of the past, we can easily repeat them.

In reaction to the German Christian Movement, Karl Barth (1886–1968), a Swiss Protestant theologian, is properly famous for shouting “Nein!” with such volume that his voice is still echoing in many parts of the church, even when his name is not mentioned.⁸ Someone needed to say very loudly and very clearly that the Nazi ideology had to be rejected by Christians as vicious, evil, and contrary to everything that Christians affirm; the heroism of Barth and the other courageous people in the “Confessing Church,” which opposed the German Christian Movement, should be noted and imitated. And Barth’s rebuke of this terrible distortion should be remembered whenever people are tempted to join faith in Christ with one-sided nationalism or excessive loyalty to any political party or ideology. But Barth’s theological explanation of his rejection of the Nazi ideology contained another theological problem. He was concerned that any talk about general revelation tends to reduce the biblical message to be merely a religious dimension of a particular culture, thereby reducing the church to be merely the department of religion of a nation or the religious dimension of a particular society. Too often, he thought, the church has lost the sharp edge of its prophetic criticism of society and secular ideologies and has con-

formed to the ideas and standards of the secular world. (We must agree with his claim that the church has often lost its prophetic sharp edge and become conformed to the world, without accepting all of his theological explanation of the problem.) He argued vehemently that Christians and the churches must only recognize God’s one revelation in Jesus Christ which must be authoritative over all we say, do, and think; even our social and political ethics must be learned entirely from the one revelation in Jesus Christ. This means, according to Barth, that Christians should never discuss general revelation, unless one mentions general revelation only to deny it. On the basis of the one revelation in Christ, and only on this basis, Barth thought Christians can be true critics of all that is evil in society. This rejection of general revelation, saying there is only one revelation from God, the revelation in Jesus Christ, was enshrined in the key Protestant document written in opposition to the German Christian Movement, the *Barmen Confession* of 1934.⁹

We must agree with and enthusiastically applaud Barth’s sharp critique of the German Christian Movement and National Socialism, including many of the theological and cultural streams that led up to these movements, but the German Christian Movement suffered from a *misunderstanding* of general revelation; this terribly misguided movement was **not** the result of a proper understanding of God’s general revelation.¹⁰ The German Christian Movement was idolatry within the circles of

the Christian Church. And as we saw in our studies of Romans 1:16–2:5, idolatry is one of the common responses to God’s general revelation. A Pauline understanding of general revelation builds on the social criticism of the Old Testament prophets and enables believers and the church to become confident both as critics of society and also as heralds of a gospel that all people need. It was the God’s general revelation of his moral law that enabled morally sensitive people from many countries (regardless of their faith or lack of faith) to see that National Socialism was evil. There is no reason to follow Barth in his rejection of any discussion of general revelation, as should be evident from our analysis of Romans. The fact that many of the morally sensitive people who resisted National Socialism and the resulting Holocaust were not clear about their own religious convictions can be explained by Paul’s claim that God’s moral law is known, at least in part, to all people and enables a socially needed process of mutual moral evaluation.¹¹ Many people knew that National Socialism was wrong and had to be resisted because they used the general revelation of God’s natural moral law as a standard of evaluation.

A distorted point of view of the opposite extreme from Karl Barth is found in the writings of a group of Roman Catholic theologians often called “Transcendental Thomists,” of whom Karl Rahner (1904–1984) is the most well-known. Whether or not this is completely intended by Rahner,

one receives the impression that God’s general revelation is so complete that people do not truly need the gospel of Christ which only comes via special revelation. In a manner that implies that special revelation has approximately the same content as general revelation, Rahner wrote, “The expressly Christian revelation becomes the explicit statement of the revelation of grace which man always experiences implicitly in the depths of his being.”¹² Notice that, in his view, the Christian revelation of grace is the same as the grace which mankind in general experiences.

What we found in Romans 1 and 2 is that people without the gospel should be aware that they receive better than they deserve because of the richness of God’s common grace. There is an awareness of common grace available to all people via God’s general revelation, though many will suppress this knowledge. But Paul seems to carefully avoid any promise of forgiveness of sins, justification, and the resulting peace with God that is communicated to people by God’s common grace and general revelation. Paul’s teaching on general revelation and common grace shows the extreme importance of declaring the gospel to all people, a gospel known only by special revelation; Rahner’s teaching seems to reduce the importance of declaring the gospel to all people and to reduce the distinction between common grace and special grace.

Rahner is surely right that God’s general revelation forms the necessary precondition of human experience,

with a result that human life always has a supernatural dimension, a claim which we have noticed in studying Romans 1 and 2. This theme in Rahner's writings provides a needed corrective for all people, whether Christians or not, who talk as if God is not active in the daily life of every person. And I like his elaborate terminology of "the universal supernatural existential," a self-giving presence of God in general revelation which makes and keeps human life human.¹³ But Evangelicals should remind Rahner and his followers that according to the apostle Paul, God holds people accountable, without excuse, and without forgiveness outside of Christ, on the basis of what God has always been speaking and is still speaking through his creation. General revelation, as described in the Bible, is associated with God's law and wrath; God's general revelation, law, and wrath form the framework for understanding and proclaiming the special revelation of the gospel. That special revelation tells us about forgiveness of sins, justification by faith, and peace with God. A proper and serious understanding of God's general revelation will give us missionary courage to confidently and wisely proclaim his special revelation in the Bible and in Jesus Christ.

There have been and will probably continue to be more distorted understandings of God's general revelation within Christian circles. But these three distortions are representative enough that these very brief descriptions can equip thoughtful Christians to perceive

other distortions when they appear. In summary, these three distortions are 1. Thinking one's nation or people is a recipient or means of God's revelation in a manner that makes it superior to other nations or peoples; 2. Rejecting the theme of general revelation, as if it were not an essential part of basic Christian teaching; 3. Thinking that God's general revelation makes the special revelation of the gospel of Christ less urgent or even unneeded, with the expectation that people will respond positively to God's general revelation without the special revelation of the gospel. What we have seen from the apostle Paul is that God's general revelation has several areas of content which together provide the conditions which make human life possible; we can continue to live as human beings only because of God's continuing general revelation. But the knowledge of God given through general revelation is constantly suppressed from consciousness because people are hiding from God, even though everyone constantly uses this knowledge for daily life and to evaluate each other and our societies. This rejected knowledge of God can be transformed into the accepted and proper knowledge of God by faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Questions for study and discussion

1. Has your previous understanding of God's general revelation been distorted? Was that distortion similar to one of the distortions briefly described?

2. Have you perceived distorted or one-sided approaches to God's two revelations, general and special, in your Christian circles? What can you do to move toward a more balanced and complete perspective?
3. When you think about "what God is doing," do you think mostly about what God is doing by means of his general revelation or by means of his special revelation? Is something lacking in your knowledge of God?
4. Try to describe the ways in which the distorted understandings of general revelation, which were briefly described, would influence or distort our approach to the mission God has given to believers in the great commission.
5. How would distorted understandings of God's general revelation influence our efforts as Christians in politics, business, and education? What influence would such distortions have on our approach to marriage, family, and parenting?

Annotation Anmerkungen

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²The Bible does not say that strong passions or desires are wrong. There are times when our passions for good goals are not strong enough.

³As Christians we should learn to distinguish between God's ultimate works of judgment, at the end of history and into eternity, and his penultimate or secondary judgments, which occur in this life.

⁴It follows that it is an act of God's common grace when he restrains human sin, often by means of the process of social or individual moral evaluation, so that sin does not unfold to its full self-destructive and self-dishonoring end. This understanding of common grace contributed to Paul's missionary preaching and will be explained below.

⁵There are also significant echoes of themes from the Old Testament book of Proverbs in Paul's description of sin as self-punishing and self-destructive. In the language of Proverbs, sin is foolishness, and foolishness is often self-destructive.

⁶Desires and habits that arose from alienation from God and God's creation order do not always immediately disappear when people are reconciled to God. For this reason the New Testament epistles are filled with instructions intended for believers who are engaged in a long term process of taking off one set of actions and habits and replacing them with renewed actions and habits.

⁷For more on this theme see Robert P. Eriksen, *Theologians Under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, and Emanuel Hirsch*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985.

⁸One of Barth's influential essays was simply entitled *Nein!*, which means "No!" in German. Barth wrote numerous essays, letters, and books to criticize the Nazis and the "German Christians."

⁹For more on this theme see Arthur C. Cochran. *The Church's Confession under Hitler*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962. And Robin W. Lovin. *Christian Faith and Public Choices: The Social Ethics of Barth, Brunner, and Bonhoeffer*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.

¹⁰Barth claimed that the church and theological movement of "Culture Protestantism" contributed to the cultural conditions which made National Socialism possible. I think Barth was right in this claim, though other cultural streams also contributed to National Socialism. The main varieties of Culture Protestantism rejected the idea of an objective moral law, whether that moral law given in general or special revelation, which left this movement vulnerable to simply conform to sinful movements in society.

¹¹For more on this theme, the rejection of general revelation and natural law ethics in twentieth-century Protestant theology, see the second appendix to this study, which is forthcoming.

¹²Gerald A. McCool (Ed.). Karl Rahner. *A Rahner Reader*. New York: Crossroad, 1981. p. 213. This is from Rahner's essay entitled "Anonymous Christians." I think it is much better not to describe people who claim to be atheists or adherents of other religions as anonymous Christians because a proper respect for people requires that we take their descriptions of themselves very seriously, even if, as I claimed in a previous chapter, many people do not fully believe all the things they say they believe.

¹³I also like Rahner's term "transcendental" which he uses to discuss these questions. Whereas the term "transcendent" usually refers to something independent and separate from the material world, and therefore is one of the words we use to describe God, "transcendental" refers to a condition that must exist within the person who knows in order for that person to know something. In this sense, God's continuous general revelation is the transcendental condition of normal human experience.

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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