

NOTES ON ROMANS 1:18-25

* * * CREATION, GENERAL REVELATION, AND IDOLATRY * * *

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Soli Deo Gloria!

OVERVIEW OF ROMANS 1-3: In this opening section of Romans, Paul reasons his way to the conclusion that, "**all have sinned and come short of the glory of God**" (Rom3:23), thus rendering all men everywhere and at all times justly condemned before God, whether they have heard the gospel or not; this sets up the need for all men to hear and respond to the gospel. Paul reaches his conclusion based on the witness of general revelation alone, which is and always has been available to all men (and which is consistently rejected by the natural man). This witness of general revelation comes in two forms: 1) the creation (the theme of Romans 1), and 2), human conscience (the theme of Romans 2).

THE UNIVERSAL AND SUFFICIENT WITNESS OF CREATION

- [18] God asserts that the "ungodliness and unrighteousness of men" manifests itself as a "[suppression] of the truth in unrighteousness". Note that it is not the case that some men do not have access to the truth, but that all men suppress the truth that they have. Furthermore, there is an agenda in man's suppression of truth; it is so that he can pursue "unrighteousness".
- [19] God has supplied all men with a knowledge of Himself. God has not relied on men seeking Him, as He knows none will (Rom3:11); rather, on His own initiative, God "hath shown it unto them".
- [20] This universal knowledge of God comes "from the creation" (i.e., the so-called natural world all around us). Further, God asserts that this knowledge of Himself is "clearly seen" and "understood". The ramifications of this assertion are awesome. No one can legitimately claim they didn't know or understand that their Creator God, to whom they are accountable, exists. Certainly many make this claim, but this is a "suppression of the truth" which they know in their heart of hearts. It isn't a matter of not knowing or understanding, but rather a case of "they did not like to retain God in their knowledge" (Rom1:28).

Universal Condemnation. Paul's conclusion is that from the witness of creation alone, **all men** "are without excuse". The Greek word translated "excuse" comes from **απολογία**, which means 'a formal, reasoned, and logical defense' (as in a legal, courtroom proceeding). Thus, there is no acceptable defense that can be offered for man's rejection of the knowledge of God from creation. This alone renders all men under the just condemnation of God. Whereas no one can be saved apart from hearing and believing the gospel (Rom1:16-17), all can be justly condemned whether they have heard the gospel or not. Put theologically, men can be condemned on the basis of general revelation (available to all), but men can only be saved on the basis of special revelation (only available to some).

SUPPRESSION OF TRUTH ALWAYS LEADS TO IDOLATRY

[21] Notice how the reasoning proceeds from the preceding assertion (i.e., "they knew God" is now a presupposition from which to reason). It is not the case that men don't know God, they definitely do. Rather, the issue is that men who know God do not glorify or thank (i.e., acknowledge) Him.

Implications for Evangelism. Scripture offers no 'proof' for the existence of God, and the so-called philosophical proofs (i.e., teleological, cosmological, ontological) for the existence of God are not fruitful in leading men to believe in God (and even if they were valid, they only purport to prove the existence of 'a god', not the God of the Bible); it is not a matter of men not having enough information, but a suppression of the clear and sufficient information they already have. This has serious implications relative to evangelism. An evangelist ought never to accept an unbeliever's demand for a proof for God's existence before he will consider the claims of the Bible. The evangelist ought to begin with the presupposition that the unbeliever already knows God exists, but has willfully suppressed that truth in unrighteousness.

Finally, the suppression of the truth (i.e., rejection of God's revelation) always and necessarily leads to idolatry, introduced here as "vain ... imaginations". It is interesting that in the Greek, the word translated "imaginations" is *διαλογισμος*, which means 'reasoning with oneself'; note, it is not someone else that the unbeliever is trying to persuade that his unbelief is rational/logical, but it is himself that he is trying to persuade (i.e., he must rationalize his unbelief in his own mind).

The Essence of Idolatry. In both the Old and New Testaments, God's emphasis is always on the prohibition of idolatry (cf. Ex20:3; Deut5:7; 1Jn5:21), even over immorality. The reason is that idolatry always (logically) takes place first, with immorality inevitably following (cf. Rom1:18-32). Romans 1:18-22 indicates that God's revelation of Himself in the creation (i.e., general revelation) is clearly seen by all men, everywhere. The pagan mind must re-engineer reality in order to suppress the implications of this clear revelation, which is his personal responsibility to his Creator. **This re-engineering of reality to suppress God's clear revelation of Himself** (which manifests itself in various and diverse forms) **is the essence of IDOLATRY.** [Even if man's idolatry gives lip service to other "gods", they are gods made by man, after man's likeness, acceptable, manageable, etc.] Once the creature's accountability to his Creator has been dismissed, he is free to engage in any form of immorality with a 'clear conscience' (so to speak). This is why idolatry always comes first (even in our modern world), and this is why God's prohibition of it always takes pre-eminence, even over immorality. In a certain sense, it is idolatry that enables immorality.

[22] According to Scripture, the greatest possible folly is to deny the existence of the God of the Bible; "the fool hath said in his heart, there is no God" (Ps14:1; 53:1). Mark Twain, legendary in his skepticism of the Bible, offered the following definition: "faith is believing in what you know isn't true". By this he intended to

imply that Christians know the Bible isn't really true, but believe it anyway; the Bible asserts the opposite, that unbelievers know that their unbelief is not rational, but pursue it anyway.

- [23] The unbeliever must rationalize his unbelief, and his construction of an alternate reality to explain the basic questions of life is idolatry. In ancient times, this manifested itself as belief in pagan deities that were no different than fallen men (only smarter, stronger, faster, etc., but without maintaining the Creator-creature distinction); in modern times, it manifests itself as scientific theories (e.g., the Big Bang, evolution) purporting to explain the origin of the universe and all life in it by purely naturalistic mechanisms. Either way this is idolatry!
- [24] Notice that immorality, following "the lusts of their own hearts", follows idolatry (not vice-versa).
- [25] Idolatry is the "[exchange of] the truth of God" (i.e., the revelation of God in the creation, in the human conscience, in Scripture, and in Christ) for "a lie"; the particulars of the "lie" have changed down through history, but today are most notably present in the wide-spread acceptance of the Big Bang cosmogony, evolution as the explanation of all life, and (as a result) secular humanism as the guiding ethic.

RESOURCES:

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