
A table of contents for *Grace Journal* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_grace-journal.php

TOWARD A BIBLICAL APOLOGETIC

CHARLES M. HORNE
Instructor in Bible and Theology
Moody Bible Institute

The Pauline apologetic is exhibited in five passages especially: Romans 1:18ff., 2:14–15; I Corinthians 2:14; Acts 14:15ff.; and Acts 17:22ff. The first three texts present this apologetic in its formal statement; the latter two in its practical outworking. In the present article we shall consider only the first of these passages -- Romans 1:18ff. Two primary questions have been before the writer in his exegetical study of this Scripture portion: (1) What is the purpose of general (or natural revelation in a Christian apologetic? (2) What does the natural man know (or what may he know) of God?

ROMANS 1:18ff.

Even as the righteousness of God is being revealed toward those who are of faith (v. 17), so likewise the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all sinners (v. 18). Let us note then:

1. The Nature of the Wrath. Orge is from orgao, meaning to teem, to swell. This wrath is not a sudden explosive and uncontrolled emotion of God. It is rather a fixed, controlled passionate anger against sin. "Wrath is the holy revulsion of God's being against that which is the contradiction of his holiness."[1] (Orge should be contrasted with thumos, for the latter term denotes sudden outbursts of anger.) God's wrath is His "No!" to man in sin; God's righteousness is His "Yes!" to man in Christ.

It should further be observed that this wrath is presently being revealed. Verses 24ff. delineate how it is now being disclosed; namely, in the giving up of sinners to their sins with the accompanying effects. (The present tense controls this entire passage referring to the ever continuous knowledge of God which men through natural revelation have together with their constant disregard of that knowledge. The aorists of this section do not refer therefore to the Fall but are best understood as gnomic.)[2]

2. The Source of the Wrath. "From heaven," that is, from God.

3. The Extent of the Wrath. "Against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men." This fixed, controlled, passionate anger of God against sin is being revealed against all men, for all are sinners--Jew as well as Gentile. Note carefully that Paul confines himself almost entirely to the term "men" or "man" from 1:18 up to 2:14. Then from 2:14 to 2:29 he makes a distinction between the Gentiles, 2:14–16, and the Jew, 2:17ff. This would establish the fact that up to 2:14 Paul has in mind a universal revelation which touches both Jew and Gentile.

This wrath is directed against all ungodliness (asebeia); that is, perversion of worship (illustrated by idolatry), and against all unrighteousness (adikia), all moral deterioration (illustrated by immorality). "Man's attitude to God is shown up as being one of irreverence--this is the

essence of human iniquity."[3] "The order is, no doubt, significant. In the apostle's description of the degeneracy impiety is the precursor of immorality."[4]

Because man is by nature wrong in his perpendicular relationship to God he is equally in error in his horizontal relationship to his fellow man. Idolatry leads to moral collapse. Where men do not hold fast to their knowledge of God, their lives become filled with all manner of unrighteousness. The fundamental sin of apostasy from the one true God leads to all manner of depravity.

4. The Reasons for the Wrath. These are to be seen first in a consideration of God's revelation to man. What does man know? Verse 20 indicates that in certain respects even the unregenerate man possesses an accurate knowledge of the true God. This knowledge is a logical deduction from the created universe rather than a personal encounter with Christ.[5] "Since the creation of the world, the invisible attributes of God are clearly seen, being perceived through all his works." By these words the Apostle Paul conveys the fact "that what is sensuously imperceptible is nevertheless clearly apprehended in mental conception. And this sense of the term 'clearly seen' is provided by the explanatory clause 'being understood by the things that are made' -- it is the seeing of understanding, of intelligent conception."[6]

These "invisible things" are set forth as (1) God's immutable omnipotence -- "even his everlasting power" (he to aidios autou dunamis) and, (2) His Divinity -- "and divinity" (kai theiotes). Theiotes is used only here in the New Testament and emphasizes divine nature and properties. From this we see the precise nature of this revelation. Paul is here speaking of the external revelation of God's divine attributes. The unregenerate man knows certain of the features which characterize God, but he does not know Him whom to know is life eternal. He knows about Him but he does not know Him personally. (One should contrast here theiotes with theotes. The latter is used only in Col. 2:9 and it emphasizes divine personality.)

Observe next why man knows. Verse 19 states, "because that which is known of God is manifest in them; for God manifested it unto them." The phrase "in them" (en autois) means simply that every man has a certain knowledge in his mind as the result of the external revelation which has been given to him. "To them" would mark the direction of the revelation; "in them" the result.

Epistemologically this interpretation would permit various constructions. Some would suggest that every man had the innate equipment necessary to understand and interpret the data of experience; others that every man has a certain innate content of knowledge so that all that is needed is for this knowledge to be brought to the conscious mind through the medium of sense experience. Regardless of one's understanding as to how man comes to this knowledge of God, it should be made clear that Paul's main concern is the fact of it. The important issue in considering a proper apologetic starting point is not how one comes to know but what one knows. From a Scriptural standpoint a consideration of epistemology must be subordinate to that of metaphysics.

In the second place the reasons for the wrath of God are to be seen in the stated purpose of the revelation. Paul writes in the last clause of verse 20, "that they may be without excuse." "The design of God in giving so open and manifest a disclosure of his eternal power and divinity in his visible handiwork is that all men might be without excuse."[7] Thus the place of natural revelation in a Christian apologetic is emphatically condemnatory. It is not intended to provide a sort of "neutral" area of natural theology upon which a case for the validity of Christian Theism

may be constructed. There can be no ground for a natural theology in a consistently Biblical apologetic.

"Romans 1 is good material for the confession of general revelation. But one must take care how he uses it. This 'knowledge' can never be isolated from the prevailing theme of Romans 1 -- the wrath of God. The history of theology parades before us numerous attempts to isolate it from the context. It is only with such kidnapping of the phrase from its context that it can be used to support a natural theology. Such a natural theology is defended by the Vatican Council which appeals to Romans 1 in defense against heretics."[8]

In the third place, the reasons for the wrath of God are discovered in a consideration of man's response to this revelation. The first response is that men "hold the truth in unrighteousness" (A.V., v. 18). Now there is some question as to the precise meaning of these words (ten aletheian katechonton). Most frequently the verb katechonton means to "hold fast," "possess," or "retain." In this passage, however, it would seem difficult to so understand it, for "truth" is coordinate with righteousness. Besides the succeeding context represents the persons in view as exchanging the truth of God for a lie (v. 25) and refusing to have God in their knowledge (v. 28; cf. also v. 23)."[9] Therefore it would be best to render the verb katechonton, "hinder," "holding back," or "restraining." Men through unrighteousness "hold back from" the truth manifested unto them.

The next response is stated in verse 21, "because that, knowing God, they glorified him not as God (A.V.)." This knowledge herein spoken of has already been carefully delineated as a knowledge manifested to all men through the created universe. Being in cognitive perception of the truth concerning the eternal power and divinity of God, men do not feel constrained to ascribe to Him the glory which He alone deserves. Men fail "to give to him in thought, affection, and devotion the place that belongs to him in virtue of the perfections which the visible creation itself makes known."[10]

Again in verse 21 we read, "neither gave thanks." Not only do men refuse to acknowledge the known truth of God's sovereignty, but they are utterly devoid of gratitude for the blessings accruing to them by virtue of common grace. W.E. Vine states, "Thanklessness toward God is a proof of the alienation of man from Him."[11]

Having described that of which men are destitute, the apostle now proceeds to state positively the nature of their religious perversity. Once again in the latter part of verse 21 we read that the unrighteous "became vain in their reasonings, and their senseless heart was darkened" (A.S.V.) "Reasonings" are undoubtedly to be understood here in the sense of evil thoughts. The wicked reasonings of the unregenerate are incapoble of any profitable or fruitful thought concerning God and hence of man and the universe. "Reason estranged from the source of light led them into a delirium of vanity."[12] The sinner asserts the autonomy of human reason making himself the ultimate reference point in all predication. He seeks to be "creatively constructive" rather than "receptively reconstructive."[13] His heart -- that which metaphorically denotes essential personality, intellect, emotions and will -- already destitute of understanding, has become darkened. Man is totally depraved and in revolt against his Creator. He is a "covenant-breaker."

In verse 23 it is further stated that the pagan has "changed the glory of the incorruptible God for the likeness of an image...." Pretending to be wise, man has made a fool out of himself. This verse "describes the religious monstrosity to which the process of degeneracy led."[14] Men exchanged the glory of God the Creator for the worship of the creature and his works. But even in this we observe that there is no human existence without a relation to God. The pagan religions themselves would not exist if God did not at first and inescapably declare Himself to everyone since the dawn of humanity through His works. The denial of such a "general revelation" preceding the historical revelation of grace in Jesus Christ can appeal neither to Paul nor to the Bible at large. Nor has this revelation ceased, for the apostle does not speak of a past possibility, now buried, but of something actually present; for it is true of everyone that he is ever inexcusable in his godlessness.

This is the exchange by which man in his presumption has made of himself a fool and a madman.

5. The execution of the Wrath. Three times we read, "God gave them up" -- vv. 24, 26, 28. "God's displeasure is expressed in his abandonment of the persons concerned to more intensified and aggravated cultivation of the lusts of their own hearts with the result that they reap for themselves a correspondingly greater toll of retributive vengeance."[15]

In conclusion here are the clear apologetic implications of this passage:

1. All unregenerate men have a certain accurate knowledge of the true God -- though this knowledge stops short of a personal acquaintance with Him through Christ.

2. This knowledge gained from natural revelation serves only to make man inexcusable before God -- the reason being that the unbeliever holds himself back from the truth which he knows; yea, he has perverted this knowledge by assuming the ultimacy of the creature over the Creator.

Another important implication of this point is that though certain men will not have had an opportunity to hear the Gospel, God may rightly visit men with wrath because they have rejected the rudimentary knowledge of God which they possessed.

3. A Scriptural apologetic must appeal to this knowledge of God which every man has, but which as Paul tells us, every sinner seeks to hold back from, yea, pervert.

As Van Til expresses the matter, "No man can escape knowing God. It is indelibly involved in his awareness of anything whatsoever. Man ought, therefore, as Calvin puts it, to recognize God. There is no excuse for him if he does not. The reason for his failure to recognize God lies exclusively in him. It is due to his willful transgression of the very law of his being. We must surround man exclusively with God's revelation. Only by finding the point of contact for the Gospel in man's sense of deity that lies underneath his own conception of self-consciousness as ultimate can we be both true to Scripture and effective in reasoning with the natural man."[16]

DOCUMENTATION

1. John Murray, The Epistle to the Romans. The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse, vol. 1, (Eerdmans, 1959) p. 35.

2. Bertil Gartner, The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation, (Uppsala, 1955), p. 79.
3. Karl Barth, A Shorter Commentary on Romans, (John Knox Press, 1959), p. 26. Barth wrongly asserts that Rom. 1:18ff. refers to the wrath derived from a failure to accept the gospel as it is in Jesus Christ; whereas Paul states that this wrath is being poured out because of failure to respond correctly to natural revelation.
4. Murray, op. cit., p. 36.
5. Apo is used in a temporal sense here.
6. Murray, op. cit., p. 38f.
7. Ibid., p. 40.
8. G.C. Berkouwer, General Revelation, (Eerdmans, 1955), p. 148.
9. Murray, op. cit., p. 37.
10. Ibid., p. 41.
11. W.E. Vine, The Epistle to the Romans, (Oliphants, 1948), p. 20.
12. Murray, op. cit., p. 42.
13. Cornelius Van Til, The Defense of the Faith, (The Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1955), p. 66.
14. Murray, op. cit., p. 42.
15. Ibid., p. 44f.
16. Cornelius Van Til, op. cit., p. 111f.