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**Paul's Intellectual  
Courage in the Face of  
Sophisticated Unbelief**



Theological Accents  
**Theologische Akzente**

# Table of Contents

## Inhaltsverzeichnis

Romans 1:16–32 (original translation) .....	4
The Human Condition before God: An Exposition of Themes from Romans 1 .....	4
General Revelation, Christian Learning, and Gospel Proclamation .....	9
Annotations .....	16
The Author .....	16
Impressum .....	17

## **Paul's Intellectual Courage in the Face of Sophisticated Unbelief: The Advantage of Grasping General Revelation**

*Thomas K. Johnson*

The Apostle Paul was one of the most courageous men who ever lived. He was able to overcome all sorts of fear, anxiety, and doubt in a vast array of situations. When he was beaten, stoned, or shipwrecked, he found courage to continue on to the next city or village, even though his next encounter with pain might be worse than the last. When he faced distortions of the faith, unbelief, and gross immorality in the new churches, he responded firmly but patiently, calling his people to live consistently in light of the core of the New Testament proclamation and teaching. And running in, through, and under his other types of courage was an overpowering intellectual courage: he had complete confidence in the truth and importance of his message, in spite of the fact that the massive majority of his neighbors thought his message was simply foolish nonsense. This becomes more striking when one sees that Paul did not live in a spiritual ghetto, separated from the various religions and philosophies of his day. The New Testament portrays a man who carried on a living, continual dialog, with the literature, ideas, and representatives of

the whole range of Jewish and Gentile worldviews, beliefs, and cults. This makes an important question unavoidable: Where or how did Paul attain this high level of intellectual courage? The answer, as given in Romans 1, seems to be that Paul attained this intellectual courage from his understanding of the human condition before God, a condition characterized by the repression of God's general revelation. In the following, in a way that should not be very technical or very original, we will try to gain an overview of Paul's understanding of the human condition of rejecting God's general revelation, which includes parts of a theory of knowledge. This will be in three parts: an original translation of Romans 1:16-32; an exposition of selected themes in this text; and some theological/philosophical reflections inspired by Paul's method of thought. The goal of this study is to assist believers in understanding the condition of the unbelieving world, thereby increasing our intellectual and practical courage in communicating the biblical message in the midst of a secular world.<sup>1</sup>

## **Romans 1:16–32 (original translation)**

*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. (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.*

### **The Human Condition before God: An Exposition of Themes from Romans I**

To understand Paul's conception of human nature before God, one has to be ready to see human knowledge and life as filled with contradictions and tensions. At the center of these contradictions stands the problem that all people have knowledge of God, even though people often do not want to accept or acknowledge that they have a knowledge of God. Though Paul did not

give us precise terminology to use, he assumes some type of contrast between two types of knowledge of God, something like a contrast between a deficient knowledge and a proper knowledge, or a contrast between a rejected knowledge and an accepted knowledge. The first type of knowledge is what all people have by virtue of creation, whether it is called deficient or rejected knowledge of God. The second type of knowledge, whether it is called proper or accepted, comes only by the gospel.

Paul claims that God really is revealing himself through creation to all people on earth, and the language he uses is in the present tense, meaning this is an active, ongoing work of God through all of human history. God did not merely create the world and go into retirement (as some Deists seem to think); he is currently speaking to all men, women, and children, whether or not they want to listen to God or believe in God. To avoid misunderstanding, it may be wise to notice that Paul sees this activity of God as coming before any human interest in knowing God or asking about God. This activity of God has often been called general revelation, natural revelation, or creational revelation by followers of Paul. 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.

As Paul describes this general revelation, it is important to notice that it has very significant content. It is not only

a vague feeling or awareness of something higher or holy, though this is surely included. At least three distinct aspects of the content of general revelation are specifically mentioned: the power of God, the deity of God (vs. 20), and a very significant portion of the moral demands of God's law (vs. 32), which fits closely with a natural scheme or pattern for life (vs. 27). This content is much of what has often been called "ethical monotheism;" in Paul's way of thinking, ethical monotheism is the pattern of truth proclaimed by God through creation (as well as in the Scriptures).

As a result of this general revelation, there is a very important sense in which all people in all times and places know God. Paul says the knowledge of God is plain to all people and in all people (vs. 19) and this knowledge is taken into the consciousness of all people (vs. 20). Of course, there is also an important sense in which many people do not know God; this is what makes the gospel so important. One of the deepest self-contradictions or paradoxes of human experience is that in at least one area, lack of knowledge is based on knowledge, namely in relation to God. How can this be?

People generally do not like knowing God. And for this reason this knowledge is suppressed or repressed, with the result that people can easily say they do not know God, while, at the same time, they really do know God in an important sense. They know a lot about his power, his deity, and his moral law.

But they “suppress the truth” (vs. 18). In recent centuries psychologists and psychiatrists have sometimes talked about the suppression of memories or truths that are frightening or deeply disturbing, but this is not a new idea. It is already present in the Bible. One can take the account of Adam and Eve hiding from God behind a bush or tree as a metaphor for what many people do much of the time. Or maybe 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 does not see them. Only when we grasp the gospel that God is so gracious and forgiving that he sent his Son to purchase our redemption can we 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 do know God.

According to Paul’s description of the human condition, much of our predicament is epistemological sin or epistemological injustice. 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 is guilty of an important crime or sin in the realm of knowledge. He or she did not publicly acknowledge all that he or she really knows. We could call this an act of epistemological (related to knowledge) crime or injustice. Something very similar is happening all the time in relation to God. People say they do not know God, when they do know God.

This is lying, an act of injustice in relation to truth. Unbelief always involves sin, since unbelief is epistemological sin. One could wonder if unbelief is close to the very core of original sin.

A sin of this magnitude is not without 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, that of thinking and the internal life of the mind and soul. He says, they became worthless in their thoughts and their senseless hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they “became foolish” (vs. 21–22). Here 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.

These worthless thoughts, darkened hearts, and general foolishness lead to a profound exchange or substitution: People try to replace the Creator God with something he created. In verse 23 he says, they “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for image of the likeness of mortal man, birds, animals, and reptiles.” This means that people create substitute gods to try to replace the Creator. Unbelief does not lead to irreligion; unbelief in the Creator leads to all sorts of religions. People are unavoidably religious, even if they may claim not to be religious and even claim they cannot or do not know God. Peo-

ple 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, 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. Whatever the type of substitute religion, unbelief in the known but denied Creator drives people to replace him with something that may seem to promise what only God can provide. Paul claims that human life is filled with self-deception on a scale that few other people have imagined.

This leads us to a second major theme in Paul's thought in this text. In spite of the fact that many people may deny it, the human confrontation with God is a central, essential characteristic of human existence.

In general, misbelievers are guilty of a twofold substitution or replacement in their confrontation with God. There are no unbelievers, since everyone believes something and has some substitute god (vs. 25). The first part of this substitution was already mentioned, but it 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 much about the demands of God's law, the so-called natural moral law. The lie which replaces the truth about God is that one can be wise without God, denying the power of God or his moral demands. The second part of

this substitution or replacement is the worship of creation (or some dimension of creation), in place of God. If people find themselves almost compelled to worship something, and if they refuse to worship God, it is only natural that people worship something from creation or an imagined image of something created.

In the confrontation with God at the center of every person's life, God does not somehow remain passive or inactive. The God of the Bible is never passive or inactive. What God does is to give people over to their sinful desires, a claim that Paul repeats in similar terms three times over (vs. 24, 26, and 28). This seems to mean that God lets people experience some of the results of repressing their knowledge of God. In verse 24 Paul uses terms that echo the tenth of the Ten Commandments, that which forbids coveting. God lets people go into their own coveting. In verse 26 Paul says that God gives people over to dishonorable passions. In verse 28 Paul says that God gives people over to a confused state of mind. These are probably three complementary descriptions of the same type of act of God. What probably unites these three complementary 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 themselves. In this way there is pure justice in the repayment. And to bring about this type of justice God does not need to intervene from outside by a special act; God repays dis-

honor by allowing people to dishonor themselves. A key assumption in this act of God, which is not always noticed by readers, is that there is a proper way 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, there is honor for all; when people create god-substitutes in their own image or in the image of some lower part of creation, there is dishonor for all. 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.

What Paul says on the topic of homosexuality can best be seen as a particular example of self dishonoring. He claims homosexual desires and actions arise from a darkened heart and mind, a heart and mind deeply alienated from God and God's creation order. There is a knowable scheme or pattern of nature, which means a created order that all people should follow, and this is heterosexual. Actions and desires contrary to this scheme of nature will be self dishonoring, assuming that actions that correspond to the scheme of nature will be self-honoring. This means there is something deeply honorable about marriage and childbearing, whereas homosexuality is self dishonorable. Though homosexuality can be described as sin, it can also be described as the self punishment for the sin of disbelief and rejection of God's created order.

Something similar must be said

about the whole list of sins in verses 29 through 31. 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 of those who bear the image of the Creator. The problem is not primarily that people do not know that these actions are wrong; people know that many things are wrong and 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 probably 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 can sometimes even begin to excuse or condone those wrong actions which they know to be wrong.

### Comments

Paul's understanding of the human condition before God was closely related to his tremendous confidence in the truth and importance of his gospel. In preaching he assumed that the people to whom he was speaking already had a long history of conflict with the God whom they know, and whose law they know at least in part, but whom they pretend not to know. Rather than being ashamed of the gospel, in a certain sense, Paul was proud of the gospel, since 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 forgive-



ness and reconciliation 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 would be in closer conformity with the law of God and the scheme of nature, and for this reason it would also be more honorable. It goes without saying that Paul's assessment of the human condition before God has deep roots in the Old Testament. In addition to being a commentary on the early chapters of Genesis, 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.

### **General Revelation, Christian Learning, and Gospel Proclamation**

In the previous section I attempted to exposit aspects of the message of Romans 1:16–32, putting matters of technical exegesis into the translation itself. Now it is appropriate to try to demonstrate the significance of a Pauline approach to God's general revelation for the interaction of believers with the secular, unbelieving world. The role of believers in the secular world is always missiological, since all believers and the body of Christ as a whole have received a missions commission from our Lord, but that missiological commission

calls us to reach people who have often grown up in a culture of unbelief which is shaped by various misbelieving philosophies, worldviews, and religions. Therefore, we must ask how a Pauline type of analysis can help us to understand the lives, ideas, and culture of the people who need the gospel. There is no attempt to be original or creative in what follows, since most of these ideas are found in the better evangelical theologians and apologists of the last few centuries. But before going further, it is appropriate to notice a few extreme points of view that should be avoided.

#### *Extreme Points of View Regarding General Revelation.*

During the Nazi time in Europe, there were some Protestant theologians who combined a seriously confused theory of general revelation with aspects of the Nazi ideology to form the so-called "German Christian Movement." While the sad details of this type of thinking are beyond the purview of this essay, the "German Christian" theologians claimed there was a general revelation of God's law through the demands of the Nazi-Germanic people, or alternately there was a general revelation of God's redemption in the work of Adolf Hitler.<sup>2</sup> Very few Christians today will be inclined to mix the biblical faith and the National Socialist ideology, but the tragic mistakes of these theologians (and the churches that followed them) stand as a warning for all time; believers must be very careful about how we

think about general revelation and its relation to secular ideologies and world-views.

In reaction to the German Christians, Karl Barth is properly famous for shouting, “Nein!” with such volume that his voice is still echoing in parts of the church today. Barth was concerned that any talk about general revelation tends to reduce the biblical message to be merely a religious dimension of a particular culture so the church becomes merely the department of religion of a particular society. While many of Barth’s concerns about the “German Christian Movement” and the theological streams that led up to this movement are surely right, these problems result from a misunderstanding of general revelation, not from a proper understanding of general revelation. A Pauline understanding of general revelation enables believers and the church to become confident critics of society and proclaimers of a gospel that all people need.

Another extreme point of view is found in the writings of the so-called “Transcendental Thomist” Roman Catholic theologians. The most famous of these writers is probably Karl Rahner. Whether or not it is exactly what these writers intend, one can easily receive the impression from their books that God’s general revelation is so complete that people do not need the gospel of Christ, which only comes via special revelation. Talk of a self-giving, forgiving presence of God in general revelation makes one wonder if the gospel is necessary. In

stark contrast, Paul’s interpretation of general revelation shows why the gospel is so urgently needed.

### *Understanding General Revelation.*

Sometimes believers have said that the revelation of God in nature makes it possible for us to use rational arguments to infer or prove the existence of God. This is one of the main sources of the long tradition of various types of arguments for the existence of God. According to this way of thinking, our natural knowledge of God (that comes before the gospel) is largely indirect and received by means of rational reflection on creation. On the other hand, other believers have thought that the revelation of God in creation is largely inside ourselves, within the human mind and heart. According to this way of thinking, our natural knowledge of God (that comes before the gospel) is direct and intuitive, perhaps without much reflection and without arguments for the existence of God. But in light of Romans 1, it would not be wise for us to exclusively follow either of these parts of the Christian tradition, without regard for the other part of the Christian tradition. Paul’s way of thinking seems to include both a revelation in nature that provides a basis for rational reflection leading to arguments for the existence of God, and also a general revelation of God within human nature, meaning inside the human mind and heart created in the image of God, which leads to a direct or intuitive knowledge of

God. God is revealing himself both through nature and through human nature created in his image, with the result that our knowledge of God coming through creation is multifaceted and received into consciousness in multiple ways. One of these ways is a direct awareness or sense of his divine nature.

It is very clear that Paul claims that all people know something about God and his moral law from general revelation. It is probably safe to also conclude that many other things that all people know come from general revelation. These might be called commonsense ideas, the first principles of practical or theoretical reason, or the transcendental conditions of human experience. They are the truths that we need to know to carry on our everyday lives but that we do not really learn from our five senses. How is it that all people seem to know that we can usually trust our five senses to tell us truth about the everyday world; that two plus two will still equal four tomorrow; that people generally know what love, honesty, justice, and loyalty are? How do we know that the world still exists when we are sleeping, or how do we know that other people have minds something like our own? How is it that people know that simple logical deductions somehow correspond to the real world? Why is it that many people will think these questions are almost too stupid to consider? Because all people have a lot of knowledge that makes everyday human (not merely

animal) life possible, knowledge that comes to us from God's general revelation, so that our created minds are in some ways the images of his creating mind. Since the time of Augustine, Christians have often said the human mind is somehow illumined by God's mind, as part of his general revelation. But people often do not want to acknowledge God and therefore do not want to acknowledge the total extent to which we are dependent on God. This may be why some people do not want to even consider how it is that we can have such common sense.

Even though there are traces of God's mercy and kindness in his general revelation, so that his rain falls on the just and the unjust alike, yet there is no clear statement of the gospel of Christ in general revelation. To know that "Christ died for our sins" and that "in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself," we truly need the special revelation of God in Christ and in the Scriptures. A proper understanding of general revelation will not reduce our sense of need for special revelation; a rich understanding of general revelation will increase our understanding of our deep need for special revelation. Using the traditional evangelical distinction between law and gospel, with caution one can say that general revelation is only in the realm of law, while special revelation contains both law and gospel. And one of the chief functions of God's law is to show our need for the gospel. This means the acceptance of God's general

revelation pushes us to also accept his special revelation, which has the gospel of Christ at its center.

One of the slogans of the Protestant Reformation was “*Lex semper accusat*,” the law always accuses. God’s law accuses us because we are sinful, and if a person does not trust the gospel, that person will have a strong sinful tendency to reject, deny, or suppress the knowledge of God’s law that all people have. Only in light of the gospel of forgiveness can we acknowledge the depths of our sin and the depths of our knowledge of God’s demand in his law. In a very important way, it is the gospel of Christ that enables us to accept or acknowledge God’s general revelation, which we would otherwise want to suppress. When we talk about the gospel with unbelievers, they enter into the discussion feeling accused and maybe condemned by the law of God which they may want to ignore or deny. Whatever method of presentation we might decide to use, they are not objective hearers or observers. They will have deep prejudices that effect what they can accept and believe, even if we think we might be presenting rather objective reasons why one should accept the Christian faith. For this reason, it may be necessary to talk about God’s mercy and offer of forgiveness before talking about whether or not God really exists, though this order may seem exactly backwards.

Because we have the difficult task of bringing the gospel to people who may be hiding from God and suppress-

ing their knowledge of God, we should expect some frustrations and many misunderstandings. People who are suppressing the knowledge of God in general revelation may have a tendency to reject our presentation of our reasons why we believe the biblical message to be true. Nevertheless, the several ways of presenting why we think the biblical message to be true, e.g., arguments for the existence of God, attempts to prove the resurrection of Jesus, evidence for the historical truthfulness of the Bible, arguments that show the coherence of theism or the incoherence of atheism, all tend to increase the level of cognitive dissonance for the unbeliever. The person who has a suppressed knowledge of God deep within, while claiming to believe something else, has a deep tension within that will probably need to reach a breaking point for him/her to come to faith. The various types of apologetic presentation can each tend to increase the level of tension or dissonance within the unbeliever, which can lead to the breaking point and total change of mind we call repentance and faith.

Ever since God asked Adam and Eve, “Where are you?” God’s speech or general revelation to all people has included questions that seem to just arise in human experience and which need biblical answers. These questions range from “What is the meaning of life?” to “Why do we feel guilty and what is the solution?” to “What is the origin of the world and of human life?” and “What happens at death?” For this

reason we should say that honest questions require honest biblical answers, though sometimes the questions may need to be slightly corrected to receive biblical answers. But because God is the one who asks the questions via general revelation as a way of driving people to the answers in special revelation, we can expect to find a deep correlation between honest questions and honest biblical answers. In presenting the biblical message we should always be listening to the questions and concerns of the people we address and try to point them to the biblical answers.

When people do not come to an honest faith in the God of the Bible, they have a strong tendency to create a God-substitute which is usually some part or aspect of God's good creation. At the core of such a religion substitute there is normally some promise that speaks to the inner religious needs and questions of men and women. For example, in our time there is a strong tendency to make wealth or prosperity a God-substitute. When Jesus talked about the "deceitfulness of wealth" (Matt 13:22) he was probably thinking that wealth makes a deceitful or deceptive promise to make us happy or secure. This is probably indicative that most God-substitutes contain a deceptive or deceitful promise, meaning that we think we hear a promise from some part of creation when, in fact, only God himself can make such a promise. When people suppress the knowledge of God given in general revelation, they cannot cease to

be religious, but their worship gets turned in inappropriate directions.

The suppression of general revelation has multiple extensive effects on academic and educational life. There are many foolish claims of wisdom and knowledge which are the result of darkened hearts. These foolish claims to wisdom are then communicated through a culture and an educational system, making it more difficult for people to accept the proper knowledge of God in Christ. At the same time, even the most foolish ways of thinking may contain traces of truth which come from God's general revelation. Just a few illustrations can be given. Once people select one dimension or aspect of creation as an idol (maybe unconsciously), they have a tendency to interpret all of life, thought, culture, and experience in light of that idol, which leads to a series of idolatrous worldviews and philosophies on the pages of history and in our society today. For example, the Marxist ideology or philosophy was a result of turning the economic dimension of life into an idol, and then thinking that humans are primarily economic creatures, so that all of life and experience was seen as controlled by economic factors. This philosophy largely controlled the schools, media, and culture of the communist countries, with disastrous results. But even though this deceptive philosophy destroyed the lives of many, there probably was an element of truth in Marxist philosophy. In contrast with some theories before Marx, it correctly noted that socioeconomic matters do

have some influence on much of life. This element of truth came from general revelation. The Nazi ideology was the result of turning blood and race into a God-substitute and then interpreting all of life and society in light of their religion substitute. The ideology was then communicated in every possible means in the society under Nazi control, with results so disastrous they need no further mention. But such a demonic ideology had an appeal for many people because it contained an element of truth, that all of us are members of particular peoples, nations, or tribes, a minor truth recognized in the Bible. (In the New Testament, there is a strong interest in reconciliation between people groups who were alienated from each other, e.g., Jews and Gentiles.) This trace of a minor truth in the Nazi ideology was probably the result of general revelation. The philosophy of existentialism absolutizes human choice or decision, with a marked tendency to think that individual choices or decisions are all that matter in the world, regardless of what those decisions may be. Like the other worldviews that suppress the general revelation of God, existentialism stands in serious tension with the world that God has made and in which we live, even while the whole philosophy arises from absolutizing one truth (that decisions are important) and worshipping one dimension of creation (human decisions). In academic and educational life, one must always ask if the claims one hears and reads are the result of worldviews, ideologies,

or philosophies that suppress the general revelation of God or which result from idolatry, absolutizing one dimension of creation. At the same time, one must always be open to find elements of truth which result from general revelation, even within worldviews that seem to be largely demonic.

Another effect of the suppression of general revelation in educational and academic life is the tendency for academic theories to falsely absolutize and separate aspects of creation and human experience that properly belong together. Examples can be found in many different academic disciplines, but only a few from the field of the academic study of ethics will be mentioned. In the common secular (meaning God denying or God ignoring) theories about ethics that are not nihilistic (meaning those theories that do not think moral truth is unavailable), there are at least four contradictory theories about right and wrong. Each claims to be a total explanation of moral life and moral experience. The deontological or Kantian ethicists say that ethics is all about our rational duty. The utilitarian or consequentialist ethicists say that ethics is all about the consequences or results of our actions, whether for good or evil, in the lives of other people. The virtue ethics theorists say that ethics is all about what kind of person each of us should become. The social contract ethicists say ethics is all about the formal or informal social agreements that hold society together and prevent social chaos. From a Christian perspective,

one can say that each of these ethical theories contains elements of truth that result from God's general revelation. A proper theistic ethic can include these elements within a larger framework coming from the Bible, while also observing that in everyday experience these proper ethical considerations blend or merge together. Each of these secular ethical theories takes one of the many ways in which God's moral law comes to us through creation, without regard for God, the Bible, or the other ways God's moral law comes to us through creation. Because unbelief tends to lead to false absolutizing, secular ethical theorists have a tendency to isolate these considerations from each other and to see them as totally contradictory. This very brief analysis of the tendency for people to falsely absolutize different aspects of creation in the realm of ethical theory can also be repeated in most fields and disciplines of education and academic life. An understanding of general revelation, and the tendency of people to suppress that revelation, helps us to understand and avoid the problem. Believers must question or criticize this tendency to absolutize parts of creation in education, while we carefully practice a critical discernment that allows us to accept all elements of truth into a biblical worldview. This effort can help to open the minds of unbelievers to the gospel, while also helping believers to remain faithful to God's truth.

### *Comments*

The apostle Paul had tremendous intellectual courage, meaning confidence in the truth and importance of his message, and this intellectual courage was worked out in the middle of the secular worldviews and multiple religions of his day. His intellectual courage was closely tied to his understanding of the human condition before God, a condition largely characterized by the rejection and suppression of the knowledge of God which comes from general revelation, while this rejected and suppressed knowledge from and about God continues to make human life still human. Believers who live in the West in the twenty-first century face a world with strong similarities to the world of Paul's time; we face a bewildering variety of secular worldviews, mixed with all sorts of religions. In this situation we need a strong intellectual courage that gives a foundation for other types of spiritual courage. Careful reflection on Romans 1 can help us in this direction.

# Annotations

## Anmerkungen

<sup>1</sup> No bibliography and very few footnotes are included in this essay, since that would unnecessarily extend its size and make it less accessible to readers. Implicitly, this essay is a dialog with much of the history of western theology and philosophy, but to make that explicit might exceed the patience of the reader and the writer. Most of the relevant sources can be found in the bibliography of Thomas K. Johnson, *Natural Law Ethics: An Evangelical Proposal* (Bonn: VKW, 2005) pp. 147–168.

<sup>2</sup> More information on the German Christian Movement can be found in Thomas K Johnson, *Helmut Thielicke's Ethics of Law and Gospel* (Ph. D. dissertation, University of Iowa, 1987), chapter one. The footnotes and bibliography provide references to the primary and secondary sources. A lightly revised version of this text may appear as a book, probably from VKW in Bonn, in 2006 or 2007.

# The Author

## Über den Autor



Thomas K. Johnson, M.Div. ACPE, Ph.D. serves Martin Bucer Seminary as Professor of Apologetics and Dean of Czech Programs. He is also Director of Komensky Institute of Prague and teaches philosophy at Charles University. He is a pastor of the Presbyterian Church in America and his work is largely sponsored through the International Institute for Christian Studies. Johnson served as a Visiting Professor of Philosophy and Psychology at the dissident European Humanities University (1994–96) in totalitarian Minsk, Belarus. He also taught evangelical theology in the Orthodox theological faculty of EHU. (EHU was later closed by force at the orders of the dictator.) He has been a church planter in the U.S. (Hope Evangelical Church, Iowa) and a pastor in the former Soviet Union. He has taught in nine universities or theological schools in five countries.