

# BaptistWay: Exchanging God's Truth for a Lie

August 27, 2015

• *The BaptistWay lesson for Sept. 13 focuses on Romans 1:18-32.*

These verses begin a larger section, extending all the way through Romans 3:20, highlighting the fact all people bear the burden of sin. No one—neither Jew nor Gentile, neither male nor female, neither rich nor poor—escapes its scope and effects. First, the Apostle Paul notes creation itself bears witness of God's eternal power and divine nature (v. 20).

Later, he will invoke Israel's covenant relationship with God in relation to the pervasiveness of sin. For those without that covenantal relation, though, God is known through creation. That is, the structure and dynamic movement of the world around us provide enough beauty, awe, wonder to become aware of God's existence and lovingkindness toward all of creation. Consequently, the character and activity of God are evident to all people; no one has an excuse for ignorance. Unfortunately, God's wrath also is made known through the created order.

## **The wrath of God**

Romans 1:18 states, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all godlessness and wickedness of people." This word "wrath" calls to mind God's final and decisive judgment. Certainly, Paul uses it in that manner (1 Thessalonians 1:10). Here, however, we also should think of the present effects of our turning from God as manifesting God's wrath. God's holiness is bound up in God's loving care for all of creation. To work against that creation is to work against God's holiness.

Paul states people "suppress the truth by their wickedness" (v. 18). This

“wickedness” is literally injustice, turning not only from God but from God’s ordered creation of justice, love and mercy. Sin, then, misuses and misconstrues the true purpose of creation. Thus, the expected result of sin is God’s wrath, which in this passage is signaled by the phrase “God gave them over ... .” It is used three times in this passage (vv. 24, 26 and 28), highlighting its importance to the force of the text. In other words, God is “stepping away” from creation, allowing the natural consequences of humanity’s sin to take place.

In contrast to last week’s section of chapter 1 where life was emphasized, here Paul focuses on death as the penalty for sin (v. 32). This death is multifaceted and present even if it is not easily seen around us. It extends to personal characteristics, societal structures, interpersonal relationships and even creation itself. While its pervasiveness is clear, Paul is clear there is more to the structure of reality than sin and destruction. Nonetheless, this passage emphasizes the aspects of creaturely existence that fall short of God’s intent for creation.

## **Idolatry**

As Paul makes clear, the central failure of humanity is idolatry: “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him” (v. 21). This is the fundamental flaw—replacing the Creator with the creature. As Paul states, “They exchanged the truth about God for a lie” (1:25). In other words, something or someone has taken the place of the Creator of all that exists and has usurped the storied character of God.

Recall the Israelites in the wilderness after crossing the Reed Sea. Once they constructed the golden calf, they did not see it as a new deity, but one responsible for all that had already occurred: “Then [the people] said, ‘These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt’” (Exodus 32:4). Even the language of Paul’s statement—“exchanged the glory of the immortal God” (v. 23)—echoes Psalm 106:20, which recounts the Israelites’

betrayal after the exodus. Thus, when we replace God with anything that is not God, all love and devotion, all ambition and attention, are directed to this alternative.

### **The culmination of depravity**

As many commentators have pointed out, this admonition resonates with typical Jewish critiques of Greco-Roman religion; thus, it is possible Paul is addressing Gentile Christians whose past lives reflected such practices, though this is not necessary. Even so, the culmination of the human depravity depicted here is corruption of the mind (v. 28). True knowledge of God becomes nearly impossible, let alone living in harmony with that knowledge. This emphasis on the mind will return in a later portion of the epistle.

Much ink has been spilled about this passage in discussing sexual sin. And certainly Paul does spend some time with that topic. Yet when considering statements such as 1:29-31, a whole host of moral flaws are named, with the summary declaration that the people have “no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy” (v. 31). In other words, this passage should help us name as evil and sinful actions and behavior such as murder, racism, sexism, economic inequality and injustice, environmental degradation, and war and violence.

Together, these sins—at their worst—paint a dark picture of the world gone astray, a world formed by the idolatry of turning away from God and turning toward some aspect of the created order—racial purity, market forces, political power, financial success, overzealous patriotism or even ourselves.

### **Consequences**

All of these are consequences of turning away from God—a God who is discernible in the physical creation itself. This should remind us the invisible God is made manifest in the visible world. The physical is not opposed to the spiritual, nor should we understand the physical to be evil or sinful. Rather, the physical world is part of God’s creation, which was declared good and very good in Genesis 1.

Our use of the gifts of physicality determine whether it is directed to God’s good purpose or toward selfish and sinful desires. Thus, our hope for future redemption and the shape of our lives in the present are bound up in the fabric of God’s just order, begun in creation and fulfilled in Jesus Christ.