No General Revelation

After the introductory salutation and a few other matters, the Apostle Paul's discussion in his Epistle to the Romans begins with an emphasis on his life's work: He is discussing his preaching of the gospel, which he is planning to do at Rome (verse 15). He says that he is not ashamed to preach the gospel because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (verse 16). This echoes Paul's statement to the Corinthian church in 1 Cor. 2:1-5 that it is by the power of the Spirit that Paul preaches the gospel. He relies solely on the power of the Spirit in his evangelism.

The preaching of the gospel is Paul's focus in the first chapter of his letter. He is not focused on the nature of revelation. It is time for traditional Reformed theologians to take a step back from their own concerns, and their own doctrinal tradition, and look at Paul's concern. Paul must be allowed to present his own perspective. He is reflecting on the response of faith by believers to the gospel (verse 17), and on the sin of those who reject the truth of the word of God (for the remainder of the chapter). The passage is not about a revelation of God in nature, although many commentators and theologians have suggested this.

Who sees and acknowledges the wrath of God against the wickedness of human beings who suppress the truth of the gospel except for believers themselves (verse 18)? The just wrath of God is revealed to believers. Observations of the creation itself helps unbelievers to understand God's eternal power and divine nature as they hear the word of God (verses 19-20), but the unbeliever gravitates to worshipping created things, his idols, rather than the Creator (verses 21-23). Paul warns believers in the next chapter that even they gravitate to the worship of idols (and other evil behavior), so they ought to avoid judging anyone (Romans 2:1).

Surely a large gap, or void, exists in the proclamation of the word of God within the world now, and in Paul's time, and going back through history into prehistoric times and right to the time following Adam and Eve. Many Christians feel a moral tension over what they perceive as the unfairness of God's judgment on the masses of people throughout the ages who have never heard the word of God. One purpose of the doctrine of general revelation is to dispose of any perceived moral problem by positing a revelation of God in nature, which is experienced by absolutely everyone in all times, but which human beings suppress by their sin. This makes all human beings inexcusable for their sin. All unbelievers in all times, even those who have never heard the word of God, are thereby justly subject to the judgment of God-- according to the doctrine of general revelation.

The Lord himself showed his love for the whole world by his command to make disciples of all nations, which begins with evangelism (Matthew 28:19-20), and this task now belongs to the Church worldwide. The judgment of all human beings in all times is in the hands of God Almighty, and His counsel is His own. Paul says in Romans 5:14 that death reigned from the time of Adam until the time of Moses, even over those who did not break a command like Adam and Eve did. Paul also states in Romans 2:12 that all who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law.

It is vital to understand two things about the judgment of God on all unbelievers. First, the doctrine of the eternal conscious punishment of the unbeliever, in fire no less according to the Athanasian Creed, is patently false. Revelation 20:11-15 speaks of the resurrection of all who have died, believers and unbelievers, to stand before God in judgment. Those whose names are not found in the book of life are thrown into the lake of fire, but this is the "second death" for these individuals-- they will die in the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14-15). The doctrine of the eternal conscious

punishment of unbelievers is a travesty propagated by the Athanasian Creed which was adopted by many Western churches including the Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed churches as well as many other protestant denominations. Second, we must consider Paul's understanding of God which provides the background of his whole discussion in Romans 1 and the remainder of the letter.

Consider the perspective of Paul as an apostle and a godly man. Paul knows that God's wisdom and understanding are perfect. They are too great for us to comprehend. He knows also that God's justice is perfect, far beyond our reach. He knows that God's plan is perfect. He knows that human beings cannot possibly attain the height, depth and breadth of that plan. The apostle knows the perfection of God's character. He knows these things very well. The background of Paul's discussion in Romans 1, and the remainder of the letter, is the transcendence of God Almighty, which Paul understood in truth from the depth of his own sin and the glorious way that the Lord appointed him as an apostle (Acts 9). In the matter of God's judgment, Paul proceeded by faith in God's perfect (transcendent) plan, character, understanding, wisdom and justice.

In verses 21-27, Paul seems to be focused on describing the sin of the Israelites who rejected the word of God in their time. Then, he seems almost unwittingly to transition to a discussion of the contemporary response in Rome to the preaching of the gospel in that place which led to the founding of the church at Rome, but which also resulted in a wicked response to the word of God on the part of many Romans (verses 28-32).

In this chapter, Paul puts great emphasis on the sin of idolatry among those who reject the word of God. Paul's descriptions of idolatry reflect accurately the response of many of the Hebrews to God when He brought them out of Egypt through the Red Sea and through the desert where He cared for them and continued to lead them through the efforts of Moses. Many of the Hebrews responded in frightful sin, as they did for example in Exodus 32 when they reverted to idolatry even though God was on the mountain with Moses providing him with the stone tablets containing the Commandments, the first of which was a red flag warning against idolatry. Such OT accounts of the sinful response of the Hebrews to God would be Paul's fundamental paradigm for the unbelieving response of human beings toward the word of God throughout the world. This is reflected in Paul's emphasis on idolatry in Romans 1. This is the paradigm of the sin of the Israelites which Stephen cited to the Sanhedrin before they murdered him (Acts 7:39-41). If we want to understand how Paul understood unbelief (that is, the rejection of the word of God) in all times and in all places, we only need to look at the example of the Hebrews who came out of Egypt with Moses. The Hebrews had the word of God through Moses even at this time and they rejected the word of God after they said they would obey Him (Exodus 19:1-8). This is also the paradigm of the disobedience of Adam and Eve to the command of God in the Garden, a topic which Paul soon takes up in his letter (Chapter 5).

Traditional Reformed theologians need to go back to the drawing board and start over on this matter. The doctrine of general revelation is a kludge, and it is an insult to God. The doctrine should be jettisoned immediately. Traditional Reformed theologians will remain stuck until they step back and examine this passage in Romans with a fresh look that is governed by the concern and perspective of the Apostle Paul. The transcendence of God has been described here very specifically and concretely, although it should be obvious that we can only grasp an infinitesimally small speck of the reality. So, our proper course is simply to worship our God, which He does desire. This was also Paul's mindset and the deep truth of his teaching in the Epistle to the Romans. The doctrine of general revelation is not the truth. It is a distraction from what is authentically spiritual in this portion of scripture.

Adherents to the doctrine of general revelation have a belief that they possess a rational basis for comprehending God's judgment of every unbeliever since the creation of the world who

has not heard the word of God. In contrast, the apostle himself simply makes the statement that we know that God's judgments are the truth (Romans 2:2). It is the difference between putting faith at the center of our heart and putting reason at the center. Traditional Reformed theologians are elevating reason and feeling above faith in the doctrine of general revelation. They have joined the school of Schleiermacher in this matter.

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