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## The modern Quest for an African Theology Revised in the Light of Romans 1:18-25

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# THE MODERN QUEST FOR AN AFRICAN THEOLOGY REVISED IN THE LIGHT OF ROMANS 1:18-25

## Part I

### Exegesis of the Text

**Alfred Muli**

*In order to make the Scriptures relevant for each generation, the church must continually search the Word of God diligently in order to apply its teaching to the contemporary issues for each culture and in each generation. However, relevant biblical theology must be continually checked and corrected. In the modern quest for a relevant African Christian Theology many have become overly optimistic about the moral nature of man and his religion, ignoring the teachings of Scripture. In this first article of a two-part series, Pastor Alfred Muli examines Romans 1:18-25 which serves as a lodestar in the evaluation of African Traditional Religion and the shaping of African Christian Theology.*

### INTRODUCTION

In the early seventies the late Dr. Byang Kato observed carefully that in the following ten years Africa would be a theological battle-field. Two decades

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have passed since the unexpected and sudden death of Kato in 1975 - who is, so to speak, the father of African evangelicalism. The fulfillment of this prophesy has gone way beyond the limit of the predicted period.

The last two decades have witnessed vigorous and aggressive theological discussions in Africa. The main issue has been the quest for a Christian theology relevant to the African situation.

These deliberations have been advanced through various methods by both Africans and expatriates, evangelicals and non-evangelicals. First, many books and journal articles on African theology have been published. Some of the leading African writers include John S. Mbiti, J.N.K. Mugambi, and Bolaji Idowu. Those represent the non-evangelical camp. On the evangelical side we can name theologians such as Tite Tienou, Tokunboh Adeyemo and Cornelius Olowola.

Second, research and position papers on Christian theological reflection in the African situation are presented in symposia, seminars and conferences. For example Nairobi Fellowship of Theological Colleges (NFTC) in Kenya, which organises such events; and the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians. There are a large number of organisations which deal with African theological issues: World Student Christian Federation, African Region; and the All African Council of Churches (AACC) which represent some of the bodies which are not exclusively evangelical. Some evangelical organisations include Association of Evangelicals in Africa (AEA), formally called Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar (AEAM); Evangelical Fellowship of Kenya (EFK); and Evangelical Churches of West Africa (ECWA).

Several titles have been proposed to describe the content of this Christian theological reflection in Africa. They include "Africana Theologia," "African Theology," "African Christian Theology" and "Christian Theology in African Context."

We can mention several benefits of this theological quest. It raises important issues with which evangelicals have to wrestle to make Christian theology authentically biblical and authentically African. Social exploitation and oppression, human dignity and identity, poverty, cultural values, and African traditional religious beliefs and practices are some of the issues which need to be addressed. These issues arise from the socio-political, economic, and religious situations of Africa.

The African Traditional Religion (ATR) related issues include the following questions: Did the Africans have a knowledge about God before the coming of Christianity? If they did, what kind of knowledge did they have? Is ATR a legitimate response to General Revelation? Did the Africans worship God in ATR? Can ATR be described as idolatry? The objective is to address the real needs of the Africans, as it were, to scratch where it itches. But do we not also need to scratch where it ought to itch?

The modern quest for African Theology among non-evangelicals demonstrates a major theological pitfall. The issue is that there is a defective view of the moral condition of fallen mankind. That is the root cause of their biblically unfounded proposals. A defective substructure produces a defective superstructure. A wrong analysis of sickness leads, inevitably, to a wrong prescription of medicine and often leads to death.

This unbiblical view of the moral condition of fallen mankind is evident in a number of ways. African Traditional Religious beliefs and practices are exalted and praised without careful consideration of the biblical teaching. Cultural values are elevated at the expense of the Bible. Salvation is viewed primarily as liberation from socio-economic and political exploitation to a self-realisation of full human identity and integrity. The Bible is used as a proof-text in support of their defective theology.

The main focus of this article is to deal with this theological pitfall. This article proposes that proper understanding of the biblical teaching of the moral condition of fallen mankind is a fundamental presupposition for the formation of a Christian theology relevant to the African situation.

This article will undertake to examine Paul's teaching on the moral condition of fallen mankind by an exegesis of Romans 1:18-25. Part II of this article, appearing in the next issue of AJET, will draw implications for the modern quest for an African Theology and then make a conclusion. A proposal of a methodology toward an African Theology is included at the end.

## EXEGESIS OF ROMANS 1:18-25

### Context

The recipients of Paul's epistle to the Romans are described as "the ones loved by God and called to be saints" (1:7). They were The Roman Christians. After a careful study of the historian Suetonius, Crainfield observes: "It is clear that there must have been Christians in Rome for, at the very least,

three or four years before the time when Romans was written" (Crainfield, *Romans, ICC*, p.16). They were converted through the presence of Christians who were performing their secular duties in the city (Crainfield, p.17).

Most commentators believe that this church had not received apostolic teaching before, especially on salvation. For example, Crainfield rightly observes that neither in Romans nor any other New Testament book "is there any allusion to an initial evangelisation in Rome by any particular missionary or missionaries" (Crainfield, p.17). Hence, Paul's main purpose of writing the epistle was "to present a complete and detailed statement of the gospel message he proclaimed" (Witmer, "Romans," p. 436-437).

There is a question about the ethnicity of the recipients: whether they were Gentile or Jewish Christians and which group constituted the majority. Crainfield and Murray correctly hold that the recipients were predominantly Gentiles with the Jews constituting a substantial minority (cf Murray, *The Epistle*, xx.xxii). Sometimes, Paul refers specifically to Gentiles (2:14; 9:24) and other times to Jews (4:1, 9:7:1). So Paul's readers include the two ethnic groups.

The text in question is an integral part of the passage, describing the need for the righteousness of God (1:18-3:20). The concept of the righteousness of God is mentioned in the preceding passage (1:16-17) in reference to the declaratory righteousness as a gift of grace from God which is received through faith in Jesus Christ (cf. Eph. 2:8-9). The righteousness from God is needed because all mankind is condemned (1:18-32), including the moral man (2:1-16) and the Jew (2:17-3:20). At this point it is important to exegete the passage in order to provide a precise statement of the whole text.

### **Exegetical Ideas**

The content of Paul's teaching about the moral condition of fallen mankind is that man is under the wrath of God because he has access to the revealed truth about God, but he has turned to idolatry.

#### **I. Fallen Mankind is Under God's Wrath (vs.18).**

*"The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness."*

**Objects of God's Wrath:** The first interpretive problem is, "Who is Paul describing by the term, "men" ? Some commentators think Paul is referring to the Gentile world exclusively. These include men like William Hendriksen,

Charles Hodge, and John Murray. Murray, for example, asserts: "The revelation of wrath contemplated is restricted to the particular class or division of mankind [namely] the Gentile nations" (Murray, *The Epistle*, p.36). These proponents argue that traits, such as worship of images (vs.23), and deriving knowledge from nature (v.19,20), are characteristic of Gentiles.

On the other hand, some commentators like C.E.B. Crainfield, C.H. Dodd and C.K. Barrett, believe that the passage describes the whole of fallen mankind. For example, Dodd comments: "The impiety and wickedness of men is hindering the truth about the nature of God, which is native to the human mind from having its due effect in the life of human society" (Dodd, *The Epistle*, p. 24). This appears to be the correct view. Paul does not mention the term Gentile or Greek in the passage (v.18-32). Instead he uses the general designation, "men" (vs.18). The catalogue of sins mentioned were committed by both Jews and Gentiles (2:1). Crainfield's conclusion is correct that, "Paul himself reckoned that by describing the obvious sinfulness of the heathen he was, as a matter of fact, describing the basic sinfulness of fallen man...." (Crainfield, *Romans*, p.105).

In a similar language F.F. Bruce rightly comments thus: "Paul's aim is to show that the whole of humanity is morally bankrupt, unable to claim a favorable verdict at the judgement bar of God, desperately in need of his mercy and pardon" (Bruce, *The Epistle*, p.82).

Heathenism is used sometimes in a limited sense to refer to world religions other than Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. In this article the term, "heathen," will be viewed with reference to fallen mankind in general. It will refer to all people in the world who have not received the righteousness from God by grace through faith in Christ.

Hence, Paul in this text presents detailed teaching on the moral condition of fallen mankind. The text in question will be approached through an analysis and commentary, phrase by phrase.

Paul's teaching puts into perspective the heresy of universalism, pluralism, and inclusivism.

The wrath (*οργη*) of God is also mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament (cf. Jn. 3:36; Rom. 9:22; Eph. 5:6; Col. 3:1; 1 Thess. 1:10). It is used in reference to the righteous indignation of the perfectly loving and good God against the sinfulness of fallen man. Wuest views *οργη* (wrath) in terms of God's attitude. In his words: "*οργη* is not punishment of sin but God's attitude towards it" (Wuest, *Word Studies*, p.29).

John Stott correctly describes the wrath of God as, "His holy hostility to evil, his refusal to condone it or to come to terms with it, his just judgement upon it" (Stott, *The Message*, p.72).

God's wrath is different from human anger and free of those poisonous ingredients such as uncontrollable emotion, animosity, malice, desire to revenge, fury, rage, selfishness or sudden outbursts of anger. These negative elements of human anger are contrary to the nature of a perfectly loving God (Ps. 18:30, Jn. 3:16; Rom. 5:8).

Paul teaches that the wrath of God is manifested upon the perpetrators of ungodliness (*ασεβεια*) and unrighteousness (*αδικιαν*) of men.

The word, "all" is used to embrace both "godlessness" and "wickedness". It seems from the context that the two terms are used as two designations of the same concept with the aim to "afford a more rounded description of it than either gives by itself" (Cranfield, p.112). The two terms describe all sin, every form of rebellion against the sovereign God, as the object of God's wrath.

Paul goes further to describe the essential character of the sinfulness of mankind. Fallen "men suppress the truth by their wickedness." "Suppress" (*κατεξοντων*) means "to hold down, to hold captive, to assault" (LK 4:42), "to hinder" (2Thes. 2:6-7) or "to come in full possession of" (Mt. 21:38). In our context it refers to "hinder" in the sense of suppressing. Fallen mankind has suppressed the truth of God, which is made manifest in the created order (vss.19-20) by his wickedness (vs.18) evident in his idolatry (vss. 21-25). The word is a present participle in the attributive position. A "relative clause" translation seems best to suit this context. It should then be rendered, "who suppress". So fallen mankind continually suppresses the truth of God in his wickedness. The word, "truth" (*αληθειαν*), refers to the objective truth of God.

Fallen men "have made an a-priori decision to live for themselves, rather than for God and others, and therefore stifle any truth which challenges their self centeredness" (Stott, p.72). Cranfield summarizes it all: "Sin is always an insult upon the truth of God" (Cranfield, p.112). Paul then proceeds on to teach about the revealed truth about God.

## **II. The Revealed Truth about God is Available to All Fallen Mankind (vss. 19-20).**

*"... since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse."*

Paul teaches that fallen mankind has access to the knowledge of God through nature and is therefore without excuse.

### **A. Fallen mankind has the knowledge about God (vss. 19-20a).**

These two verses are basic in the theology of General Revelation, though it probably was not Paul's main purpose here to give an elaborate teaching on it. In this connection Barrett observes that, "It is not Paul's intention to establish a natural theology; nor does he create one unintentionally" (Barrett, *A Commentary*, p.35).

Some interpreters hold that these two verses give the reason for God's wrath. Others see them as a justification of the fact that men do indeed have sufficient knowledge of the truth about God in the General Revelation. Since the two ideas seem to come out clearly from the passage without causing any significant effect on its meaning we would endorse both. The revealed truth about God is available to fallen mankind and, therefore, they are justly under God's wrath. This is the essence of Paul's teaching in these two verses. Let us analyze the verses *clause by clause*.

#### **1. Paul teaches that fallen men are justly under God's wrath because they have suppressed that which is knowable about God and is evident among them (vs.19).**

What does Paul refer to by the phrase, "that which is knowable about God" (το γνωστον)?

In this context the word seems to refer to experiential knowledge which is gained through ascertaining the truth about God by way of examining the created order which God has made available for the purpose of divine manifestation (vss. 19-20).

The main problem here is the extent of this knowledge. We will evaluate several commentators here for the sake of clarity. We should bear in mind that a defective exegesis of this "knowledge" may lead to a major theological pitfall.

Vincent says *το γνωστον* refers to "that which is knowable... signifying the universal objective knowledge of God as the Creator which is, more or less, in all people" (Vincent, *Word Studies*, p.15).

It must, however, be noted that Paul is not advocating a belief that fallen mankind is capable in himself of objective knowledge of God. This is evident in man's response. He has instead suppressed the truth (vs.18), and turned to ungodliness (vss. 21-25).

The Psalmist knew this when he prayed, "open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wonderful things out of thy law" (Ps. 119:18 A.V.). Finite mankind cannot have a meaningful knowledge of the infinite without God's special disclosure. God has to take the initiative to open our eyes.

Crainfield's observation is significant. He says that Paul here refers to that which is knowable about God by man with the aim to safeguard "the truth of the mysteriousness and hiddenness of God" (Crainfield, p.113).

So we need to note that, though the revealed truth is made available, something remains unknowable as Shedd declares, "*το γνωστον* denotes all that is knowable without written revelation; and also implies that there is something absolutely unknowable (Shedd, *A Critical*, p.20).

This knowledge is limited in degree and content. To render the words *το γνωστον*, as "what may be known", as does the **New International Version** and the King James Version, seems to stretch Paul's teaching too far. Hodge is correct in commenting that Paul "does not mean to say that everything that may be known concerning God was revealed to the heathen, but simply that they had such a knowledge of them as rendered their impiety inexcusable" (Hodge, p.36).

This revealed truth about God is manifest and made known to all mankind everywhere, from the observable handiwork of God's visible creation. In this connection Dodd is right to say that "the created universe offers sufficient evidence of its divine origin" and that from it we can surely behold something "like a great thought of a mind beyond our own" (Dodd, *The Epistle*, p.25).

To summarize this, "what may be known" (*το γνωστον*), therefore, refers to that which is knowable about God, not that which may be known. It is a general and limited knowledge, limited to the extent of what God has made

manifest in the visible creation. In this context, το γνωστόν points to God's invisible attributes in verse 20. These will be discussed latter.

ἐν αὐτοῖς can correctly be translated with an internal nuance as "in them" or "with them" or with an external nuance as, "in their midst" or "among them". There has been a significant debate among commentators in determining which rendering correctly interprets the word in this context. Three schools of thought are represented here. The majority of them advocate the outward nuance, while others take the inward, and still others advocate both ideas.

It seems best to interpret ἐν αὐτοῖς with both meanings, "among them" and "within them." For men to perceive clearly that which has been externally manifested, the internal response of mind and conscience is presupposed. Murray accurately asserts: "If it is revelation to us it must also be in us because that which makes it to us is that which is in us, namely, mind and heart" (Murray, p.38). The revelation is external through what has been created but its perception is internal in man's mind (vss.20-21).

Paul repeats the idea of revelation in the words, "for God made it evident to them" (vs. 19). Paul's reason is twofold here. First, he probably intends to point out that the work of revelation belongs to God alone. Revelation is "the result of His own deliberate self disclosure and not something in anyway independent of His will" (Crainfield, p.114). God reveals himself willingly. His act of revelation is in conformity with his will.

Secondly, Paul probably wants to show that without God's intervention man is totally incapable of knowing God. It is "not as if men acting on their own initiative could have discovered God, but God has made known to them whatever in area of creation can be made known about him" (Hendriksen, p.69). Although God has made himself known, in his fallen condition, man is unable to know God (cf. 1 Cor. 1:21).

## **2. Paul explains how the revealed truth about God had been made manifest to all mankind (vs. 20a).**

The revealed truth about God is "his invisible qualities" (το αορατα), namely, "his eternal power and divine nature." vs.20.

Kasemann thinks that "invisible qualities" (το αορατα) refers specifically to God in his divine invisibility which distinguishes him from the cosmic being. He asserts: "God remains invisible here to the extent that we cannot get power over him or calculate him metaphysically" (Kasemann, p.42).

The truth that God is indeed invisible is a clear biblical teaching. The Bible teaches that God is invisible (1 Tim. 1:17, Heb. 11:27), no one has seen him (Jn. 1:18), and that Jesus is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15).

It seems that Kaseman approaches the three clauses ("invisible qualities," "eternal power" and "divine nature"), as referring to three distinct but specific attributes of God. He sums them up to refer to the divine invisibility of God. But the natural flow of verse 20 does not seem to draw that conclusion. Again even if it were the case, the term, "divine nature," is inclusive of all the divine properties of God as will be demonstrated latter

It would seem, therefore, that "his invisible qualities" refers to the invisible attributes of God, namely, his "eternal power" and "divine nature." The "invisible qualities" (το αορατα) constitute a summary of the essence of God and the manifold attributes which distinguish him (Godet, 103).

The word, αιδιος ("eternal power") in the New Testament occurs only here and Jude 6. It refers to the everlasting and eternal character of God. This is not a strange concept in the Bible.

Murray makes several comments about the eternal power and divinity of God. He observes that the eternal power is specific and refers to the eternity of God's being and power. Divinity (or "divine nature") on the other hand, is generic and general. "It reflects on the perfection of God and denotes the totality of that which God is as a being, possessed of divine attributes" (Murray, p.39).

Hence Paul does not seem to have in mind some specific attributes of God which have been manifested in the revealed truth about God as Kaseman thinks. He is talking about the sum total of divine attributes which characterise God. This totality of God's nature is clearly seen and understood.

Paradoxically, God's invisible attributes are actually seen and understood through His creation. Barrett is correct to comment that through the perception of the eye and of the mind "the being of God is inwardly perceived" (Barrett, p.36).

So in verses 19-20a Paul teaches that the revealed truth about God is available to all mankind because they have access to the knowledge. He goes further to teach that men are without excuse for their godlessness.

**B. Fallen Mankind is "Without Excuse" for his Godlessness (vs. 20b).**

Paul teaches that fallen mankind is "without excuse" for his godlessness.

Two views have been proposed for the proper interpretation of this clause. Some commentators approach it as a purpose clause. These include Murray and Barrett. Others think that it is a result clause. Hodge and Crainfield are good examples.

Those who approach it as a purpose clause think the clause must be rendered, "so that they might be without excuse". Barrett, for example, believes Paul is saying: "God may rightly visit men with wrath because, though they have not had the advantages of hearing the gospel, they have rejected that rudimentary knowledge of God that was open to them" (Barrett, p.36).

This purpose is seen as part of the sovereign ordination of God. Murray asserts, "If men do not glorify and worship God they have no excuse for their impiety, and that the impiety might be without excuse is the design of the manifested glory" (Murray, p.40).

Murray is convinced that any objection to this view in favour of result undermines the sovereignty of God as ruler of human history. He strongly believes that, "We cannot eliminate from the all inclusive ordination and providence of God the design which is presupposed in the actual result" (Murray, p.40).

There are three significant objections to this view. First, the verb, εἶναι (*to be*), is a present infinitive from εἰμι (*I am*). It should, therefore, be translated "they are" but not with a subjunctive force, "they might be."

Second, an infinitive of purpose cannot be in the present. In discussing the purpose use of the infinitive, the standard Greek grammar books do not give any example in the present tense (cf. Dana & Mantey, *A Manual*, p. 214-215).

The third objection is that though it is theologically true that God's sovereignty governs all human history, the interpretation of the clause as purpose does not seem to fit the context. Paul does not seem to be saying that the purpose for the divine manifestation is to render man without excuse. Again to interpret the clause as result does not undermine God's sovereignty.

The interpretation of the clause as infinitive of *result* seems to fit the context better than purpose. With the *result* nuance the clause will be rendered: "So that they are without excuse."

On the basis of the revelation of truth about God men are without excuse for their ungodliness (vs.18). Paul does not imply that God's purpose of self-divine disclosure in nature is to render man's rebellion inexcusable. It is rather that, "since this revelation has been made, they have, in fact, no apology for their ignorance and neglect of God" (Hodge, p.37).

All men have access to knowledge about God but have wilfully rejected or ignored it. Though they would not have gained full knowledge about God the point of the text is the result, that, they are without excuse. Crainfield makes an excellent comment in this regard: "The result of God's self manifestation is not a natural knowledge of God on man's part, independent of God's self-revelation in His word, a valid though limited knowledge, but simply the excusiveness of men in their ignorance" (Crainfield, p.116).

εἰς ("so that") with an infinitive usually expresses result (cf. Heb. 11:3). In fact, the whole of verse 20 is an explanation of that result. It gives reason for that result.

Paul's teaching in those verses (19-20) is that fallen men have access to knowledge about God through nature with the result that they are without excuse for their ungodliness. We can then correctly draw a theological conclusion that the revealed truth about God in nature is not salvific. But yet fallen mankind is inexcusable under God's judgement. Paul now gives an elaborate exposition of men's ungodliness.

### **III. Fallen Mankind has Turned to Idolatry (vss. 21- 25).**

*"For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator - who is forever praised. Amen."*

Paul's teaching in this section is that fallen men have ignored the revealed truth about God and turned to idolatry both implicitly and explicitly.

#### **A. The Implicit Idolatry (vss. 21-22).**

Implicit idolatry here means characteristics which are suggestive of idolatry. We will discuss four of them.

### 1. They do not glorify God (vs. 21).

In this verse we have the biblical philosophy of the pattern which leads to false religion. This pattern consists of the degeneration and degradation of fallen mankind from the revealed knowledge about God resulting in religious perversity, namely idolatry. Mayer correctly says,

For heathenism is not the primeval religion from which man might gradually have risen to knowledge of the true God, but is, on the contrary, the result of a falling away from the known original revelation of the true God in His works (Quoted by Murray, p.41).

False religions are a degeneration from an original monotheism. Some observable rationale, as Dodd says, is that even among the false religions of Africa, India and Australia, "A belief in some kind of Creator - Spirit subsists along with the superstitious cults or gods or demons, and often with a more or less obscure sense that this belief belongs to a superior or a more ancient order" (Dodd, p.26).

Paul's teaching is that fallen men ignored the knowledge about God and did not "glorify God" nor "gave him thanks."

The Greek word for "glory" ( $\delta\omicron\xi\alpha$ ) has its equivalent in the Old Testament. The Hebrew equivalent for  $\delta\omicron\xi\alpha$  is *kabod* which has the "primary sense of divine glory which comes to expression in God's acts in creation and history" (Bromiley, *TNDT*, p.179). This meaning has been carried in the New Testament.

The word,  $\delta\omicron\xi\alpha$ , is used five times in Romans. Here in Romans 1:21 the word is used of the response which men owe to God by praising Him and recognizing Him as God, their Creator and Lord of their life (cf. 15:16). In this case man is the subject and God is the object of the glory. Fallen man has failed to glorify God the Creator (v.20-21). Murray correctly gives the meaning of the term. He says:

To glorify God as God is not to augment God's glory or add to it, it means simply to ascribe to God the glory that belongs to him as God, to give to him in thought, affection, and devotion the place that belongs to him in virtue of the perfection which the visible creation itself makes known (Murray, p.41).

This is the kind of glorification that Paul says fallen man failed to give to God. Failure to glorify God is a form of implicit idolatry.

## **2. Their thinking is futile (vs. 21).**

Paul teaches that fallen mankind became "futile" in their "thinking" (or "reasoning").

The Greek word for "futile" is common in the Septuagint, representing a variety of meanings. It may mean "in vain," "fruitless" (Mt. 15:9) or "groundless," "deceptive" (1 Cor. 15:17), or "erroneous, corrupt, perverted" (1 Pet. 1:18). The word is used in connection with idolatry where idols are referred to as "mere useless nothings" (Acts 14:15).

Paul is, therefore, saying that their thinking became perverted and actually fell into the error of religious idolatry. The futility of their thinking was evident in their "reasoning" and "thinking."

It is as a result of their failure to recognize and to glorify the true God that their thinking and reasoning were perverted, in fact idolatrous. The picture painted here is that "man was unwilling to recognize a Lord; he chose to be Lord himself, and to glorify himself" (Barrett, p.36-37).

Their ignorance of the revealed knowledge about God resulted in the perversion of their thinking. A loss of touch with reality inevitably leads to the corruption of human thoughts. They are incapable of rational thought about the true God.

Murray correctly observes that, "In their evil or wicked reasoning they became destitute of any fruitful thought". To sum it all he states, "The mind of man is never a religious vacuum; if there is the absence of the true, there is always the presence of the false" (Murray, p.42). Paul's teaching, therefore, is that human thinking is idolatrous.

## **3. Their faculties are corrupted (vs. 21).**

Paul teaches that their "foolish hearts" were "darkened" (vs. 21).

Note that the phrase, "foolish" (or "undiscerning") "hearts", means "destitute of understanding, uncomprehending, undiscerning, unintelligent, dull" (Mt. 15:16), "reckless and perverse, unenlightened and heathenish" (Rom. 10:19). In our context it means void of understanding. The term is used here in contrast to understanding (vs. 21 cf. vs. 22).

The word, "heart" (καρδια), is used in reference to the inner-self of man including his faculties of intellect or thought, volition or will, and emotion or feelings (cf. Rom. 1:24; II Cor. 7:3; Col. 4:8). So by "heart" Paul refers to the seat or totality of human faculties.

Paul's teaching is that since fallen man has failed to recognize and glorify God, all his faculties which are destitute of understanding have been rendered void of any true knowledge about God. He has "lost the insight into the nature of divine things... the light of divine knowledge" (Hodge, p.39). His "undiscerning heart" was "darkened."

#### **4. They are fools in divine things (vs. 22).**

Paul's teaching is that "although they claimed" to be wise, they became fools (vs. 22). There is a striking contrast between man's pretension and the fact of the matter. Elsewhere Paul contrasts the concepts of true wisdom and human folly (cf. 1Cor. 1:18-25).

Murray views Paul's teaching here as "an acute analysis of what the pretension of those whose hearts are alienated from God really are" (Murray, p.42). It is a striking fact to note that "the more they boasted of their wisdom, the more conspicuous became their folly" (Hodge, p.39). The next section will discuss the explicit idolatry of fallen mankind.

#### **B. The Explicit Idolatry (vss. 23-25).**

##### **Introduction**

Surely, there can never be greater folly than the worship of the creature instead of God. This way fallen mankind has sunk into the folly of the sin of idolatry. Bruce is right to say that foolishness "implies moral obtuseness rather than mere deficiency in intelligence" (Bruce, p.84).

The folly of idolatry is demonstrated and despised elsewhere in the Bible. After the flood men attempted to build a tower whose top would reach heaven (Gen. 11:4). The Syrians thought Jehovah was the god of the hills but not of the valley (1Kg. 20:23, 28). The heathen cry to idols which cannot in reality rescue them from distress (Isa. 46:6-7). Ironically, they create an idol and worship it as their creator (Ex.32:4, 24; Isa. 3:9, 46:1).

Paul's teaching in the preceding section is that fallen man is involved in implicit idolatry in that he has ignored the revealed truth about God. He has failed to glorify God, turning to idolatrous thinking with his faculties which are

rendered void of understanding. He has, therefore, become foolish in his idolatry.

Martin Luther correctly asserts: "The sin of omitting that which is good leads to the sin of committing what is positively evil" (Luther, p.28). Omitting good results inevitably to committing evil. This provides us with an excellent introduction into this section where explicit idolatry of fallen mankind will be discussed.

Paul teaches that fallen mankind is actively involved in open idolatry. He exchanges the glory of God for images and worships creatures (vss. 23,25).

### **1. They exchange the glory of God for images (vs. 23).**

Paul teaches that fallen mankind has "exchanged" the glory of the immortal God for images made of mortal creatures.

The word, "exchange," does not simply mean change. In this context it means "exchange" with the sense of substitution of one thing for another.

In this context, "the *glory* of God" refers to the self-revelation of the true God mentioned earlier (vss. 19-20). It points to the majesty and splendor of God. The glory of God was substituted for an "image," namely an object or idea made in the place of God.

In this verse Paul echoes the language used of Israel in reference to the making of the golden calf (Ex. 32) and forsaking the Lord their God (Jer. 2:11 cf Ps. 106:20). Such a substitution of the glory of God for the likeness of an image in form of man and beasts points to the irrationality and folly of fallen mankind.

### **2. They exchange truth for a lie (vs. 25).**

In this clause Paul repeats the idea mentioned earlier in verse 23, probably for the purpose of explaining the point more clearly. We note an interesting parallelism between this clause and verse 23.

The "truth of God" refers, in this context, to the reality consisting of God himself and his self-manifestation, the truth that God has made known. Its antithesis is expressed in the term, "lie". The Greek word, ψευδει, from which we derive the English prefix, "pseudo," means "lie, falsehood, or a false view of God." In the Old Testament the heathen gods are referred to as a lie (Jer. 13:25; 16:19; 10:14; Isa. 44:20). In the New Testament it is frequently used in the same sense.

Vine correctly comments that the use of the word in Romans 1:25 "stands by metonymy [change of word] for an idol" (Vine, p.664). Another similar New Testament usage is found in 2 Thessalonians 2:11. In this context it refers to a false god.

Godet sums up the discussion with the comment: "The abstract word 'lie' here denotes idol, that ignoble mask in which the heathen expose the figure of the All-Perfect" (Godet, p.108). On the contrary it is amazing to compare this with the exchange that takes place when men respond positively to God in the gospel (1 Thess. 1:9). Paul's teaching is that fallen men have exchanged the revealed knowledge about God for idols. He goes on to give further explanation of this idolatry.

### 3. They worship creatures (vs. 25).

Fallen men worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator who is forever blessed. Amen.

The clause, "worshipped and served the creature", is explanatory of how they exchanged the Creator God for an image, truth for a lie. Hence there is a parallelism. "The truth of God," corresponds to "the Creator," and the "lie" corresponds to the "creature." Elsewhere, "truth" corresponds to the "Creator" (Jn. 14:6; Ps. 31:5; Isa. 65:16), and "lie" to a "creature" or "idol" (Isa. 44:20).

The words, "worshipped and served," are key theological terms and need to be studied. The term for worship (σεβομαι) means to "worship, venerate, adore, to stand in awe or reverence in a devout, pious and dreadful manner." In this context it means "to venerate with devout reverence." The verb, (λατρευω) means "to serve with reference to rendering religious worship" (cf. Mt. 4:10, Lk.1:74).

Some commentators think the two terms refer exclusively to different things. They say *worship* is an internal practice and *service* an external practice. But this view does not seem to be accurate because worship can refer to both internal and external practice.

On the contrary, the two words express a single idea in general (worship) and specific (service) terms. Paul uses a similar style in the same text in the words, "glorify" (εδοξασαν) and "thanksgiving" (ηυχαιστησαν) (vs. 21).

So Paul is teaching that fallen mankind generally worshipped, in the sense of devout reverence, and specifically served, in the sense of cultic religious worship, the creature rather than the Creator. The basic idea is that

the reverence rightly due to God the Creator was accorded to images which are mere creatures.

In the wider context, idolatry does not only consist of offering to images the reverence rightly due to God. It is much broader. Hodge correctly comments: "Idolatry is made to include not merely the worship of false gods, but the worship of the true God by images" (Hodge, p.39). This additional aspect of idolatry is common in African Traditional Religion and Hindu worship. Though the aspect is not explicitly taught in our passage, it is implied in verses 23, 25.

On the contrary Paul ends his teaching with a powerful doxology. He accords God the Creator his rightful reverence and adoration.

This doxology is an affirmation to the effect that "transcendent blessedness belongs to God and the implication is that the dishonesty done by men does not detract from his intrinsic and unchangeable blessedness - God is blessed forever" (Murray, p.46). God deserves human worship as a divine prerogative. Although fallen mankind dishonours God through idolatry, He remains the only time object of reverence. Despite man's neglect, God remains forever blessed. Amen

By "Amen" the Apostle express the assent of his heart and mind in regard to the doxology.

In the foregoing exegesis we have seen clearly Paul's teaching about the moral condition of fallen mankind. Fallen mankind is under God's wrath for his godlessness. He is without excuse because God made the revealed truth about Himself manifest to him. Man has instead suppressed it and turned to idolatry.

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