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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF REPRESENTATIVE VIEWS
OF NATURAL THEOLOGY BASED ON AN EXEGESIS
OF ROMANS, CHAPTERS ONE AND TWO

By

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INTRODUCTION

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF REPRESENTATIVE VIEWS
OF NATURAL THEOLOGY BASED ON AN EXEGESIS
OF ROMANS, CHAPTERS ONE AND TWO

INTRODUCTION

A. The Subject

1. Stated

Within the past thirty years an incomparable pre-occupation with the subject of revelation and epistemology has suddenly ushered Natural Theology into the limelight. Because of the intense wrangling, a definition of terms would facilitate discussion. Unfortunately, the terms have been confused by modern theologians according to their own admission, so that more time must be devoted to this matter.

Any mention of Natural Theology, however, precipitates a dichotomy between what is revealed as the absolute truth according to the historical Revelation of Jesus Christ and the Scripture, and that which is, or has been, revealed by God through nature. Emil Brunner has been forced to admit that the formal connotation attached to Natural Theology must be retained. Thus, one finds that Natural Theology still retains its more formal definition as that branch of theology which arrives at discoverable truth concerning God, by the process of reason, in so far as God has stamped his

identity on creation.

"Nature" here is not to be distinguished from the supernatural, strictly speaking; the natural is the manifestation of supernatural origin and activity. Nature is the present constitution of things apprehended by the ordinary faculties of man.

Nature also includes the mind of man, which is part of the physical cosmos, and the total history of the race not known to us through the Bible. Reason is the means of identifying and interpreting God's handwriting on the universe. Aquinas states that "unaided" reason starts with sense data. In this connection, Brunner always implies "unregenerate" reason, or the activity of the man not enlightened by the special revelation of God in Christ. Natural Theology is then seen to be affiliating and interpreting all that nature can teach by unregenerate reason concerning God and our relations to a supernal world.

Natural Theology has been accepted or rejected as a source of truth according as the forces which revived the study have beforehand determined its contribution or usefulness. However, a study of the philosophical bases of religious systems and their formulative influences on theories of Natural Theology is not necessary here since this is not a survey of the subject of revelation. The point is to discover various representative views of Natural Theology as they are determined by interpretations of Romans, and to

compare these views.

2. Justified

The theory of scientism and its products in the fields of discovery struck at the epistemological basis of the Christian faith. It would not be too broad an assertion to state that modern Liberalism in Protestant theology conceived its task as one of retrieving the essentials of the faith within the realm of the Christian ethic, imposing as the absolute standard the teaching and sacrificial life and death of Jesus. It remained for the impressions of futility which the war made on the thinking of Karl Barth to be expressed in a new emphasis on the transcendent God and His reach into the human sphere. This shattered the complacency of Liberalism as the only intellectually respectable fortress worthy of the name "Christian."

A man will never be justified in the sight of God by philosophically-derived knowledge, by reason, by social regeneration, or by any token of human effort, but solely by faith in the ultimate Word of God, Jesus Christ. Such is the declaration of Barth and those in agreement with him. At last, apparently here was a return to the faith of our fathers. Apart from the train of reasoning which led to their conclusions, or the essential meanings behind their words, there could be no doubt that the Barthians were asserting there is no knowledge of God save as it was

revealed, and this revelation comes through the Bible and by the incarnate Word.

The Barthians, however, were not ignorant of all the scholastics and Protestant theologians had taught concerning God's revelation of Himself in the cosmos, and not without palpable justification; for Paul and the Psalmist called on the cosmos to testify to man in his supposed ignorance of God. Are there two revelations or one? Can we know anything of God apart from faith in Christ and the consequent illumination of the written Word? Does creation have anything to "say" to the unregenerate? If not, how is Romans 1 and 2 to be understood? If so, is it possible for the unregenerate man to know what God is saying?

Natural Theology became a hotbed of discussion. Everyone boasted that he stood in line with the Reformers. Brunner took exception to certain declarations of Barth on the subject, and declared:

Natural Theology "is now regarded as a fundamental problem and, like few other problems of this kind, has led to varied and passionate controversies. The feeling . . . shows that we are here dealing with a decisive question of the first importance."¹

Considering both the fundamental value of the Word of God in revealing divine purposes, and the strategic importance of epistemology in this day, four reasons justify this study.

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1. Emil Brunner: The Christian Doctrine of God, p. 132.

First, if Romans 1 and 2 have traditionally been understood as affirming a doctrine of revelation in nature, students of the Word are challenged by varying exegeses to investigate the possibility of enhancing their understanding of these passages.

Secondly, this is a study of views based on Scripture. The basis and development of those views will be apparent in following the exegesis of each theologian. Critical points of exegesis facilitate comparison of different views. For example, one critical point is the expression "eternal power and divinity" of Romans 1:20. An understanding of an exegesis of that expression, as well as others, helps to see specifically wherein one view agrees or differs from another.

Thirdly, exegesis is a science open to study by everyone equipped with its tools. By following the reasoning and exegesis basal to varying views, a way is open to evaluate their validity.

Fourthly, possessing fundamental clues to the comprehension of the place of Natural Theology in the systems of certain theologians, a means is thereby procured to appreciating related underlying concepts affecting the logic and contributions of their systems as a whole.

Today it is asserted in many quarters that a saving faith in Christ supplies a certainty which needs no logic or infallible document as additional proof. But this

doctrine can hardly escape the "bony fingers of horrific doubt." It must be admitted, said Edwin Lewis, that

where faith is called for, there is necessarily an alternative. Either we know or we believe, and where we believe because we cannot know we recognize that the belief is a venture and may be mistaken.¹

What can we know apart from the knowledge of the experience of faith? The man in the street wishes to know if his faith can only stem epistemologically from faith, or from prior reality perceptible in creation to reason.

B. Subject Delimited

Since this comparative study is in reference to passages in Romans, there is no concern here with the philosophical basis of Natural Theology. The psychological and metaphysical ramifications of the reasoning processes--and these include the "ontological" and related arguments--are not pertinent.

Luther and Calvin agree in the main on the nature and extent of general revelation, and their interpretations are available in their commentaries and related books. Karl Barth, who has taken a view diametrically opposed to Calvin and Luther, has also written a running exegesis of Romans. Other of Barth's works must be kept in mind to realize their influence in theories of revelation affiliating upon their expression in his Commentary.

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1. Edwin Lewis: A Philosophy of the Christian Revelation, p. 194.

The task with Brunner and Lewis, both taking a view somewhere between Calvin and Barth, is even more difficult. They do not expound a rigid theological system. While Barth's views are expressed in his comments on Romans far more than they grow out of his exegesis of Romans, Brunner appears to differ with Barth because of a profound conviction on the teaching of Romans. But when Brunner discusses Romans, it is usually with his entire position in mind, so that he is greatly interested in indicating whom he differs with, what he does not believe and why, and how his views relate to major theological premises. Neo-orthodox beliefs can hardly be avoided, but they will be taken into account in so far as they have a bearing on interpretations of the Biblical passages. Again, the course here is to understand as well as to summarize.

C. Method of Procedure

So that it will be possible to regard references in the works of the theologians to Natural Theology with an accurate comprehension of background and terms, the meanings applied to "Natural Theology" will be touched upon. Just as Neo-orthodoxy or Calvinism cannot be identified with "theology," just so, Thomism or scholasticism is not synonymous with Natural Theology. Classifications related to the whole subject of Natural Theology will be discussed.

Other important usages, such as "the knowledge of God," convey different meanings, and these should be brought

to attention.

A summary appears at the end of Chapter I, which presents in key form the wide areas of agreement in the use of terms, and differences implicit in the writings of individual theologians. Basic attitudes toward the whole subject of Natural Theology have also appeared. In the case of Barth they are not brought out in his commentary, and this information is a necessary adjustment preparatory to a comparative study.

Luther and Calvin made a decisive break with those elements in Scholastic Natural Theology which minimized the critical qualitative difference between that which was received by faith through the Scriptures and that perceived about God in nature. In this thesis they will be included in the Positive View.

Karl Barth denies Natural Theology as a valid study. His commentary is consistent with that; consequently, he is included under the Negative View.

Both Brunner and Lewis believe in a revelation in nature, but both stand midway between Barth and Calvin because of their theories concerning the suppression of this knowledge. They hold to the Suppression View.

D. Sources

The primary sources include the commentaries of Calvin and Karl Barth. As far as could be determined, there is no

available English translation of Luther's Latin commentary on Romans. Rev. Leroy Nixon provided a translation of key passages. A German translation was procured and Dr. Richard M. Suffern translated relevant passages. Certain of Luther's comments were translated by Mr. Bruno Penner, a student who speaks German fluently.

Brunner clearly related his stand on general revelation to Romans in "Revelation and Reason" and "The Christian Doctrine of God." Other references appear in "The Divine Imperative" and "God and Man." The small volume "Nature and Grace" with the reply "No!" by Barth is invaluable for understanding the difference between the two.

Lewis deals with general revelation at some length in "A Philosophy of the Christian Revelation." He does not relate his views clearly to Romans, so the writer communicated with him in reference to the Biblical statements. His reply is reproduced in this thesis.

Secondary sources include those books and periodicals which touch upon Barthian views of revelation. Calvin's "Institutes" are a necessary supplement to his commentary.

Other sources take in dissertations on the study and value of Natural Theology.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY PROBLEMS CONCERNING NATURAL THEOLOGY

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INTRODUCTORY PROBLEMS CONCERNING NATURAL THEOLOGY

A. Introduction

The study of Natural Theology has always been controversial. Numberless interpretations of its definition and function have been attached to the term. There is some area of agreement in nomenclature and approaches to the problem. In so far as this agreement is valuable in understanding the major views on the subject, it will be presented in a discussion of the definition and purpose of Natural Theology. There are indeed some classifications concerning revelation which pertain to the subject and which represent a wide area of agreement among theologians; these are given in "Classifications Related to Natural Theology." "The knowledge of God" is a rather significant expression here, and exegetes specifically state their understanding of the expression. This is discussed in "Definitions of 'the knowledge of God'."

B. Natural Theology

1. Defined

Time and effort has been wasted in discussing the merits of Natural Theology because of inadequate attempts to understand the nomenclature of respective theologians. Joyce presents one definition of Natural Theology in these terms:

Natural Theology is that branch of philosophy which investigates what human reason unaided by revelation can tell us concerning God. The end at which it aims is to demonstrate the existence of God, to establish the principal divine attributes, to vindicate God's relation to the world as that of the Creator to the creature, and, finally, to throw what light it can on the action of divine providence in regard of man and on the problem of evil.¹

Natural Theology has been conceived in the minds of some as a study arising out of a universal intuition. Others have thought in terms of cosmic evidence both in man and nature, which had to be systematized so as to engender religious faith. In any case, reason is distinguished from the subjective passivity of faith which exercises itself in the apprehension of God's truth through the revelation of Christ and the Bible.

Natural Theology attempts to discover and interpret all that the unregenerate mind can know of God. Specifically, Romans 1 and 2 raises two questions for Natural Theology with which divergent views are directly concerned: Can unregenerate man, unaided by special revelation, grasp the meaning of God through the avenues of creation and conscience? In the Pauline argument, wherein is unregenerate man constituted a responsible sinner?

2. Its Purpose

The purpose of Natural Theology has never been as clearly expressed as glib definitions of the expression.

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1. George H. Joyce: Principles of Natural Theology, p. 4.

Preconceived notions of the meaning and purpose of Natural Theology have unconsciously dominated the theories of theologians. That is one reason why it is necessary to demonstrate several notable interpretations of the task of Natural Theology. The statements of Paul in Romans 1 and 2 are brief. The task of bringing forth different views on the basis of Romans is difficult, since theologians make broad statements about the teaching of Romans without precisely demonstrating how their views grow out of the text, and without enlarging upon their own definitions of the meaning and purpose of their subject.

The objections lately raised that God cannot be known in His essence, that faith precedes reason and not vice-versa, and that there is no available knowledge of divine things apart from Christ, have been anticipated by a capable exponent of the "classical" claims for the basis and express purpose of Natural Theology, Thomas Hill, who states:

However impossible, therefore it may be for a finite creature to comprehend the Infinite Creator, it is nevertheless clear that man has direct vision of some of the attributes of the Creator.¹

On the relation of faith to reason, he continues:

In our power to see them lies the glory of our intellectual nature . . . and it is the salvation of the soul, then, seeing divine truth, we seize it with the living and earnest grasp of faith, whether in geometry or theology; reason sees and assents to truth; faith sees and consents, lays hold of the truth as a part of our own life.²

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1. Thomas Hill: Natural Sources of Theology, p. 28.
2. Ibid.

On the assertion that Natural Theology reveals nothing apart from the historical revelation in Christ, he avers:

We may overvalue our own ability, fail to recognize the light which flows from the divine word, and over-rate our powers of unaided vision in discerning things that pertain to God. On the other hand, if we say that without Christ we have no knowledge of divine things, then we assert that man has no power to recognize the Christ, no test whereby to know he came from God.¹

Alfred Cave² has outlined an elaborate scheme of the constituent aspects of Natural Theology as a science. A summary of it is as follows:

1. The Introduction to Natural Theology. This embraces all the sciences of the physical universe, of the mind of man, and of the history of the race.

2. The Data of Natural Theology, given in

- (1) Mathematics
- (2) Physics
- (3) Chemistry
- (4) Astronomy
- (5) Biology
- (6) Geology
- (7) Mental Science
- (8) Sociology

3. Induction of Natural Theology

(1) Doctrinally. God, spirits, world, man, evil, salvation, associations of the saved, last things.

(2) Ethically. Ethical implications of Natural Theology.

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1. Ibid., p. 29.

2. Alfred Cave: Introduction to Theology, p. 159.

3. Classifications Related to Natural Theology

a. Brunner's Classification

Natural Theology is not synonymous with revelation in creation. Brunner emphasizes this distinction by saying:

First of all, we must make a clear distinction between two questions which, unfortunately, are continually being confused with one another: the question of the revelation in Creation and the question of man's natural knowledge of God. While one side was mainly anxious to deny the validity of a "theologia naturalis", the other side was chiefly concerned to affirm the reality of the revelation in Creation . . .

The affirmation of a revelation in Creation has, in itself, nothing whatever to do with a belief in Natural Theology . . . Sin not only perverts the will, it also "obscures" the power of perceiving truth where the knowledge of God is concerned. So where a man supports the view of the reality of a "theologia naturalis" in the sense of correct, valid knowledge, he is actually denying the reality of sin, or at least its effect in the sphere of man's knowledge of God.¹

Having denied a "Natural Theology" he is forced to admit that the mass of humanity does have a consciousness of God expressed in varied worship and rituals. He continues:

There is, it is true, no valid "natural theology", but there is a Natural Theology which, in fact, exists . . . Human beings, even those who know nothing of the historical revelation, are such that they cannot help forming an idea of God and making pictures of God in their minds.²

Brunner states that, as a possibility, Natural Theology does not exist, but Natural Theology exists as an empirical fact which is ambiguous, but understood in its

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1. Brunner, op. cit., pp. 132-33.

2. Ibid., p. 133.

ambiguity when Romans 1 is correctly understood. Hereafter, "theologia naturalis" should connote in this thesis the meaning Brunner grants it, i.e., Natural Theology as a formal study, with the emphasis on reason as deriving a knowledge of God.

The neo-orthodox school has reacted against conceptualized inventions of Deity. Brunner says:

Every philosophical conception of God is as such monistic, or pantheistic or mystical. A philosophically reasoned faith in a personal God is a contradiction in terms, however hard thinkers may have labored to square this circle.¹

Therefore, since Brunner tends to think of Natural Theology as the breeder of philosophical gods, he rejects it. Barth also rejects Natural Theology. Brunner stresses a revelation in creation. This belongs under Natural Theology as a field of study, for he narrowly conceives Natural Theology to be solely a philosophic inquiry based on reason which conflicts with the purpose of Christ and Scripture in that it strives for a "valid knowledge of God."

b. Lewis' Classification

Edwin Lewis also distinguishes historical from general revelation. He says:

But if God is so revealed, it will follow that he is revealed elsewhere. Barth's attempt to limit revelation to Christ and the historical preparation for him is a profound mistake, even from the standpoint of Christian apologetics.²

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1. Emil Brunner: God and Man, p. 48.

2. Edwin Lewis, op. cit., p. 3.

C. Definitions of "The Knowledge of God"

1. The Problem

Divergent views are adopted on Natural Theology, because of disparate opinions as to its scope and purpose. The literature contains numerous references to "knowledge." All writers agree that Natural Theology purports to give some knowledge of God. One does not have to read long before it becomes apparent that differences are due in part to the fact that no two theologians are agreed as to the meaning of "the knowledge of God." On this point, representative views may be compared.

2. The View of Calvin

John Calvin generally speaks of two degrees of knowledge, the first being a knowledge of God the Creator, the second, a more intimate knowledge resulting from a union with God through Christ. Of the more general knowledge he says:

By the knowledge of God, I understand that by which we not only conceive that there is some God, but also apprehend what it is for our interest, and conducive to his glory, what, in short, it is befitting to know concerning him . . . For although no man will now, in the present ruin of the human race, perceive God to be either father, or the author of salvation, or propitious in any respect, until Christ interpose to make our peace; still it is one thing to perceive that God our Maker supports us by his power, rules us by his providence, fosters us by his goodness, and visits us with all kinds of blessings, and another thing to embrace the grace of reconciliation

offered to us in Christ.¹

With Brunner, Calvin emphasizes the moral persuasion of the recipient heart before it can bear any knowledge of God. Calvin did not imagine the knowledge of Natural Theology as being born in empty speculation. He says:

And here we must observe again (see chap. ii, s. 2), that the knowledge of God which we are invited to cultivate is not that which, resting satisfied with empty speculations, only flutters in the brain, but a knowledge which will prove substantial and fruitful wherever it is duly perceived, and rooted in the heart. The Lord is manifested by his perfections.²

On the more intimate knowledge of God, Calvin adds:

To this first knowledge was afterwards added the more intimate knowledge which alone quickens dead souls, and by which God is known, not only as Creator of the world, and the sole author and disposer of all events, but also as a Redeemer, in the person of the Mediator.³

Calvin did not believe in a continuous line of knowledge so that two "types" of knowledge were to be understood as merely differing in degree. On the contrary, when Calvin exegetes the passages in Romans, by using the term "knowledge of God" as revealed in creation, he does not mean the intimate knowledge "which alone quickens dead souls."

3. The View of Brunner

Brunner will have nothing to do with that religion or philosophy which alleges to know God in His essence. He asserts:

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1. John Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion, p. 51.

2. Ibid., p. 74.

3. Ibid., p. 84.

The doctrine which lays the most stress upon the Mystery of God will be nearest to the truth.

It is precisely this fact which distinguishes the God of the Biblical revelation from the gods and divinities of paganism. The gods of the heathen are not really mysterious, because they can be "known" within the sphere of that which is natural and given, whether in the processes of the world of nature or in the mind of man. Their mystery is the mystery of nature, of the Self, of the world, and therefore it is not the mystery of that which is genuinely supernatural. Through the Biblical revelation we discover that what we can "learn" to know as "God" by our own unaided efforts is not the True God, precisely because we acquire this "knowledge" by our own efforts.¹

That is one of the most significant, and perhaps characteristic, statements in all of Brunner's philosophy. The evidence of Brunner's dialectic construction of a concept of knowledge in terms of a contrast is perspicuous here, and in this further statement:

We do not fully realize how unknowable, how mysterious God is until we meet Him in His revelation. Here alone do we understand that all our own processes of knowing, just because they are our own, do not create the true knowledge of God, since through them--whether in a profound² or in a superficial way--we remain in our own sphere.²

These statements are taken from a late work of Brunner (The Christian Doctrine of God, 1946), and make a distinction between degrees or, rather, differences in knowledge, which were not made before he fully dealt with the very limited and distorted knowledge of God possessed by pagan peoples. This limited, but very real knowledge,

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1. Emil Brunner: The Christian Doctrine of God, pp. 117-18.
2. Ibid., p. 118.

forces him to posit a difference between a primordial knowledge and a true, valid knowledge of God which is only made possible by means of the experience of faith on the basis of the historical revelation. He states:

This does not mean that pagans have no knowledge of God at all; such a foolish statement, and one which is utterly contrary to experience, does not occur anywhere in the Bible. But it does mean that those who do not possess the historical revelation, those to whom God has not made known His Name, do not know Him truly, do not know Him in such a way that they are in communion with Him. The pagan --or what comes to the same thing in the end--philosophical knowledge of God, does not create communion with God, because it is not knowledge of the God who--since He makes Himself known--creates communion with Himself.¹

4. The View of Luther

It is not here stated that because distinctions are made, the terms themselves, following the classifications, bear the same significance to all writers. They do not. But the classifications mentioned have all been summarized and anticipated by Luther in his commentary on Galatians as follows:

But here some will object again, if all men knew God, wherefore then doth Paul say, that the Galatians knew not God, before the preaching of the Gospel? I answer, there is a double knowledge of God: general and particular. All men have the general knowledge, namely, that there is a God, that he created heaven and earth, that he is just, that he punisheth the wicked. But what God thinketh of us, what his will is to us, what he will give or what he will do, to the end that we may be delivered from sin and death, and be saved, (which is the true knowledge of God indeed,) this they know not. As it may be that I know some man by sight, whom yet, indeed, I know not thoroughly,

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1. Ibid., p. 121.

because I understand not what affection he beareth towards me. So men know naturally that there is a God, but what his will is, or what is not his will, they do not know.¹

As Brunner employs the term "valid knowledge," so Luther says "true knowledge," and means by this being saved. He also uses the terms "general" and "particular," referring by the first to the universal revelation given by God to all men concerning Himself, and by the second to the revelation given to each man as he comes into a saving relationship with the Redeemer.

D. Summary

1) The whole subject of Natural Theology pursues any clues to the being and nature of God available to unregenerate man through creation and conscience. The reason is unaided by the historic revelation.

2) It is recognized by all writers that man as a finite creature cannot, by reason alone, attain to that knowledge of God which results from saving faith in Christ as revealed in the Scriptures.

3) All writers recognize one basic distinction, namely, between any knowledge which may be gained by searching for evidences of the presence and attributes of Deity in creation, and that knowledge which comes through knowing Christ in redeeming relationship. This relationship enlightens

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1. Martin Luther: Commentary on Galatians, p. 468.

the soul with an intimate knowledge of God.

4) Lewis, Brunner and Luther recognize this first rudimentary knowledge as a "general" revelation given to all men. This is distinguished from a "particular" (Luther and Brunner) revelation which comes through Christ.

5) Brunner rejects "theologia naturalis" as that branch of theology which, without Christ, attempts to derive a valid and complete knowledge of God. He accepts the expression "revelation in creation" as valid and Biblically sanctioned. This revelation is not the concern of Natural Theology, since he feels the latter attempts to impart a complete knowledge of God, which the former cannot impart.

6) Calvin avers that no one is invited to cultivate a knowledge of God which is satisfied with empty speculations. Man has a "first" knowledge of God as a Creator, but there is an intimate knowledge which "quickenes dead souls."

7) Karl Barth conceives the purpose of Natural Theology to be the gaining of knowledge which can only be imparted by the historic revelation, and thus rejects Natural Theology. Whether or not, on the basis of his understanding of Romans, he allows for any revelation in creation must still be seen.

CHAPTER II

NATURAL THEOLOGY AND INTERPRETATIONS OF THE POSITIVE VIEW

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OF THE POSITIVE VIEW

A. Introduction

Two men represent the Positive School: John Calvin and Martin Luther. Both believed in the validity of Natural Theology. They affirm with Brunner that there is a revelation in creation, but are listed under the Positive View because of their theories on the nature, the amount, and time retained, of the general knowledge actually available to the unregenerate man.

First, the place of Romans 1 and 2 in Paul's argument, according to John Calvin, will be presented. The procedure has been to group certain key interpretations around crucial phrases. The first consideration in the exegesis itself is "Romans 1:18-20: The Manifestation." The word "manifestation" is taken from the Scriptural reference to the fact that certain truths are manifested to the heathen (Romans 1:19). The content of the manifestation and how it is conveyed to man is relevant in this connection. The important term "inexcusable" is discussed under the heading, "The Consequence of the Manifestation." As a result of this manifestation being given in creation, there is an indictment of man in Romans 1:21-23. In addition to a manifestation concerning Himself, God has manifested His wrath, according to Calvin; this section deals

with Romans 1:24-32. The final section touches upon "Romans 2:14-16: The Gentiles and the Work of the Law."

B. The View of John Calvin

1. The Place of Romans 1 and 2 in Paul's Argument

Calvin declares these passages are the grounds for condemning man in his ingratitude for not paying due homage to God when He revealed Himself in His works. The necessary result was an impiety which plunged the race into insufferable guilt; this impiety resulted in sin, which was the evidence of divine wrath. He states:

He first condemns all mankind from the beginning of the world for ingratitude, because they recognized not the workman in his extraordinary work: nay, when they were constrained to acknowledge him, they did not duly honor his majesty, but in their vanity profaned and dishonored it. Thus all became guilty of impiety, a wickedness more detestable than anything else.¹

On the question of the alleged ignorance of the Gentiles, on the basis of Romans 2:14-16, Paul confutes their plea, for conscience is to them a law. Calvin declares:

He cuts off from the Gentiles the excuse which they pleaded from ignorance, because conscience was to them a law, and by this they were abundantly convicted as guilty.²

Calvin conceives Paul's purpose as follows:

Having wholly deprived all mankind of their confidence in their own virtue and of their boast of righteousness, and laid them prostrate by the severity of God's judgment,

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1. John Calvin: Commentary on Romans, p. xxx.
2. Ibid.

he returns to what he had before laid down as his subject --that we are justified by faith; and he explains what faith is, and how the righteousness of Christ is by it attained by us.¹

2. Romans 1:18-20: The Manifestation

a. Revelation of Wrath

Verses 18 to 23 are taken up separately by Calvin, who sees in them Paul's contention that there is no righteousness except what is granted gratuitously by God. He says:

And he brings, as the first proof of condemnation, the fact that though the structure of the world, and the most beautiful arrangement of the elements, ought to have induced man to glorify God, yet no one discharged his proper duty: it hence appears that all were guilty of sacrilege, and of wicked and abominable ingratitude.²

Calvin understands "wrath" to mean the vengeance of God, although not implying an emotion of God, but the feeling of the sinner who is punished. This wrath is revealed "from heaven" and must be taken as having this import: "Wheresoever a man may look around him, he will find no salvation; for the wrath of God is poured out on the whole world, to the full extent of heaven."³

b. The Truth of the Manifestation

"The truth of God" of verse 18 means "the true knowledge of God." Although Calvin uses the term "true knowledge,"

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1. Ibid., p. xxxi.
2. Ibid., p. 67.
3. Ibid., p. 69.

as was predicated in Chapter II, it will be noted that he does not mean the true knowledge which he would ordinarily have us understand as attending the revelation apprehended in the Redeemer. This "truth" is more lucidly defined by Paul in the verses following v. 18.

c. The Nature of the Manifestation

In verse 19 Paul means "all that appertains to the setting forth of the glory of the Lord, or, which is the same thing, whatever ought to move and excite us to glorify God." This does not mean that through nature men can fully comprehend God. It is manifested "to them" (ἐν αὐτοῖς), and Calvin takes this in the moral sense, τὸ γνωστὸν being a manifestation so "closely pressed" that it could not be evaded, "for every one finds it to be engraven on his own¹ heart." By looking at this manifestation in nature man was supposed to be led to the author Himself. The "invisible things" (v. 20) such as power and divinity do not include all the "particulars which may be thought to belong to God." On the other hand, Calvin asserts:

When we arrive at this point, the divinity becomes known to us, which cannot exist except accompanied with all the attributes of a God, since they are all included under that idea.²

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1. Ibid., p. 70.
2. Ibid.

d. The Consequence of the Manifestation

As a result, "they are inexcusable." Paul's purpose in employing this phrase is to demonstrate man's inability to show he is condemned unjustly.

At this point we arrive at a crucial point in Calvin's thinking. There has been much dispute over whether there is actually, in fact and in reality, a revelation in creation. The waters of dispute are muddy, since man's faulty sight has reflected on the nature of the revelation, in the thinking of many. Calvin makes this vital statement:

Yet let this difference be remembered, that the manifestation of God, by which he makes his glory known in his creation, is, with regard to the light itself, sufficiently clear.¹

Calvin adds that it is not clear to the unsaved man because he is blind from sin. Reason fails because "it cannot ascertain who or what sort of being God is."² He states:

Hence the Apostle in Heb. xi:3 ascribes to faith the light by which man can gain real knowledge from the work of creation, and not without reason; for we are prevented by our blindness, so that we reach not to the end in view; we yet see so far, that we cannot pretend any excuse.³

Calvin adds that this rudimentary knowledge is sufficient to take away excuse but "differs from that which brings salvation."

The assertion that men are without excuse is made in Romans 1:20. The Greek reads: *εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτοὺς ἀναπολόγητους* . This phrase aroused considerable controversy. To what purpose did God make this revelation? How

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1. Ibid., p. 71.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

was it sufficient to indict men, but insufficient to save them? Was the revelation extended solely for the purpose of leaving mankind culpable? Or is mankind's guilt merely the result of his rejection of the revelation?

The Calvinist school has been adequately represented by H. A. Meyer on this point. In his comments on Romans 1:20, Meyer has this to say:

The εἰς cannot be said of the result, as Luther, and many others . . . following the Vulgate (ita ut sint inexcusabiles), have understood it; for the view, which takes it of the purpose, is not only required by the prevailing usage of εἰς with the infinitive (see on 2 Cor. viii 6), but is also more appropriate to the connection, because the καθ' ὅρατα is conceived as a result effected through God's revelation of Himself (ver. 19), and consequently the idea of the divine purpose in εἰς τὸ εἶναι κ.τ.λ. is not to be arbitrarily dismissed. Comp. Erasmus ("ne quid haberent," etc.), Melancthon ("propter quas causas Deus," etc.), Beza, Calvin ("in hoc ut"), Bengel, and others.¹

Meyer adds that this became a subject of contention between the Lutherans and the Reformed, but states that those who regard the expression as meaning "result" hesitate to admit the conception of a divine decree, under which Paul places the inexcusableness of men. He concludes:

In this connection, which inserts the results in the divine counsel, the inexcusableness of man appears as telically given with the self-manifestation of God, ver. 21, as in general even ver. 18, contains the perverse conduct of men manifesting itself in the course of human history, on account of which God, who foresaw it, has in His natural self-manifestation made their inexcusableness His aim.²

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1. H.A.W. Meyer: Hand-Book to the Epistle to the Romans, p. 59.
2. Ibid., p. 60.

3. Romans 1:21-23: The Consequent Indictment of Man

Here again, in connection with verse 21, Calvin stresses the assertion that men "knew God." He declares:

He plainly testifies here, that God has presented to the minds of all the means of knowing him, having so manifested himself by his works, that they must necessarily see what of themselves they seek not to know--that there is some God; for the world does not by chance exist, nor could it have proceeded from itself.¹

In commenting on the phrase "they glorified him not as God," Calvin asserts:

No idea can be formed of God without including his eternity, power, wisdom, goodness, truth, righteousness, and mercy. His eternity appears evident, because he is the maker of all things--his power, because he holds all things in his hand and continues their existence--his wisdom, because he has arranged things in such an exquisite order--his goodness, for there is no other cause than himself, why he created all things, and no other reason, why he should be induced to preserve them--his justice, because in his government he punishes the guilty and defends the innocent--his mercy, because he bears with so much forbearance the perversity of men--and his truth, because he is unchangeable. He then who has a right notion of God ought to give him the praise due to his eternity, wisdom, goodness and justice. Since men have not recognized these attributes in God, but have dreamt of him as though he were an empty phantom, they are justly said to have impiously robbed him of his own glory.²

§ 676 has a specific function in connecting verse 21 with 20, which is not discussed by Calvin. In fact, it is noted that he here introduces an elaborate series of attributes which he takes as naturally arising in the mind when any idea is formed of God. The conclusion, then, is that man should have glorified God with the knowledge of

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1. John Calvin: Commentary on Romans, p. 71.

2. Ibid., p. 72.

these attributes common to them.

Calvin does not clarify these points:

1) Are these attributes correlative with the observable "power" and "divinity," or are they to be reasoned on the basis of verse 20?

2) What are the Scriptural grounds for asserting God's impeachment of man because he did not glorify God when he knew of His eternity, power, wisdom, goodness, truth, righteousness, and mercy?

3) To what extent does Calvin consider himself enlightened by the revelation of the Scriptures? There has been some question as to whether he considered these attributes more perspicuous to the regenerate man than to the natural man, but it can hardly be denied that Calvin thought those characteristics of Deity are open in nature to the eye of the natural man. The fact that man does not generally recognize them does not theoretically negate the possibility of their being seen. Above all, it is clear that he reasons thus from premises, which to him seem undeniable, but are not derived by the process of exegesis from the assertions of Scripture.

4) Calvin does not make it clear how he reconciles the two declarations, a) that men know there is a God, and b) they are guilty for not recognizing certain of His attributes. At first it would seem he carries out the Scriptural implication that man is guilty, because he did not act on the knowledge he possessed (the actual degree of knowledge possessed not

immediately pertinent to Paul's argument), but then asserts that man is culpable for not having recognized these attributes; instead they dreamt of God as "though he were an empty phantom." Evidently Calvin has not directly commented on the word "glorify", but seems to imply that this neglect of duty took the form of not recognizing, by acting upon, the knowledge possessed. The difficulty is partly caused by Calvin's sudden intrusion of a series of attributes as constituting part or all of the universal revelation. A more lucid and succinct summary of his view is given in the Institutes as follows:

That there exists in the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of Deity, we hold to be beyond dispute, since God himself, to prevent any man from pretending ignorance, has endued all men with some idea of his God, the memory of which he constantly renews and occasionally enlarges, that all to a man being aware that there is a God, and that he is their Maker, may be condemned by their own conscience when they neither worship him nor consecrate their lives to his service.¹

Thus, on "but they became vain" Calvin states: "That is, having forsaken the truth of God," and by "forsaken" must mean--having forsaken both the limited possession and availability of the truth. He adds that their unrighteousness consisted in choking by depravity the seed of right knowledge before "it grew up to ripeness." On verse 22, Calvin holds that Paul is proving that men tried to bring God down to their low condition. Verse 23 makes it clear that, having

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1. John Calvin: The Institutes of the Christian Religion, p. 55.

failed to glorify God, they all "attempted to make for themselves an image of God."

4. Romans 1:24-32: Manifestation of the Lord's Wrath

In introducing this passage Calvin states:

As impiety is a hidden evil, lest they should still find an evasion, he shows, by a more palpable demonstration, that they cannot escape, but must be held fast by a just condemnation, since such fruits have followed this impiety as cannot be viewed otherwise than manifest evidences of the Lord's wrath.¹

The revelation was obfuscated by the obdurate nature of the heathen, and their flagrant impiety, depicted in the remainder of the chapter, shows that they "suffered punishment through the just judgment of God." Calvin makes this overall conclusion:

What then, in short, he proves to us is this,--that the ingratitude of men to God is incapable of being excused; for it is manifest, by unequivocal evidences, that the wrath of God rages against them; they would have never rolled themselves in lusts so filthy, after the manner of beasts, had not the majesty of God been provoked and incensed against them.²

In verses 24, 26, and 28 it is stated that "God gave them up." God not only permits sinners thus given up to sin unrestricted, but "so arranges things, that they are led and carried into such madness by their own lusts, as well as by the devil." Calvin attacks the view that men are led into sin only by the permission of God. Satan is the minister of

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1. John Calvin: Commentary on Romans, p. 73.

2. Ibid., p. 76.

God's wrath, he is armed against us by the command of His judge. He quickly adds that God is not cruel, for he only follows this course where it is unquestionably deserved.

On verse 27, dealing with "receiving the reward for their error," Calvin very keenly remarks:

They indeed deserved to be blinded, so as to forget themselves, and not to see any things befitting them, who, through their own malignity, closed their eyes against the light offered them by God, that they might not behold his glory: in short, they who were not ashamed to extinguish, as much as they could, the glory of God, which alone gives us light, deserved to become blind at noonday.¹

All along, Calvin brings out the compelling nature of the light of the knowledge of God in creation. Men saw fit to extinguish it so as not to be aware of God's glory. It was necessary for them to no longer retain God in their knowledge (v. 28) so that they might continue in sin. God judged them by intensifying their darkness. Nothing but the knowledge of God guides the human mind to wisdom. They were helpless to do anything but the wrong, because their minds were perverted. Calvin adds:

And by saying that they chose not, (non probasse--approved not) it is the same as though he had said that they pursued not after the knowledge of God with the attention they ought to have done, but, on the contrary, turned away their thoughts designedly from God. He then intimates that they, making a depraved choice, preferred their own vanities to the true God; and thus the error, by which they were deceived, was voluntary.²

In connection with verse 29, Calvin thinks of

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1. Ibid.

2. Ibid., p. 80.

"unrighteousness" as the violation of justice among men, by not rendering to each his due. The vices mentioned are not dependent on one another, but are listed as they occurred to Paul.

On verse 32, "who knowing the judgment of God," etc., Calvin feels Paul's argument to be that men left nothing undone to give the fullest freedom to their sinful nature. He avers:

For it is the summit of all evils, when the sinner is so void of shame, that he is pleased with his own vices, and will not bear them to be reproved, and also cherishes them in others by his consent and approbation.¹

5. Romans 2:14-16: The Gentiles and the Work of the Law

According to Calvin, there is no nation that does not keep within the confines of some laws. All have some notions of justice and rectitude. The Gentiles may not have the written law, but they are not wholly "destitute of the knowledge of what is right and just." In this they are a law unto themselves.

There is "imprinted" on the heart a "discrimination" which is a moral standard. This standard functioned in the realm of cognition, and had no volitional force. "Hearts" in verse 15 refers to the seat of the understanding, not the affections. Calvin again reiterates, not that all the rudimentary knowledge all the Gentile heathen held consisted of

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1. Ibid., p. 83.

a knowledge of God and the necessity of worshipping Him, but that this was the minimum of conscious fact that they generally possessed, even after God gave them up. Paul is saying that men have a conscience, without exception, and that this constitutes a certain knowledge of the law by nature.

Calvin indicates that Paul does not wish us to regard the heathen as being in full possession of the law. Only certain indices of right and wrong are implanted in their nature. The Gentiles have religious rites; they make laws to punish such acts as adultery, and praise such traits as honesty. Thus, they have proved that God is deserving of worship, and immoral acts should be condemned. At this point a vital problem presents itself. To what extent do men retain any true knowledge of God--that knowledge with which they could reasonably be convicted before God? Can they be responsible for retaining a prostituted form of knowledge, which, passed down from generation to generation, is tantamount to no knowledge? It is important to discover the nature and extent of the general revelation the unregenerate man consciously apprehends as a basis of responsibility. Calvin simply states his understanding of the Pauline thesis as follows:

It is not to our purpose to inquire what sort of God they imagined him to be, or how many gods they devised; it is enough to know that they thought that there is a God, and that honour and worship are due to him. It matters not whether they permitted the coveting of another man's wife,

or of his possessions, or of any thing which was his, whether they connived at wrath and hatred; inasmuch as it was not right for them to covet what they knew to be evil when done.¹

Calvin, then, is making this contribution: a distinction must be made between the knowledge of God as man consciously retains it, and the evidences of its outworking in his life. Because of sin, the true knowledge is distorted and paganism flourishes where true worship should have prevailed. But this paganism does not necessarily reveal man's understanding of the general revelation. Sin affects man's response to the knowledge, but not necessarily his reception of it.

But what is more important is the fact that his idolatry indicates he has not lost the general revelation. In some manner, for some time, he consciously retains some knowledge of the true God and that He is deserving of worship; but his sin initiates the vicious cycle--he puts God out of his thinking so that he can sin with freedom, and God's punitive wrath further blinds him. Calvin does not discuss individual differences among men, and the knowledge some retain that others do not. He is dealing with universal principles, and particularly the principle of man's responsibility. As he says, "It is enough to know, that they thought that there is a God, and that honour and worship are due to him."

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1. Ibid., p. 98.

In verse 16, "by Jesus Christ" is interpreted as the day of judgment. In that day the Lord will execute judgment by His Son, Jesus Christ.

C. The View of Martin Luther

1. Luther's Commentary on Romans

What comes to us as Luther's commentary is actually a compilation of lecture notes. The most accurate edition is that of Johannes Ficker.

The lectures were delivered between autumn of 1515 and the summer of 1516. They reflect the thinking of a pioneer theologian, possessed by the dynamic of the rediscovered doctrine of justification by faith. The commentary does not present an adequate, thoroughly objective exegesis in the case of Romans 1 and 2. Hartman Grisar notes Luther's preoccupation with the "new" doctrine and declares:

The whole of his exegesis is pervaded by his doctrine of Justification. In this sense he says in the preface to Galatians, the largest of his exetico-dogmatic works: "Within me this one article of faith in Christ reigns supreme. Day and night all my ideas on theology spring from it and return thereto."¹

2. Luther's Preface to the Book of Romans

In 1522 Luther produced a preface to Romans, and summarized Paul's meaning in Romans. He states that the wrath of God is not revealed through the condition of men,

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1. Hartman Grisar: S. J., Luther, Vol. IV, pp. 421-22.

but through the Gospel. The heathen "know and daily recognize that there is a God."¹ However, nature apart from grace is so bad that it neither thanks nor honors Him. Romans 2 is a rebuke extended to those appearing outwardly righteous. Luther states:

Such were the Jews and such are all the hypocrites, who, without desire or love for the law of God, lead good lives, but hate God's law in their hearts, and yet are prone to judge other people.²

Luther, then, never did consider Romans 2 as an extension of the problem of human responsibility in light of a general revelation. Luther conceives of this chapter to be evidence of universal guilt. Those who from all outward appearances appear righteous and lead good lives are included. Luther declares:

Thus St. Paul, as a true interpreter of the law, leaves no one without sin, but proclaims the wrath of God upon all who live good lives from nature or free will, and makes them appear no better than open sinners; indeed he says that they are hardened and unrepentent.³

3. Romans 1:18-20: The Manifestation

a. Revelation of Wrath

In considering "the wrath of God" (1:18), Luther throws no light on "the wrath" or how it is revealed. This is his comment on that verse:

The apostle cries out especially against the powerful and

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1. Works of Martin Luther, Vol. VI, p. 454.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

wise of the world, because the humble and low and unlearned are easily subjected to them, and furthermore, because they completely make void the gospel and word as well as the life of the cross of Christ, and besides they will incite them against it. Therefore, as he imputes guilt and sin to these alone, so he threatens them with the wrath of God.¹

b. The Nature of the Manifestation

Luther is not at all clear in indicating what he understands by "what is known of God" (v. 19). He employs I Cor. 1 and the reference to the weakness of God to prove that such phrases (including "knowledge of God") are said of God, "not that they are in Him, but that they are in us from Him." He adds:

And thus all things are set in interchange, as the foolishness and weakness of God in the eyes of men is wisdom and power in the eyes of God, and on the contrary, the wisdom and power of the world is foolishness and weakness, indeed death, in the eyes of God, as below, chapter 6.²

Luther thinks of the "wisdom and power of God" as evidences of life given to the inner man by God.

Luther understands "from the creation" (v. 20) to mean "from the constitution of the world." He feels that Paul is saying that the invisible things of God (whatever that means to Luther he does not say) have always been perceived through the things He has created.

Surveying the wide range of Luther's writings, Dr. Köstlin interprets him as follows:

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1. Martin Luther: Luther's Vorlesung über den Romerbrief, p. 15.
2. Ibid., p. 16.

Thus, as Luther says, in harmony with Romans 1:20, the invisible being of God, i.e., His eternal power, is seen when it is recognized in His works, etc. Human reason can itself, although but feebly, infer from the beautiful objects of nature, and from the wonderful and harmonious order of their movements, the existence of an eternal divine Being from whom they have all proceeded, and by whom they all are governed.¹

Luther is vague in his thinking in many places, but quite confident concerning the inevitable reception by the heathen of a glimmer of light which reveals the existence of Deity. The eternal power of God is manifest through the created order. What Luther is saying is that the cosmological argument dawns, however faintly, upon the mass of men. This consciousness of the creating and governing sovereignty of Deity never quite leaves them, although sin has taken its toll in wresting human reason from what should have been inevitable conclusions. Dr. K stlin continues:

But we must discriminate between that which these works, according to Luther, in themselves contain and indicate and that which man ensnared in sin, is able to discern in them. Adam, had he not sinned, would have possessed a full insight into the significance of the works of God . . . But fallen man, on the contrary, recognizes but faintly, as has been said, the existence of an eternal Being. Under the curse and the terrors of sin, he fails especially, notwithstanding all the fullness of the blessings showered upon us from heaven, to realize the benevolent disposition of God toward us. Thus is revealed to us only in the special revelation, whose aim and content is the presentation of Christ, the Son of God and Saviour, and which comes to us in the divine Word.²

Whatever nature may confirm in the special revelation, the

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1. Julius K stlin: The Theology of Luther, Vol. II, p. 218.
2. Ibid., p. 219.

universal sinfulness of mankind is a basic premise which tends to make irrelevant the question of how much nature could reveal to the heathen were it not for their sin. Adam (a word which also tends to denote the hypothetical case of someone without sin) would have understood the message of the cosmos. In many instances Luther makes rather extravagant claims for Natural Theology, but he makes it plain that he refers to the insights of the reasoning Christian.

It would appear that man is caught in a circle. The evidence of the unintelligible nature of the cosmos to the heathen is valid proof that sin has done its work. Proneness to sin and repression of the general revelation result in further obfuscation of the truth. However, the question for Luther is not anthropological, nor is it a problem in revelation per se; it is the righteousness of God and the responsibility of man. Therefore, he emphasizes that no matter how faint the light is at any one time, it was consciously recognized, and its repression was not automatic or unconscious, but deliberate. The motivation for this repression, and its universality, is a problem of the nature and origin of evil, but not a problem for Romans 1 and 2. Luther seems to be somewhat conscious of the problem of evil, for he touches upon it in passing.

4. Romans 1:24-32: Manifestation of the Lord's wrath

In commenting on verse 23, "And changed the glory of the incorruptible God," Luther lists four steps in the

degradation of humanity. Men are prone to project their own imagination of Deity onto God Himself, and the glory of God is exchanged for a "phantom of the mind."¹ A form of God is worshipped, which has been invented. It is seemly to give God honor, but He has denied this. The first step, then, is the "drying up" of thankfulness. The second step is the stage of vanity. Luther gives the example of one who likes a gift, but will not thank the giver. He says one "pastures" oneself; one only seeks his freedom for himself. The third step is the process of becoming blind to revelation, turning completely from God. The sinner is plunged into darkness. The blind man only wanders. Sin almost seems inevitable, but the steps of a wandering man who is blind are understandable. The fourth step is the worst, and that is separation from God. There remains nothing but atheism and disgrace.

Luther has an elaborate comment on verse 29, and especially the word "unrighteousness." Again it is evident how he is concerned with justification by faith. Righteousness is the positive factor. Unrighteousness is the absence of belief. Righteousness is always a concept of "obedience" in terms of saving faith. He says:

Unrighteousness is the sin of unbelief or the absence of righteousness, which comes out of belief, as the righteous is one who believes, the unrighteous, one who doesn't

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1. Martin Luther: Vorlesung über den Römerbrief, p. 31.

(Rom. 1:17, Mk. 16:16 and many other references). Then, the one who doesn't believe is not obedient, and the one who isn't obedient is unrighteous. In this disobedience is placed the whole concept of unrighteousness, and the whole concept of sin, according to a word from Ambrose: "Sin is the disobedience against the heavenly commands." . . . Therefore, one can simply say, "wrong" (Unrecht) consists in the fact that the duty to which you are bound, you let go, and you do that which the circumstance demands; that you put behind you that which seems right, and you do that which it is your duty to do.¹

Luther distinguishes between being unrighteous and a wrong act. Righteousness can only refer to standing before God according as one believes or disbelieves. But "Unrecht" is "called the sin of self-righteousness that one chooses in his own pious stupidity." It is ignoring duty and doing what the circumstance demands. He adds:

"Unrecht" is used mainly in speaking relatively and comparatively, that is, it relates to the circumstance and is compared to it. This comparison can be made to true righteousness and self-righteousness.²

On verse 24, "Wherefore God also gave them up," God deliberately delivered man up to the devil and the flesh. Luther faces the dilemma of God seemingly turning people to evil. He simply replies that God is good, so that is all right. God does not actually do the work; no, he removes His hand of restraint, and the devil seizes the opportunity. Luther warns against throwing this statement in God's face by saying that God is not good to do this. God is just not

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1. Ibid., p. 43.

2. Ibid.

withstanding the devil, and the person is no longer able to do the will of God.

At any rate, it is clear that it is the greatest hardness to give that man over to the one he hates most. It is God's merciful will that those sinners become slaves to that which God intends to punish most severely.

5. Romans 2:14-16: The Gentiles and the Work of the Law

In reference to verse 14, it is clear that when Luther delivered the lectures he was not certain what Paul meant. Augustine is quoted as understanding the verse in a twofold sense. In the first place, Paul may mean those believers out of the world of the heathen. "Nature" means it is restored through the Spirit by the grace of Christ. Augustine inclines to this understanding. In the second place, it may refer to those who, though they do not lead a godly life, still do things which the law demands. They understand something of the law. One can approve of them to a limited extent. Luther explains in connection with the next verse that he takes a position midway between those two.

In commenting upon verse 15, Luther is not too clear what Paul means or what he means. First he says that men excuse themselves so as to be punished lightly. A few good works do not save anyone. Then Luther says this:

Still the word counteracts the meaning that they do by nature what the law demands; the doers of the law are righteous. He speaks openly not of such godless ones, even so little of those who have been just called, i.e.,

of those who are believing on Christ. For this interpretation of nature is violent, and I do not see on what basis the apostle wishes to make use of this expression. He does it in order to obscure his real meaning from his reader, that he does not otherwise express himself. For this reason I take, as above, the middle--between the godless and the believing heathen who deserve grace as much as (grace which assists them) their natural powers permit them, because of some godly, pious deed. Not in the sense that grace was given to them for the sake of such merit, so that there was no more grace to be given, but since they in this way prepare themselves for the grace which man can only receive as a pure gift.¹

Luther seems to be saying that Gentiles deserve to receive grace when they do commendable deeds, but that saving grace is not proffered on the basis of merit. The problem that Luther has constructed for himself is lucid enough. He cannot understand what Paul could have meant by "the work of the law written on their hearts." Luther lost the train of Paul's argument, the context, and the purpose of the verse. Luther is apparently anxious to condemn the Gentiles, not to remain with the thought that they keep any of the law. This is clear as he proceeds:

However, one must conceive that this Word only counts for a limitation if it really means that they do by nature what the law intends. Then is the place of Scripture very understandable, and the meaning of Augustine, so far as it keeps the two possibilities before the eye. For then the apostle cites these heathen, since they have been keeping the law as little as the Jews. To be sure, they have done good works by the law in order that they shall try to escape in the day of judgment a greater punishment. In spite of this, they need still more the grace and pity of Christ as the apostle speaks of them, whereas also to the Jews the other warnings of the law are of no avail. Therefore, both stand under their sins.²

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1. Ibid., p. 66.

2. Ibid., p. 67.

Having finally come to the conclusion that the Gentiles are condemned, he adds that their condemnation consists not only in their partial fulfillment of the law, but the fact that they have not kept it in spirit. In discussing the work of the law on the Gentiles' hearts, Luther concludes that the meaning is found in Romans 5:5, and love is poured forth into their hearts through the Holy Spirit. It also means the knowledge of the work of the law is written, as a lawbook contains the work to be done. It is not evident what Luther means by that.

In discussing conscience, Luther is on more certain ground. He states that the heathen prove the work of the law is on their hearts, because before others they do what it commands, and in the day of judgment their conscience will give a good witness concerning good deeds, and a bad witness concerning evil ones. Their conscience is a conclusive proof that the law is not unknown, and the knowledge of good and bad possessed them. The trouble with the heathen is that they are never too concerned about their evil; they hold themselves up as their own standard.

Concerning the judgment Luther says, "Our innermost nature will be laid naked before all eyes. God will give the same judgment which our thoughts have."¹

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1. Ibid., p. 68.

D. Summary and Comparison

1. General Summary of Calvin's View.

1) Calvin holds that the passages under study contain Paul's argument in which he impeaches all mankind from the beginning of the world, because they refused to recognize the workman in his extraordinary work.

2) Through the structure of the world and the most beautiful arrangement of the elements man ought to have been induced to glorify God.

3) The divine manifestation in nature consists of all that appertains to the setting forth of the glory of the Lord and all that should have led to the glorification of God. The moral cogency of the revelation is inescapable in the human heart. Although we may perceive God's divinity and power (v. 20), there are other perceptible attributes implied in those general terms.

4) The fact that man has preferred blindness to seeing God's revelation does not obscure its actual presence. The two indubitable facts broadcast to the consciousness of man, regardless of the increments of additional knowledge possible of apprehension, are: a) the presence of Deity, and b) the conclusion, that whoever He may be, He ought to be worshipped. Reason cannot determine who or what sort of being God is.

5) The Calvinist school of thought takes "they are without excuse" (v. 20) to mean that man was rendered inexcusable by decree, so that the phrase would be a "purpose"

construction, rendered by interpretation: "to the end that" or "in order that they might be without excuse."

6) Calvin reasons that under the sense of the presence of Deity must be included the universal cognition of His attributes: eternity, power, wisdom, goodness, truth, righteousness and mercy. These do not rise intuitively to consciousness, for Calvin insists that they should be induced from universal inferences, as for example, when he says that God's justice is evident because "in his government he pun-¹ishes the guilty and defends the innocent." Calvin does not draw the conclusion on the basis of the Scriptural text that men should glorify God because these attributes are known to them. He does not make clear how much of this knowledge has been contributed by the information or influence of the historical revelation in Christ and the Bible. However, he is sure that man is culpable, not of having insufficient knowledge, or completely ignoring the knowledge available, but because he choked by his depravity the "seed of right knowledge."

7) The enumerated sins and man's depravity are evidence of God's purposely judging him by giving him over to a reprobate mind. This does not happen merely by God's permission; Satan is the minister of God's wrath.

8) The Gentiles are convicted; they had no written

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1. Ante, p. 28.

law, but have a conscience which condemns them, and so are a law unto themselves.

9) Calvin makes a distinction between the knowledge of God as man consciously retains it, and the evidences of its outworking in his life. Man retains the general revelation for at least some time before his sin distorts it. At some time or other the mass of men are conscious that there is a God and He ought to be worshipped.

10) Romans 2:16 is a reference to the judgment day.

2. General Summary of Luther's View

1) Luther's Commentary returns at every possible point to the doctrine of justification by faith. His comments actually bearing on the verses of Romans concerning the general revelation tend to be sketchy.

2) The heathen know and daily recognize that there is a God.

3) Luther does not say how the wrath of God is manifest, although he intimates it always supervenes rejection of the Gospel.

4) Luther leans toward an intuitive recognition of the cosmological argument. It should be, and often is, apparent to the unregenerate man that the beauty and order of the universe are the adumbrations of the invisible being and eternal power of God. It should be apparent that God is the Creator and governor of the universe. This consciousness is never lost, although grossly distorted by sin, to

be sure.

5) In the degradation of humanity, four steps are suggested: the refusal to be thankful, proneness to vanity, turning from God, and utter separation from God.

6) God by volition gives men up. He purposively removes his hand of restraint and delivers reprobate sinners to Satan.

7) Righteousness is obedience in saving faith. Unrighteousness is unbelief. Wrong acts are circumstantially determined, and stem from self-righteousness.

8) Concerning the Gentiles, Luther takes a stand between the alternatives suggested by Augustine. The Gentiles deserve to receive grace when they do commendable deeds; nevertheless, saving grace is not extended on the basis of merit. Although Luther does not admit it, it is obvious that he is somewhat confused by the phrase: "For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law." (Rom. 2:14)

10) Conscience will convict the heathen in the day of judgment. Conscience is conclusive proof that the law is not unknown.

3. Comparison of Calvin's and Luther's Views

John Calvin is comparatively explicit in his definition of general revelation, its content, and the responsibility of the heathen Gentiles. Mankind is condemned because they did not recognize the Creator in the midst of His works. By

recognize, Calvin means "by acting upon" the knowledge they possessed. The knowledge was not lost because it was distorted by sin. By "lost" it is meant that the knowledge was never completely beyond the reaches of the conscious mind. The reason the knowledge was repressed is that it is of a nature, which, if recognized and acted upon, would induce men to worship God. Then Calvin makes this crucial point: the light of general revelation is clear. It actually conveys all that it is supposed to; the reason it is not fully perceived is that sin has done its work. Resultant sin consisted in sacrilege (in idolatry) and the sin of ingratitude.

Luther agrees, in the main, with Calvin. He, like Calvin, states that the harmonious order of the universe ought to have led men to glorify its Creator and Governor. He is not as clear as Calvin in expatiating upon precisely what is seen of God in nature, but he depicts the compelling nature of the knowledge and man's sin, which begins with ingratitude and ends with separation from God.

The relation of sin to this general revelation is of the utmost importance. It is clear that there is a process of hardening which continues as the knowledge is repressed. The question that must be answered is this: "Is the knowledge in its entirety first generally received and then repressed so that man may sin unrestricted?" Neither Calvin nor Luther say so. Both indicate that the light is only faintly visible because of sin. However, enough light is

apprehended by all men sufficient to leave them without excuse in the day of judgment.

The second basic question then becomes: "In what sense is man inexcusable?" For sin is doing its work so that in practice the knowledge avails nothing. The answer to this is not treated adequately by Luther or Calvin. Luther has been taken to intimate that this knowledge could have been acted upon, but the net result is that it wasn't, and man has no excuse. Calvin, on the other hand, states that this knowledge only avails to take away excuse. The whole Calvinist school has followed him in asserting that the knowledge was given even though Deity was aware how it would be received; it was actually given, then, to leave man excuseless. In one sense, the general revelation was set forth so that God would have an excuse to leave man without excuse. God, however, does not see mankind without will and responsibility, because when the knowledge or truth of God is repressed He hardens them and eventually delivers men to Satan. It would seem that Luther has firmer ground for asserting the deliverance to Satan, but Meyer states that those who cannot accept the paradox of Calvin's interpretation do not believe in the divine decree.

Man never forfeits his conscience. According to Calvin conscience proves that men never actually lose sight of the truth that there is a God and honour and worship are due Him. Luther does not fully relate the work of the law on the heart

to conscience. However, he does say that in the day of judgment the heathen will prove they have it written on their hearts when their conscience witnesses to their moral life.

CHAPTER III

NATURAL THEOLOGY AND INTERPRETATIONS OF THE SUPPRESSION VIEW

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A. Introduction

Included in the Suppression View are Emil Brunner and Edwin Lewis. The basal pattern of agreement between them is their theories of the relation of reason to revelation. These theories have influenced their view of Natural Theology. They reject it, but accept a general revelation. Both men have stood with the neo-orthodox school in declaring the reason-gods of the Deists, the Scholastics, and Protestant Liberal Theologians to be pagan idols.

The whole attitude of Brunner in dealing with revelation in creation is colored by his reaction against unregenerate reason in knowing the Christian God. He says:

When reason pretends to know God, it creates a reason-God, and that is always an idol. It is on this pretentious trespassing reason that faith declares war. I do not mean that we are not allowed to think metaphysically; but we are not allowed to put the one God whom reason knows in the place of the living God, who can be known only in the personal decision of Faith.¹

These theories in theology have led Brunner and Lewis to a view which differs from the Positive View. They accept a general revelation, but they have their own theory as to its

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1. Emil Brunner: The Word and the World, p. 33.

reception and suppression.

The procedure in first dealing with Romans 1:18 and 19: The Manifestation, etc., will be similar to the one followed in Chapter II.

B. The View of Emil Brunner

1. Brunner on Passages in Romans 1

a. Romans 1:18 and 19: The Manifestation

Brunner does not exegete these verses in the formal sense of "exegete", as the Reformers do. In "The Divine Imperative" he refers to Romans 1:18ff, and says:

It is just as wrong to deny that Paul recognizes a natural pagan knowledge of God, as it is to equate this knowledge as continuous with the real knowledge of God, possessed by faith.¹

Brunner claims that he agrees fully with the Reformers. In this one passage cited he sees the pagan people as having a knowledge of God. As will be pointed out it is misleading because it is not a knowledge, but some prostituted form of it. Whether Brunner admits the heathen have a reliable knowledge of God for any length of time is a basic problem. He declares:

From the point of view of God the Creator, it may indeed be possible to know God in His creation, but it is not possible to know Him from the point of view of man, who is a sinner.²

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1. Emil Brunner: The Divine Imperative, p. 599.
2. Ibid., p. 5.

Such are typical passages which mean that revelation exists as a fact in nature, but not a fact in experience.

On verse 18 he merely states that "man stands under the wrath of God." It is probably because man is guilty of holding down a truth.

In verse 19 there is a "manifestation" to man. Brunner states:

That is, there is a divine revelation; God has revealed this to all men. There is a truth that is universal, a truth that confronts every human being who is willing to receive it, but man--and this is his sin--"holds it down in unrighteousness."¹

Just what are *το γινωσθαι τοῦ Θεοῦ*? Brunner does not say directly. He continually states that the possibility exists for knowing God, but does not say what the knowledge in this revelation is. Verse 20 contains reference to two attributes. Brunner comments:

Thus here the universal revelation is described in a two-fold sense as revelation in the Creation: first, in so far as it has been there since the creation of the world; secondly, in so far as it takes place through the works of creation.²

It is evident that Brunner will not say positively what the nature of this revelation is. He is quick to say again and again:

It does not teach that the revelation in the Creation, which is given to all, implies an actual, experimental knowledge of God, and thus that man, in spite of and in his sin, may know God.³

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1. Emil Brunner: Revelation and Reason, p. 63.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p. 65.

Brunner never tires of emphasizing the either-or difference in knowledge, lest it be supposed that there are degrees of knowledge on a continuous line leading to a valid cognition of God. The most that can be said is that "God reveals Himself." He has not, however, defined what God reveals in creation. In one place he states:

In spite of this, however, the Scriptures teach explicitly that it is precisely the divinity of God, His invisible Being, His transcendence, which is manifested in His works of creation.¹

This knowledge seems to be a pervading sense of God's Lordship as Creator in contrast to the creatureliness of man. It is an awareness of infinite distinction between God and man. "That which is created bears the stamp of its Maker through His will as Creator and through His act of creation." This is consistent with Brunner's thesis concerning the mysterious, infinite God, who is so far and above our finite comprehension. Brunner is not vague in asserting that whatever this revelation is, the works of God were meant to be seen, and "the objective means of revelation, and the subjective capacity to receive revelation, are made for each other."²

b. Romans 1:18-20: The Consequent Indictment of Man

Thus far, it is evident that God has manifested Himself in creation. However, on the matter of man's suppression

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1. Ibid., p. 67.

2. Ibid., p. 68.

of the truth, and God's consequent impeachment of man, Brunner has far more to say.

Whatever the truth is, it is there, else how could God say man is guilty? Man suppressed the truth in unrighteousness. There was not merely the possibility of knowing God. Nor did this knowledge once become available in times past. It ever exists. Brunner asserts:

The point of this whole passage, and the reason why Paul begins with this, is the proof that man is guilty, that men are responsible for their state, "that they may be without excuse." He now says exactly what he means by the statement that men "hold down the truth in unrighteousness": the men to whom the message of Jesus Christ is proclaimed are not merely ignorant, but they are guilty in their ignorance; their lack of knowledge is due to the fact that they do not want to know. Here we have from the Apostle Paul the explicit confirmation of the fact that the Christian conception of sin presupposes that of revelation, not only in the sense that it is only the revelation of salvation which makes sin evident, but also in the sense that without a general revelation, the historical revelation in Jesus, and indeed even the prophetic revelation which preceded it, men could not be sinners at all. They are all sinners, simply and solely because they "hold down in unrighteousness" the revelation in the Creation which has been presented to them as the truth of God.¹

The critics of Brunner sometimes ask whether he thinks truth exists if man does not receive it. The answer, then, is that it most certainly does, and it is because it exists in this instance that God justifiably calls man guilty.

c. Revelation and the Sin of Man

(1) The Underlying Problem for Brunner

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1. Ibid., p. 64.

Brunner attacks reason, or rather the claim often made in the name of reason, that it can produce, a priori, a system of philosophy giving knowledge of God. The view of reason which he holds is narrow and dogmatic. If reason could discover God in the slightest evidence of His being and attributes, it would by impinging upon that which God has assigned solely to revelation. Barth has gone ahead of Brunner in pointing up the antinomy to the extent that there is either the true knowledge of faith or utter ignorance of God. Brunner is able to boast that he follows the Scriptures and believes in a revelation in creation (objective) given to man's reception (subjective), because the divine image in man is not completely lost. It has a double character, and materially it is man's justicia originalis. Barth regretted that Brunner should suppose traces of the divine image remain, for this would be inconsistent with the Reformation principles: sola gratia, sola fide. And it would certainly seem that if Brunner permits a revelation outside the historical one, then he has admitted more than is justified by a formal imago Dei. Barth will not grant degrees of knowledge, but it is maintained that Brunner is more moderate.

It would seem, then, that for Brunner to grant a revelation in creation received by reason would be admitting more than his theories of knowledge, reason, and the fall would logically permit. Furthermore, in the Mediator, Chapters I and II, Brunner strenuously denies there is a difference in

degree and not in kind between the Christian revelation and those of other religions. In a thesis entitled, "Prolegomena to Theology and Philosophy," in Union Seminary Library, John Heron says:

I suggest the oft repeated contention that he [Brunner] suffers, like Barth, from "dichotomania". The difference of kind rather than of degree which he makes between the Christian revelation and all others is not a necessary consequence of the arguments brought forward in its favor. He seems to be afraid that to recognize difference of degree rather than of kind between Christianity and other religions would involve reducing them all, at least in principle, to one level . . . But if the antithesis between human and divine activity is not made absolute, such difficulties need not arise, so long as we recognize that that which is divine revelation is also human apprehension, and therefore limited and imperfect, but none the less not a human construct.¹

This gets to the crux of the matter in a moment. Actually, the refusal of Brunner to see revelation as nothing but a totality received in a critical moment of faith stems from his belief that nuances of truth perceived would mean a slow conquest of reason in its own strength. This cannot be, says Brunner. Revelation swings open to the decision of faith involving the whole man. The Word of God and the word of faith are inseparable. He states:

It is not God who believes but I myself who believe; yet I do not believe of myself, but because of God's speech, which is a gift, and because of His gift which is a Word. In this faith He gives me not only Himself, but He also gives me knowledge of myself. In this faith He decides about my existence, so that I decide for myself . . . There is no theoretical and neutral knowledge of God and of the true man; for knowledge of the Word of God is at

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1. John Heron: Prolegomena to Theology and Philosophy, pp. 73-74.

the same time the basis of true responsibility. To know God's Word means: to perceive and accept, and therefore to obey, the Lord's Word as the Word of the Lord.¹

Therefore, for Brunner to admit of a revelation in creation would demand more from his theory of the imago Dei than it will permit; it is not consonant with his view of the absolute and complete nature of God-granted knowledge; it would not follow logically from his total view of revelation and reason, and would give Barth the benefit of consistency, even though Brunner could boast that he stood in line with the Reformers on Romans 1 and 2.

(2) As Brunner Meets the Problem

Brunner admits that there is a revelation, though, as we have seen, he says scarcely anything positive about it. Actually there is no reason for him to discuss its positive aspects, for his main concern is in showing that it has been suppressed immediately. Brunner has figuratively "done away with" revelation in creation. He asserts that the truth has been suppressed, and also that the truth has been immediately suppressed entirely from the conscious mind by all people.

He says:

He [Paul] is speaking of a factual knowledge, indeed of a knowledge which, as a consequence of human sin, is immediately transformed into illusion, thus of a "knowledge" which does not work itself out as knowledge, but which through the ferment of sin is transformed into the illusion of idolatry.²

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1. Emil Brunner: Man in Revolt, p. 68.

2. Emil Brunner: Revelation and Reason, p. 64.

One may suspect that Brunner is quick to expatiate on the suppression of the knowledge, and hesitates to discuss at all its objective nature, because he may feel (to be consistent) that the knowledge in creation must be intimate and valid, and to admit of reason's apprehension of such knowledge would open him to the charge of adhering to a Natural Theology. Brunner will not admit any man holds any of the truth any length of time before he suppresses it. Every man corrupts all of it completely. He says, "but that on the other hand, precisely because he is a sinner, and in so far as he is a sinner he remains isolated, he cannot know God aright."¹ And again: "It is because he is a sinner that the revelation cannot issue in the knowledge of God."² In commenting on "holds down this truth", Brunner not only says that this is a result of man's defiance of God, but adds: "He does not allow it to penetrate his consciousness, but transforms it into an illusion or a lie."³

Brunner conceives of revelation in creation as entirely Either-Or. He avers:

So where a man supports the view of the reality of a "theologia naturalis" in the sense of correct, valid knowledge, he is actually denying the reality of sin, or at least its effect in the sphere of man's knowledge of God. Thus, on the one hand, the reality of the revelation in Creation is to be admitted, but, on the other hand, the possibility of a correct and valid natural knowledge of God is to be contested.⁴

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1. Ibid., p. 65.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., p. 64.

4. Emil Brunner: The Christian Doctrine of God, p. 133.

Man is responsible for his sin which was originally so great that it obscured the truth before it could be understood. Man's vision was not somewhat clear and then blurred, but completely distorted from the beginning.

This revelation exists regardless of human reaction to it, but from man's point of view what then does this revelation become except a possibility? "Sinful man is responsible for his sin, because in the revelation in Creation the possibility is given him of knowing God."¹ Thus, the cornerstone of Brunner's position rests on the particular significance he attaches to those verses dealing with sin's work in suppressing truth. Scholars betray shortcomings when supposing Brunner believes man can discover a part of the knowledge of God by his own efforts.²

d. Anthropological Evidence

In "The Christian Doctrine of God," reference is again made to Paul's argument, and attention is devoted to universal religious consciousness. Brunner does not allow for the possibility of degrees of knowledge within the sphere of reason. However, to deny the existence of any vestige of the true knowledge of God is to plunge the problem into the realm of

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1. Ibid., p. 134.

2. For example, Prof. John Otwell interprets Brunner as saying, "Man can discover something about God of his own effort by studying His handiwork in nature, even though such knowledge is not adequate for his salvation." -- from "Neo-Orthodoxy and Biblical Research," Harvard Theological Review, Vol. xliii, No. 2, April, 1950, p. 149.

anthropology. To sanction the view that all the truth is immediately transformed into the illusion of a lie involves observing case histories of pagan peoples, both past and present. Brunner states:

For "natural theology" is an anthropological fact, which no one can deny. Human beings, even those who know nothing of the historical revelation, are such that they cannot help forming an idea of God and making pictures of God in their minds. The history of the religions of mankind provides incontrovertible evidence of this fact.¹

Speaking of "the welter of religious conceptions of God," it is observed that there is no one common denominator among them.

When Brunner states that the point of Paul's whole argument is to demonstrate the responsibility of man and the fact that he is without excuse, he does not mean to say that his comments on Romans are designed to bring that out primarily. The burden of his remarks is to indicate his belief in revelation in creation if it be clearly understood that this revelation is immediately and entirely spoiled the moment it comes to the conscious mind, and therefore, Natural Theology is not valid, and all the speculative thought of the natural man is an idolatrous illusion. He asserts:

From the beginning of Greek philosophy men have continually tried to reach a clear and certain knowledge of God, not along the path of religion, but by the way of philosophy, by speculative thought, and thus to overcome the irrationalism of the purely religious formation of ideas. These philosophical doctrines of God now confront one another in irreconcilable opposition. Above all, none of them can possibly be combined with the Christian Idea of God. The

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1. Emil Brunner: The Christian Doctrine of God, p. 133.

relation of the "God" of Plato or of Aristotle with the God of the Biblical revelation is that of the Either-Or.¹

2. Brunner on Romans 2:14 ff.

In these verses Paul is speaking of the Gentiles and the works of the law on their hearts, which is to say, the conscience. The good produced by the conscience is not the good perceived through revelation. In referring to Romans 2:14 ff., he asserts:

It is of course true that according to Paul the works of the law are written in the hearts even of the heathen, and therefore the conscience--which is to be distinguished from the practical reason--can raise its voice in accusation. But the "works of the law" are very far from being the good. Rather it is the view of Paul that the genuine good can only be perceived through revelation, and indeed only through Christ. These two statements which only apparently contradict one another, about the nature of moral perception, we find also in the teaching of the Reformers . . . For him too this implanted law is naturally the point of contact for the word of revelation.²

Pagan peoples are aware of the ordinances of God in some vague way, but they do not know the Creator. The natural man cannot know the Creator save through the relationship with His Son, Jesus Christ. However, he does have a knowledge of the divine law. Brunner states:

Barth says rightly: "we only know the Creator through faith in Jesus Christ; even in the first article there is no 'natural theology' on which Christian theology can be based." . . . But Barth does not seem to perceive that the believer, when he thus knows the Creator, in so doing also perceives the working of the Creator in the pagan world, in the sphere of nature, and also the further fact that

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1. Ibid., pp. 135-36.

2. Emil Brunner: The Divine Imperative, pp. 599-600.

the Creator does His work by using human instinct and human reason, indeed, even by using a natural or pagan or rational "knowledge" of the Creator and of His ordinances. As Paul (Romans 2:14 ff.) admits that the heathen have a knowledge of the divine law--in spite of the fact that they do not rightly know the Law-giver--so must we, in connection with Romans xiii also go further and admit that the heathen are to some extent aware of the ordinances of God, without rightly knowing Him who creates these orders.¹

C. The View of Edwin Lewis

1. An Introductory Statement of Lewis' View of General Revelation

Lewis has nowhere commented on the verses of Romans 1 and 2 in a manner comparable to Barth or even Brunner. He does discuss general revelation in "A Philosophy of the Christian Revelation." Lewis speaks in general terms. He emphasizes his thesis from varying perspectives in every chapter.

Lewis says that there is a valid distinction between the "Unmade and the made, the Creative and the created, the Infinite and the finite, the Supernatural and the natural."² It is the meaning that the one conveys to the other that constitutes the nature of revelation. In short, "creation is revelation." It is a "matter for gratitude" that Brunner should differ from Barth and assert that there is a revelation in creation. Creation is, to some extent, a Word of God.³ It is "revelation in the rough."

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1. Ibid., p. 618.

2. Edwin Lewis: A Philosophy of the Christian Revelation, p. 172.

3. Ibid.

The thesis of Lewis, however, is the absolute supremacy of the revelation in Christ as the key that opens the truth of every other revelation. He is not, therefore (like Brunner), interested in primarily showing that he believes in a revelation in creation while rejecting Natural Theology. Lewis is desirous of pointing out the total inadequacy of the revelation in creation. He quotes the words of Olin A. Curtis:

"The fact is that the more men know about nature, and the more they rely upon nature, the more agnostic and hopeless they become. For one thing, men need to be told a few plain things about themselves, about their origin, about their spiritual condition, and about their destiny. And in nature there is no perspicuous anthropology.¹"

Lewis admits the presence of a revelation in creation, but disallows its efficacy in enlightening the natural man, because:

"Much is written on the unfolding scroll of time, and men look at it, and they struggle to make it out, and one reads it one way, and another in another. It is not that nothing is written, but that what is written is not clear. It is hieroglyphics, and the key is lost.²"

Some truth is there in creation. But it is not enlightenment that slowly trickles through the channel of the universe. It is rather the truth of a total impression that forces itself upon a searching mind, to wit, there might possibly be a significant unity of plan and purpose in the cosmos which could be perceived were it not for the futility of the reasoning mind. The dilemma is in fact caused by the refusal of the

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1. Ibid., pp. 172-73.

2. Ibid., p. 173.

reason to recognize its own futile limitations. Lewis says, "God withholds the whole truth about himself until such time as the revelation of it could be endured and given its proper response."¹ The whole truth is available to man. It is partly given in creation, because men are unable to see the Creator, and because the whole truth is not simply that created things advertise the presence of the Creator. Lewis' thesis is reiterated:

Hence it is in Christ, if anywhere, that we are given that final truth of God and of his purpose with us men which illuminates the course of all his activities and dealings elsewhere. Here is that Word which interprets all God's other words, that final thrust of His will into the confusions of the human scene which exposes him to us completely as it exposes us to him.²

2. The View of Lewis as it Relates to Romans

The writer communicated with Lewis to ascertain how his views related to Paul's argument in Romans 1 and 2. In the second of two letters which he wrote, Prof. Lewis says:

(2) I question whether so much weight should be put on Rom. 1 and 2 as you appear to put. For one thing, I am not at all sure that Paul by "Greek" means the entire non-Jewish world. He could easily mean "Grecian Jews", such as helped form the Jewish Christian community at "Rome". Otherwise, what is meant by "knowing the ordinance of God" in 1:32?³

This may be one reason why Lewis does not refer so often to Romans in his discussion of revelation in creation, as for example, Brunner does.

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1. Ibid., p. 174.

2. Ibid.,

3. Letter written from Bradford, Vermont, August 15, 1950.

Regardless of his interpretation of "Greek" and the audience Paul addressed in Romans 1 and 2, Lewis does not overlook the implications of these chapters for Natural Theology. This is clear in his first letter which was a response to numerous questions. Among them he was asked if at any time he thought the natural man held a knowledge of God. If so, what did this knowledge consist of? And, if creation said nothing definite to man, how could he be reckoned inexcusable? After some personal remarks, Dr. Lewis responded as follows:

If my book anywhere gives the impression that "creation" or "nature" says nothing to "the natural man" about "a power and a divinity", then the book does not give the impression I intend. This is why I stand with Brunner, et al., for "general" revelation as against Barth's denial of it. I do not forget that the faculty of conscience, the sentiment that leads men to worship something, and the like, are a part of "the natural". I believe with Paul that "the natural man" is "inexcusable" because he fails to yield himself to that which he might apprehend and does apprehend. It is not that a man can "save himself", i.e., of himself be all that God purposes. He is guilty before God in a double sense--both because the full status of a son of God is beyond him and because against his own best insights he is willing to continue in bondage. The moral status attending natural inability as respects "the whole law" he makes his responsibility by conscious and deliberate failure. It is this conscious and deliberate failure that is chiefly significant and with which I believe Paul is chiefly concerned. To consider guilt based exclusively on natural inability in separation from guilt based on responsible failure is to remain within the realm of the purely theoretical. The ultimate condemnation of any man is not based on the failure that must be, but on the failure that need not have been. God is never faced with the first form of failure alone: when he faces it, it is always in company with the second form. The dogma of infant damnation quite overlooked this, and made out of God a mere despot. If you like, we are sinful by nature (what I mean by inability to meet the full divine purpose), but we are sinners by volition. The doctrine--and necessity

--of divine grace is a corollary of "sinfulness by nature" and "sin by intent".

It is this divine grace that men cannot read out of "the nature of things". God is such a God as he has shown himself to be in Jesus Christ. This is the real import of "special" or "Biblical" or "Christian" revelation. So I do not say (at least I do not mean to) that "creation declares nothing apart from Christ." I say rather (1) that what is declared in Christ is not readable out of nature, and (2) that it is only when nature and its ways are read according to the revelation in Christ that it yields any true certainty as to God factually and any true knowledge as to God purposively. I hope I make myself reasonably clear. The God who reveals himself in Christ (and as Christ) is the same as the God of creation; but until the God of creation is seen in Christ, the God of creation, while he may still be a reality to men, is a reality, however, neither clearly seen (or seeable) nor clearly known (or knowable).¹

Lewis closes his letter by pointing to the first chapter of "A Philosophy of the Christian Revelation" as a denial of the assertion that he makes no provision for the experience of the natural man in his works. He further denies that he says creation declares nothing apart from Christ, for he depends, to a great extent, on the Fourth Gospel.

Dr. Lewis is here making a twofold basis of guilt. The first is attributed to the position which man holds as alien from the divine Family through no choice of his own. As a total personality he is a sinner, because he is not a saint by identity, and could not be since sainthood by volition is beyond him. The truism that man is sinful because he is not a saint is valid if the terms of divine accusation are warranted by his present status regardless

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1. Letter written from Bradford, Vermont, July 31, 1950.

of origins or necessity. If the antithesis of sainted being is sinful being, then the definition of man as sinful because the divine purpose is beyond him is justified.

But the burden of Paul's thesis in Romans 1 and 2 is that responsibility is based on choice. Man's status is not inexorable, for he refused an alternative. The alternative is not salvation by insights into creation. It is not additional knowledge. The alternative is to yield to that reality which is apprehended in nature. What is the reality which might have been yielded to? That is a serious question for Natural Theology and for epistemology. Lewis adopts the marking-off technique by defining negatives and alternatives. He says in essence that we know that this phenomenon is such that it cannot be characterized by this or that, and when such-and-such a reaction to it does not occur then this is what happens. So then, whatever this reality in nature is, it is such that when man does not act on the limited apprehension of it, a sufficient basis exists to render him guilty. It is such a reality as to hold back any true certainty as to God factually and any true knowledge as to God purposively until it is read in the light of the revelation in, and through, Jesus Christ. And above all, whatever that reality is, it cannot be that which is declared solely in Christ. Yes, the God of creation is a reality to man: but whatever Paul may mean in verses 19 and 20, it is certain that those things which are "clearly seen" (v. 20), and "that which may

be known of God" (v. 19), do not negate the fact that God as a reality in creation may be neither clearly seen, nor clearly known. And because men do not have the key of interpretation, not only is this reality not seen, it is not seeable: not only is it not known, it is not knowable.

But the point is not to define the reality, or to even concentrate on it. Whatever it may be, man could have acted differently when conscious of it, and because he did not, and deliberately chose his own way in the face of a known alternative, he is without excuse.

It should be apparent that Lewis and others stress the general elimination of the truth from the consciousness of man as a (1) basis for his guilt, (2) demonstration of the necessity of the revelation in Christ. Prof. Lewis would say that further discussion of the "reality" is a theoretical quest, and foreign to the purpose of Paul, which is to point up the responsibility of man, to indicate God's attitude toward the deeds of the flesh, and to prepare the way for the necessity of the saving revelation in Christ.

D. Summary and Comparison

1. General Summary of Brunner's View

1) Brunner believes the only true, valid knowledge of God results from saving faith in Jesus Christ, and is not gained by reason. His view of reason is limited and special.

2) Brunner does not say clearly and directly what this

revelation in creation consists of, but does say it has been there since the creation of the world, and it takes place through the works of creation. It is not an actual, experimental knowledge of God.

3) There is a revelation in creation. This revelation is given to every man. It exists though man has suppressed it.

4) For Brunner to admit of a revelation in creation would demand more from his theory of the imago Dei than it will permit: it is not consonant with his view of the absolute and complete nature of God-granted knowledge; it would not follow logically from his total view of revelation and reason, and would make him susceptible to the charge of adhering to a Natural Theology. He interprets those verses dealing with the suppression of truth to mean that all of the revelation to man becomes immediately vitiated by his sin the very moment it comes to the conscious mind. Natural Theology is not "disposed" of on theoretical grounds, but is eliminated on the grounds of man's sin.

5) Paul is showing that man is responsible for his sin, and is without excuse before God.

6) Man cannot discover a part of the knowledge of God by his own efforts. Brunner deals with the philosophy and religions of the heathen to show that they have produced nothing in common worthy of comparison to the truth of the one God of the Christian revelation.

7) The conscience is the works of the law written on the heart of the heathen, but this is unable to save, and unable to disclose the truth of divine revelation. The implanted law is the point of contact for the word of revelation. When a man knows the Creator he is able to perceive His working in the pagan world, in the sphere of nature, and the fact that He uses instinct and reason through conscience to give an awareness of divine ordinances (Romans 2:14 ff).

2. General Summary of Lewis' View

1) Lewis recognizes the fact of revelation in creation. The whole truth has been given to man, part of it in creation.

2) The truth revealed in creation is obscured and illegible. Whatever it is, it cannot save the natural man.

3) The truth is obscured because man does not have the key of interpretation until he receives the illuminating revelation in Jesus Christ.

4) Paul may be addressing the Jewish Christian community only, and not the entire non-Jewish world.

5) Dr. Lewis stresses a twofold basis of guilt. Man is sinful by nature, because the divine purpose is beyond him. Secondly, he is a sinner by volition, because he fails to yield himself to that which he might, and does, apprehend. He deliberately chooses to ignore an alternative.

6) The doctrine of divine grace cannot be read out of nature. The fact of God's presence in His creation is a reality which is neither clearly seen nor clearly known.

Nature yields no "true certainty as to God factually and no true knowledge as to God purposively" until it is read according to the revelation in Christ.

7) Lewis is not primarily concerned with the nature or extent of the revelation to the natural man, because Paul is not primarily interested in that. It is defined by showing what it is not, and what it is not able to do. Paul is concerned with the primary question of man's guilt, and the necessity of divine grace in Christ.

3. Comparison of Brunner's and Lewis' Views

Lewis has stated that, in regard to general revelation, he agrees with Brunner. Brunner admits that there is a knowledge of God inherent in the cosmos. Neither Brunner nor Lewis discusses the nature of the manifestation. Only once in all his writings does Brunner say what it is, namely, that the divinity of God, His invisible being and His transcendence. All this asserts is that God is God, He Himself cannot be seen with the eye, and that He (intimating because of His divinity) is apart from and transcendent over man. Lewis does not even go this far except to say that whatever the truth might be, its importance consists in the alternative presented to man, which, when rejected, consists in man's guilt.

Both men must be thought of against the background of their theology. The basic contribution of Brunner is that a general revelation must exist if man is to be rendered inexcusable, but there is no point in discussing this

revelation itself, for it is immediately suppressed the moment it reaches man. Brunner hastens to add that this suppression may be immediate, but man's responsibility lies in the fact that he did not want to know.

Lewis' contribution takes the form of one central thesis, namely, that the general revelation is totally inadequate. Brunner emphasizes the suppression, Lewis the resultant inadequacy, of this revelation because of the suppression. The only exegetical challenge to study that Lewis posits is his question whether "Greek" means the entire non-Jewish world or "Grecian Jews".

CHAPTER IV

NATURAL THEOLOGY AND INTERPRETATIONS OF THE NEGATIVE VIEW

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A. Introduction

If all the members of the neo-orthodox school had to be called Barthians, they could not object on the grounds that Karl Barth is not the chief apostle of their original and fundamental postulates.

Against Modernism's methodology centered in the criterion and constructs of reason Barth has protested continuously. He has been a prophet of that God who is infinitely beyond the finite circumference of reason, and who loathes reason's greatest sin of reluctance to bow to its limitations so as to fall on the revelation of His grace in Christ. He states:

God is the one and only one and proves Himself to be such by His being both the Apostle of His own Being and the source of all knowledge of Himself. In both these respects He differs from everything in the world. A God who could be known otherwise than through Himself, i.e., otherwise than through His revelation of Himself, would have already betrayed, eo ipso, that He was not the one and only one and so was not God. He would have betrayed Himself to be one of the principles underlying human systems and finally identified with man himself.¹

It must be stated from the outset that Barth considers Natural Theology to be a specious study. In his Gifford

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1. Karl Barth: The Knowledge of God and the Service of God, p. 20.

Lectures he declared:

I certainly see--with astonishment--that such a science (Natural Theology) as Lord Gifford had in mind does exist, but I do not see how it is possible for it to exist. I am convinced that so far as it has existed and still exists, it owes its existence to a radical error.¹

God's creatorship is not sanctioned as fact on the grounds that Genesis 1 and 2 are strict historical narratives. Neither is it evident in the world around us. It must become evident in the knowledge which faith has of God. He says:

Knowledge of creation is knowledge of God and consequently knowledge of faith in the deepest and ultimate sense. It is not just a vestibule in which natural theology might find a place.²

Barth has stated flatly he does not believe in general revelation. Some have essayed to dull the sharpness of his position by reading into it qualifications, but Barth's language is quite plain. He says:

The world with its sorrow and its happiness will always be a dark mirror to us, about which we may have optimistic or pessimistic thoughts; but it gives us no information about God as the Creator. But always, when man has tried to read the truth from sun, moon and stars or from himself, the result has been an idol. But when God has been known and then known again in the world, so that the result was a joyful praise of God in creation, that is because He is to be sought and found by us in Jesus Christ. By becoming man in Jesus Christ, the fact has also become plain and credible that God is the Creator of the world. We have no alternative source of revelation.³

Barth has written a running commentary, and designates the sections with his own titles. For example, he refers to

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1. Ibid., p. 5.

2. Karl Barth: Dogmatics in Outline, p. 52.

3. Ibid.

Romans 1:18-32 as "The Night." This chapter, which is called the Negative View because Barth does not believe in general revelation, will employ the groupings and designations he uses in his commentary.

B. The View of Karl Barth

1. Barth's Commentary as Exegesis

Barth's views on Natural Theology had not peremptorily¹ crystallized in his commentary. However, he states that the work was meant to be exegesis and not a vehicle for presenting a new spiritual outlook. He states:

Proper criticism of my book can be concerned only with the interpretation of the text of the Epistle. In other words, criticism or approval should move strictly within the realm of Theology . . . My book deals with one issue, and with one issue only. Did Paul think and speak in general and in detail in the manner in which I have interpreted him as thinking and speaking?²

The question of general revelation became prominent in later years, and one must go outside of Barth's Commentary to find a more dilated and lucid exposition of his thinking. But the commentary still presents those fundamentals which may have been explicated later, but not drastically revised.

2. Romans 1:18-32: "The Night"

a. "Its Cause"

Vv. 18-21. There is a challenge made to man by the

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1. Karl Barth: The Epistle to the Romans, p. vi.

2. Ibid., p. 10.

imponderable complexity of human limitation and corruptibility versus the refusal of man to apprehend an answer to their necessity. When the unquestioning mind does not meet it God gives free reign to corruptibility by His wrath. Surrender to or ignorance of the significance of this limitation and corruption will not negate the lost estate of man. He states, "It (the wrath) is the protest pronounced always and everywhere against the course of the world in so far as we do not accept the protest as our own."¹ He continues, "Men are lost, even though they know nothing of salvation. Then the barrier remains a barrier and does not become a place of exit."² The wrath of God is the righteous judgment of God against that which is not protested against in the choice of unbelief. It is the righteousness of God "apart from and without Christ."

Man is judged. He lost sight of God's transcendence. He attempted to set up partnership with God. He confounded time with eternity. This is the ungodliness of verse 18. Poor sinners project aspirations on a cosmic scale and make their own heaven so that they may have a "deeper sanction" for their conduct.

In one sense this alternative of an "eternity" concept in the consciousness of man is the "truth" held down. Barth does not point to its origin. Suffice to say, there is a "prolongation into infinity", a longing of more than

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1. Ibid., p. 42.

2. Ibid., p. 43.

psychological significance which God is taking into account. At any rate, the truth is that which might not have been what now is the present state of things; it is obscured by proud unbelief structuralized in man's exaltation of Self-god instead of the God. Barth comments:

If mankind be itself God, the appearance of the idol is then inevitable. And whenever the idol is honoured, it is inevitable that men, feeling themselves to be the true God, should also feel that they have themselves fashioned the idol. This is the rebellion which makes it impossible for us to see the new dimensional plane which is the boundary of our world and the meaning of our salvation. Against such rebellion there can be revealed only the wrath of God.¹

On verses 19-21 Barth comments, "The truth concerning the limiting and dissolving of men by the unknown God, which breaks forth in the resurrection, is a known truth."² What is known of God? God is the one men don't know, and their limitation should not be dissolved by its source, but should be dissolved by that which is beyond their limitation. Men know that they strive (at times) for emancipation and that it must lie without themselves. They know their absolute heteronomy.

What are "the invisible things of God" so clearly seen? It is the invisibility of God, His majesty infinitely higher than confusion, it is the clues of the insecurity of us all, and it is the contemplation of the divine "No" when recognized. His "everlasting power and divinity" are the sense of distance

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1. Ibid., p. 45.

2. Ibid., p. 47.

between God and us. We are not God. God is to be feared. But this Weltansicht is not fatalistic. Men are without excuse. Barth asserts:

We have, therefore, encased the truth of God and evoked His wrath. But this was not because no alternative was open to us. God is not far from each one of us: for in him we live, and move, and have our being (Acts xvii. 27, 28). The situation might, therefore, have been very different.¹

So men became vain in their reasonings. They are bereft of all understanding, because reason is imprisoned within itself, and thought is not in touch with ultimate reality.

b. "Its Operation"

Vv. 22-32. There is only the possibility of seeing the clearly seen,² but once this possibility is abandoned men are able to profess themselves wise. The more certain a man is of himself in his own little world of God-rejection, the more he plunges himself into the certainty of ruin and gross immorality. When men lose sight of the judgment eternity must make upon their world of time, the distance between God and man becomes blurred. Vision is blurred until man sees God, the totaliter aliter, as an image of corruptible man or beast. Finally, God gives man up, so that his little gods become gods, and he sinks irretrievably into sin.

On the sins of man, outlined in verses 28-31, Barth aptly comments:

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1. Ibid., p. 47.

2. Ibid., p. 49.

Chaos has found itself, and anything may happen. The atoms whirl, the struggle for existence rages. Even reason itself becomes irrational. Ideas of duty and of fellowship become unstable . . . His judgment now becomes judgment and nothing more; and we experience the impossibility of men as the real and final impossibility of God.¹

Finally (v. 32), those who have forgotten God will often complain about human insecurity and bad conditions, but they love the world, foster their highest aspirations upon its sinking sands, and think the reign of death upon its face is extenuated by ignoring it.

3. Romans 2:14-16: "The Judgment"

In Barth's commentary this section includes verses 14-29, but he deals with verses 14-16 separately. On these verses he avers that we have a provocative piece of information. He states:

Those possessing no revelation stand before God as though they were fully possessed of it; awake in their sleep, righteous in their unrighteousness, they believe whilst they do not believe!²

The Gentiles have no revelation. They "have no impress of it to guard." The Bible asserts they "do the things of the law." This means they stand in awe before the God who turns them back by His majesty and eternity. He avers:

The Gentile world no doubt lies in wickedness; but it may be a world so disintegrated, so disorganized, and so undermined, that the mercy of God seems closer and more credible than where the "Kingdom of God" is displayed in full bloom.³

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1. Ibid., p. 54.

2. Ibid., p. 65.

3. Ibid., p. 67.

Those who do the things of the law without receiving it are a law unto themselves. How can the Gentiles show the work of the law on their hearts? Barth says nothing of the manifestation of God's general revelation in conscience. Instead, "that by which men are justified by God is discovered¹ in them." Suddenly, Barth considers Paul to be speaking of the work rendered in the heart by justification. God has done the work in the heart which becomes subject to the righteousness of God.

The voice of conscience in verse 15 is quite dead. Who of himself can penetrate and understand the "dialectical paradox by which they are enveloped"? No one can but God. Again this seems like a fantastically fatalistic cycle. But no, says Barth: "Hence emerges the incomprehensible possibility that lawless men are brought to judgment, and yet pass through it into freedom."²

V. 16. All men of all ranks and distinction shall lay bare those relationships to God which are secret, in the day when Christ shall judge men openly. Outward show of righteousness counts for nothing. The secrets of men alone exist and are true, and these God will regard in judgment.

Thus, it is clear, that which apparently may have been "revealed" to the Gentiles in nature and conscience is awareness of the judgment of the sovereign Eternal and Invisible

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1. Ibid.

2. Ibid., p. 69.

One on the egocentricity of their unbelief, which prefers to welter in corrupt limitation rather than face God's protest. The truth which was near to man as a basis of divine judgment is not revealed in a general revelation, but becomes open to the grasp of faith only through an act of history, as Barth later points out. As Brunner remarks:

Suddenly, all that he has been saying--and that had to be said--on Rom. 1:19 disappears. Without warning, as it were, that which Barth had stated "objectively considered", to be true no longer has any significance. The "original" truth becomes the "future" truth, from which, by means of the historical revelation, the revelation in the Creation, which was on the verge of being recognized, is again wiped off the slate, and nothing remains but the historical revelation.¹

C. General Summary of Barth's View

1) There is an underlying theme in this Dialectic Theology to which Barth continually returns, to wit, the transcendent, sovereign God testifies in the hovering presence of eternity against the time-bound and idolatrous autonomy of man. Man could be emancipated from the bondage of his finiteness and corruption by first recognizing it, and accepting Deity's Negation. Because he does not, he is under the wrath of his freedom, which exhibits itself in a cycle of further corruption.

2) The great sin of man is avoiding the liberty of God's righteousness, and continuance in the unrighteousness of idolatry. Man wishes to have his relations with God under

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1. Emil Brunner: Revelation and Reason, p. 79.

his control. Generally speaking, man's ungodliness is the confounding of time with eternity. Rather than submit to a God infinitely beyond his human reach, he wishes to bring God down by inflating a cosmic projection of himself.

3) Obviously nothing concerning the essence or personality of God is known by the natural man. All Paul is saying is that idolatry was inevitable when mankind made itself god. Barth does not discuss fully the key terms "everlasting power and divinity." It seems to be the awe-inspiring presence of God's judgment against the arrogant exaltation of Self-god. It is awareness of the infinite qualitative distinction between God and man.

4) The course man took was not predestined in the nature of things. He refused an alternative, and so is without excuse.

5) Limitation cannot be overcome by being left to itself. Because man did not recognize this he became vain in his reasonings. He lost touch with reality and understanding when he lost touch with God.

6) The final abomination is that man worships an image of himself. God permits it, and man sinks irretrievably into sin.

7) The Gentiles have no revelation. To "do the law" means that God speaks, "that revelation occurs." But in their degraded state they may stand in awe before God. They can become His elect. Perhaps they, in their loathsome

state, see the mercy of the kingdom of God as being credible.

8) The "work of the law" is displayed by the Gentile who is justified. There is joy in Heaven over the work which God has written in their hearts.

9) The voice of conscience is indistinguishable. God understands what is secret and concealed. In the paradox of God and destiny, destiny and guilt, guilt and atonement, "atonement and God" is present muffled confusion, but not an enigma to God. God knows what we do not, hence the incomprehensible possibility that judged men pass to freedom in God.

10) There is the truth of the unknown God which is "revealed" to the Gentiles by their awareness of His judgment on the egocentricity of their unbelief, but He neither reveals Himself nor justifies the condemned except by the historical revelation in Christ Jesus.

CHAPTER V

COMPARISON OF THE POSITIVE, SUPPRESSION AND NEGATIVE VIEWS

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A. Introduction

The use of reason and understanding is nowhere so important in theology as in the study of Natural Theology. It precludes the possibility of putting the three views side by side to examine surface differences. The view of John Calvin resembles that of Emil Brunner. But it has been clear that there is a critical difference, despite Brunner's assertion that he stands with the Reformers in this matter.

In this comparative study the basic differences and agreements between the views are highlighted. There will be four indices of comparison:

1) The Pauline argument, or the point of these Biblical passages as the Apostle conceived them, and his line of argument.

2) The manifestation, i.e., the "truth", and how it is received by the heathen, Romans 1:18-20.

3) The indictment, that is, the nature and basis of man's guilt, Romans 1:21-32.

4) The Gentiles and the work of the law, Romans 2:14-16.

B. The Pauline Argument

1. The Positive View

God revealed Himself in nature. This knowledge should have persuaded men to honor God and worship Him. By indicating they did not, Paul is convicting the race, so as to show the need of all for Christ. The purpose of the Pauline argument is not to demonstrate how much men can know about God apart from faith in Christ.

2. The Suppression View

The point of the passage is to prove that man is guilty, responsible, and without excuse for their sinful condition. Paul is showing that the heathen are not merely ignorant, they are guilty because they do not want to know. Without the general revelation men could not be sinners; they are sinners, because they held down the truth in unrighteousness.

3. The Negative View

Barth conceives the point of Paul's statements in this effect: first of all, the natural man cannot know or understand the minutest aspect of the nature or being of the personality of God the creator. Creation must not be thought of as a vestibule in which man catches a preview glimpse of what is clearly displayed in Christ. Therefore, in Romans 1 and 2, God is not giving a sufficient picture of Himself to provide a basis for man's condemnation. Rather, here is

a description of the underlying fabric of reality of which man is aware in a religious perspective. This reality to the natural man is a dilemma with which he will not come to grips. This dilemma finds its solution when man is liberated from it in the redemption in Christ. Reality only becomes a dilemma when man breaks himself upon God. Reality becomes a revelation in Christ.

So the truth of which Paul is speaking is axiomatic. Just as Christ was not giving the truth of the Gospel, but the truth of life and religion when He said, "Whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it" (Mark 8:35). This is why so much that first appears in Barth seems to indicate he believes in general revelation; he speaks of receiving truth. But he is merely showing how these axioms are working out in the revelation of God's wrath, although they do not become apparent or effective to man save in Christ, which is the one revelation of God to man. Thus, on the key phrase "that which may be known of God is manifest to them", he comments:

The truth concerning the limiting and dissolving of men by the unknown God, which breaks forth in the resurrection, is a known truth; this is the tragic factor in the story of the passion of the truth. When our limitation is apprehended, and when He is perceived who, in bounding us, is also the dissolution of our limitation, the most primitive as well as the most highly developed forms of self-consciousness become repeatedly involved in a "despairing humiliation", in the "irony of intelligence" (H. Cohen). We know that God is He whom we do not know,

and that our ignorance is precisely the problem and the source of our knowledge.¹

C. The Manifestation

1. The Positive View

Without making gratuitous claims for the study of Natural Theology, this view does posit two facts apprehended in varying degrees to the unregenerate: the existence of God and the revelation of His wrath. It is hinted that there is some ecumenical instinct to perceive the cosmological argument. All men see the outworking of God's attributes in the order and function of inherent cosmic constructs of morality and theology,² and therefore are able to deduce His being and transcendent sovereignty. This knowledge is compelling in two ways: it should lead to worship and gratitude. Men are conscious of what they do in repressing this knowledge³ and God's wrath is revealed to the whole world.

2. The Suppression View

Barth feels that all men are somewhat conscious of the need to surrender to transcendent otherness in protest to their finiteness and sin. The Suppression View has taken this concept over, and dressed it in the form of a general revelation. The source of this transcendent, divine, invisible

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1. Karl Barth: The Epistle to the Romans, p. 45.

2. Ante, p. 28.

3. Ante, p. 31.

otherness is God. However, nothing is stated in the detailed way the Positive View presents this general revelation. The Positive View cannot be said to have presented all the regenerate man can read out of nature. It is stated there that if Adam did not sin he could perceive far more than the heathen. The Positive View holds that the heathen receive and retain some of this knowledge before suppressing it.¹ But the Suppression View does not go into the nature of the general revelation itself, for while its adherents cannot ignore the actual argument of Paul and its place in the book, and are therefore forced to admit of a general revelation, they cannot conceive of another actual, operative, source of revelation than the historic one, and so say that the general revelation is immediately suppressed from consciousness the instant the heathen receive it. The receiving and suppressing activity is one.

3. The Negative View

One is not always too sure what the Positive School posits about the nature of the general revelation. On occasion its assertions tend to be extravagant, but generally it avoids the pitfall of claiming that this knowledge impinges upon the knowledge of the historic revelation. If the cosmological argument is tacitly alluded to, then it is implied that the reasoning function apprehends, and is conscious of,

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1. Ante, pp. 35, 40.

the general revelation before it is held down in unrighteousness. However, when Barth speaks of God in human consciousness he is not discussing bits of information about God lying about in the universe, such as His wisdom, justice, etc. "Everlasting power and divinity" are not such bits of information. The nature of reality (not general revelation) demands acceptance of the infinite distinction between the invisible God and corruptible man, and what is this but "His everlasting power and divinity"? Why does Barth say this? Because he is convinced the cosmos is scribble, not handwriting, and because he begins with the premise that there is one revelation, not two.

D. The Indictment

1. The Positive View

The haunting question, "Will any of the heathen who have never heard Christ's name be saved," is not touched upon directly in any view, because the burden of Romans 1 and 2 is the indictment of man. Sin had hold of man when he received the general revelation. But he did not want to retain God in his knowledge, because he desired to sin unrestricted. Not glorifying God and being ungrateful, he therefore stands condemned. Such is the understanding of this view.

2. The Suppression View

Not only do the adherents of this view realize that

a general revelation must be posited because it is clearly declared by Paul, but they hold that men are reckoned sinners on the basis of Paul's indictment. The suppressing process¹ is described by them as universal, immediate and automatic, but volition is somehow involved or man would not be judged guilty. Even though man was possessed by sin before he received the general revelation, he is still responsible for sin's work. Lewis adds the pertinent assertion that he is guilty "because against his own best insights he is willing to continue in bondage."² It would be of value to know the nature, source, and extent of these "insights".

3. The Negative View

Barth's understanding of man's guilt is that he is judged for having lost sight of God's transcendence. Barth³ is not clear how his theory of the fundamental alternative comes to man. Therefore, though he constantly asserts that man took the wrong course, his explanation of the basis of indictment is not clear. All views are emphatic as to the guilt of man and its cause, but all differ concerning the mode and alternative open to him. All are agreed that Romans 1:22-32 is the result of the phrase: "Wherefore, God gave them up."

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1. Ante, pp. 60-62.
2. Ante, p. 68.
3. Ante, p. 79.

E. The Gentiles and the Work of the Law

1. The Positive View

This view generally takes the Gentiles as having a conscience, which functions in two ways: a) it convicts man of right and wrong, and b) it will confirm God's impeachment in the day of judgment. The "work of the law" has nothing to do with the salvation of the Gentiles. Even though the Gentiles have no written law, they are a law unto themselves.

2. The Suppression View

The "works of the law on the heart" is the conscience. But the genuine good can only be perceived through the revelation in Christ. Brunner claims that these apparently contradictory statements are also found in the Reformers. This view emphasizes that this implanted law is the point of contact for the word of revelation.

Brunner agrees with Barth that the Creator as Creator can only be known by faith in Christ. Brunner confuses the issue somewhat by adding that when the believer thus knows¹ the Creator he perceives His work in the pagan world. God is doing something in the pagan world through pagan instinct and reason, and vague pagan awareness of God's ordinances. But the heathen do not recognize God the Creator in it all.

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1. Ante, p. 64.

That knowledge comes through knowing Christ, who reveals the Creator. The Positive school states that the heathen know that it is God, though they distort that knowledge. Brunner claims Barth does not perceive the Christian's recognition of the work of God among the heathen.

3. The Negative View

Barth takes a radically different view than the rest. When the Gentiles "do the things of the law" this means they stand in awe before the God who turns them back by His majesty and eternity.¹ Conscience is quite dead. Paul is speaking of the work rendered in the heart by justification. An interpretation closely approximating that was Augustine's possibility, quoted by Luther. The Gentiles are aware of the inevitable judgment of the sovereign and invisible One on the egocentricity of their unbelief. Romans 2:14-16 contain principles; their meaning, outworking, and structuralization in concrete context, are never apparent except through the historical revelation.

F. Summary

In this comparative study four indices of comparison were employed: 1) the Pauline argument, 2) the manifestation, 3) the indictment, and 4) the Gentiles and the work of the law.

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1. Ante, p. 82.

1) Calvin, Brunner, Luther, and Lewis agree in broad areas concerning the Pauline argument. All agree that Paul proves men are guilty, thereby demonstrating their need for the historical revelation in Christ. Brunner especially stresses the evidence that men are constituted responsible sinners on the basis of the revelation in nature. Barth differs radically from the others. Men are not constituted sinners because of this revelation, because there is no such revelation. Paul is laying down religious axioms which come to fruition in the revelation in Christ.

2) According to Luther and Calvin, the meaning of God is apparent to the unregenerate man to a limited degree. Brunner and Lewis deny that it is apparent, because man never permits himself to recognize it until he is redeemed by Christ. Because Brunner and Lewis deny that man can consciously investigate general revelation before he is redeemed, they do not explore the nature and extent of God's manifestation of Himself in creation and conscience. The manifestation to Barth is a religious truth about ultimate reality as expressed in religious terms. Nothing can be known of God or His attributes in creation, because God has revealed Himself only in the historic revelation.

3) None of these men are concerned with the practical question of whether any of the heathen who have never heard of Christ will be saved. All agree that in some way or another God forced a conviction concerning Himself upon the

mind of man. Lewis, Brunner and Barth stress the word "alternative." All three are somewhat vague just what this alternative is; Barth is vague because he does not believe in a revelation in creation. Brunner and Lewis are vague because they assert that man suppresses the knowledge of God immediately from the conscious mind the moment it is received. Brunner and Lewis feel that responsibility must rest on volition and man continues to suppress the knowledge by his will. The dilemma for Lewis and Brunner consists in holding to suppression by will on the one hand and asserting that this suppression is immediate, complete, instantaneous and universal on the other. Nevertheless, Lewis insists that man is guilty "because against his own best insights he is willing to continue in bondage."

Calvin and Luther find that at one time men possessed a conscious knowledge of God, but refused to glorify God on the basis of that knowledge. They were ungrateful to God, and He gave them over to their own unrestricted sin.

For Barth, guilt consisted in choosing the wrong alternative. This alternative is either acceptance of God's transcendence and one's own finiteness, or the worship of self.

4) For Luther and Calvin, in the day of judgment the conscience will review the convictions of right on wrong which characterized its earthly function. The Suppression View identifies the works of the law as the conscience, and

states that the genuine good can only be perceived by means of the historic revelation. Brunner claims that no one can perceive God's work among the heathen until he becomes a Christian.

For Barth, conscience is dead. Again, Romans 2:14-16 contains principles about God's basic relation to man, the meaning of which never becomes clear to the unregenerate man until he is found in Christ.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

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This study has concentrated on three views of Natural Theology in the context of the exegesis of Romans 1:18-32 and 2:14-16. A summary of the Positive View, the Suppression View, and the Negative View was presented after introductory material was given preparatory to understanding the interpretations. Finally, the three views were compared.

It was discovered that the Positive View considered the available knowledge to the unregenerate man sufficient qualitatively, quantitatively and temporally to justify man's condemnation. All views asserted the impossibility of salvation apart from faith in Christ. It was also discovered that the representations of the Suppression View did not appear to cope adequately with the meaning of Romans 1:19,20. Neither is the Pauline doctrine of man's responsibility and guilt lucidly and concretely reflected in the fundamental premise of this view that because man is a sinner the general revelation never penetrates human consciousness, and cannot issue in the knowledge of God.

It was noted that the opinion of the Negative View concerning man's responsibility and constitution as sinner reflected still less the Pauline argument as basically understood by the other two views.

This thesis claims to demonstrate that Brunner's theories of Natural Theology are not so opposed to those of Karl Barth as is commonly thought. Though the Suppression View is avowedly aligned with the Reformers, it actually essays to mediate between the Positive and Negative Views. It allows for a general revelation in theory, but actually denies it in fact. The root of the difference between Barth and Brunner in this point lies in divergent theories of the imago Dei. It has been shown that Brunner's position will not permit him to endorse Natural Theology, but, he argues, to accept a general revelation does not, ipso facto, involve belief in a natural knowledge of God. He demonstrates his affinity to Barth in the matter of the supremacy of the historical revelation in Christ by taking great pains to prove that he is not susceptible to that which Barth avoided in the wrong manner.

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