

WHAT CAN THE NATURAL MAN KNOW?
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I. Introduction:

One of the beautiful aspects of doing systematic theology is the attempt to harmonize the whole of Scripture on vital issues. One critical issue that often finds its way into conversation, especially when one discusses some of the finer details of Calvinism is what spiritual truth the natural man may know.

Romans 1:18-25 is contrasted with Ephesians 2:1 with either side usually siding with one passage over and against the other or superimposing a theological paradigm over the passage, depending upon what Calvinistic perspective one embraces (e.g., Dutch Calvinism vs. Presbyterian/Princetonian Calvinism). But is there a way to harmonize these two passages and maintain total depravity? Consider the following:

II. A Closer Look at Ephesians 2:1 and Romans 1:18-25:

If I could summarize Ephesians 2:1 in one statement I would state that the spiritually dead, consciously, deliberately, and willfully violate God's holiness and righteousness.

- A. The word, "*being dead*" (*nekros*) is the state or condition before God's action.
- B. The word "*dead*" itself is in Greek a predicate accusative (for it cannot mean "*physically dead*"). Thus, "*dead*" is used in a metaphorical nuance to denote being separated from God, unable to communicate from God. But this metaphorical use denotes a spiritual reality: eternal separation from God.
- C. The words "*transgressions*" and "*sins*" (datives that indicate sphere) are synonyms that denote a "conscious and deliberate false step." As Harold Hoehner states:

They connote willful action against God's holiness and righteousness and thus a failure to live as one should. Human beings are responsible for these acts of treachery against God.... This verse describes the condition or state of a person before the gracious..."¹

If I could summarize Romans 1:18-25 I would state that man's reaction *against* God involves three degenerative steps: Trauma, repression, and substitution.²

- A. ***Trauma is the experience when one perceives God's natural revelation.***
 - 1. Vs. 20: The unregenerate man clearly perceives God's invisible attributes (e.g., eternal power & divine nature) in the display of God's awesome works in all of creation.

¹ Harold Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 308.

² I am borrowing these terms from R.C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 58-63.

- a. “Seen” is “*noew*” means to perceive, think, consider well, understand, and reflect on with insight (present, passive participle, neuter).
- b. “Clearly” means to “learn about or discern clearly” (“*kathorao*” a verb, third person, singular, present, passive, indicative).
- c. “Without excuse” is the term ἀναπολόγητος [*anapologetos* / an·ap·ol·og·ay·tos /]; it occurs twice in N.T. and is an adjective (as a negative particle) which translates as “*without excuse*.” This term means without defense or excuse. This term is also used in Romans 2:1 and means that which cannot be defended; it is inexcusable.
- d. If we look more closely at this verse we see that the phrase “so that” is an infinitive (adverbial) of result which indicates the outcome produced by the controlling verb.³ As a result, the structure in the Greek places emphasis on effect.⁴ Let’s look at this passage again:

“for his invisible nature from the creation of the world... has been clearly perceived... **with the result that they are** without excuse.”⁵
- e. There is perhaps a word play on words between the noun translated “invisible qualities” (*aorata*) and the verb translated “clearly seen” (*kathoratai*) because they share the same Greek root. Since both the verb “clearly seen” and the participle “being understood” are in the present tense, they emphasize the continuous nature of the action.

B. *Repression of truth takes place when one does not honor God as God.*

1. Vs. 21: The unrighteousness became fools for repressing the truth; they did not honor Him as God.
 - a. The term “knew” (*ginōskō*) means to possess information about, to have knowledge of, to be acquainted with, to come to know, recognize, perceive [verb, aorist, active, participle, masculine, plural, nominative].
 - b. “Although” is a verbal, concession, participle which means that the state or action of the main verb is true in spite of the state or action of the participle. Translated as “although”, let’s re-translate this passage:⁶

“**Although** they had information about God, they did not honor him as God.”

³ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 592-3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 592.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 494.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 634.

- c. The term “honor” is δοξάζομαι (*doxazomai*) which is a verb that means to speak praise, or speak words of glory, to attribute high status.
 - d. The term “be futile” means is ματαιόω (*mataioō*) is a verb that means to be given over to worthlessness or vanity.
 - e. The term “thoughts” or “speculations” (διαλογισμός (*dialogismos*)) is used as an adjective to mean carefully thinking out (cf. 1 Cor. 3:20), inward reasoning, deliberate questioning about what is true, hesitation, disputing, and arguing.
 - f. “Foolish hearts were darkened.” The word “darkened” means that they were unable to understand (cf. Ro 1:21; 11:10; Eph 4:18).⁷
2. Therefore, since they did not honor Him as God, they gave themselves over to worthlessness, to speculative inward reasoning, thus, unable to understand. Though they think they are wise, they “became” fools (vs. 22). The fool is one who exchanges the truth for a lie. They are foolish because they not only refuse to worship the true God but embrace and worship a lie (vs. 25).

C. *Idolatry occurs when one substitutes the true knowledge of God for a lie.*

- 1. Vv 24-25: Because they dishonor their bodies, having exchanging the true God⁸ for the lie, thus worshipping and serving the creature rather than the Creator, God gave them up to uncleanness, in their lusts of their hearts. In essence, they substituted (exchanged) the truth for a lie.
 - a. The word “dishonor” (ἀτιμάζω (*atimazō*)) in Greek means to “treat shamefully, insult”; it is an iterative present which is describing an event that repeatedly happens (in short intervals).⁹
 - b. The phrase “*who exchanged*”: The preposition “*who*” is a qualitative relative pronoun meaning “everyone who”; it focuses on the nature or essence of the person in view.
 - c. The word “*exchanged*” is (metallasō) a verb that means “to change” or barter away.” It is a volitional choice of idolatry to worship the creature rather than the Creator.
 - d. The phrase “*gave them up*” refers to God giving them over to the consequences of their choices.

⁷Swanson, James: *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)*. electronic ed. Oak Harbor : Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997.

⁸ In Romans 1:25 the phrase “*truth of God*” means “*true God*” because it is an attributed genitive. Cf. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 90.

⁹ Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 520.

2. The fool is one who exchanges the knowledge about the true God for a lie. This is evident by the fact that they worshipped and serve the creature rather than the Creator.

III. Summary of Both Passages:

Premise 1: If I could summarize Ephesians 2:1 in one statement I would state that the spiritually dead, consciously, deliberately, and willfully violate God's holiness and righteousness.

The natural man, who is spiritually dead, consciously, deliberately, and willfully violates God's holiness and righteousness. In other words, we must observe that if the natural man, who is spiritually dead, willfully violates God's holiness and righteousness then he must have some knowledge about Him in order to purposefully violate it. Purposeful volition to act against implies knowledge about something.

Premise 2: Romans 1:18-25: If I could summarize Romans 1:18-32 I would state that man's reaction *against* God involves three degenerative steps: Trauma, repression, and substitution.

The natural man, who is able to clearly perceive truth about the true God from creation, degenerates when he cognitively and volitionally represses and substitutes God for idolatry.

IV. Harmonization of Both Passages:

- A. Certain cognitive knowledge about God (Ephesians 2:1 cf. Romans 1:18-25):
 1. Holiness,
 2. Righteousness,
 3. Eternal Power;
 4. Divine Nature.

- B. Purposeful rebellion against God (Ephesians 2:1; cf. Romans 1:18-25):
 1. Transgression,
 2. Sins,
 3. Suppressed,
 4. Exchanged,
 5. Dishonor,
 6. Worshipped,
 7. Served.

Therefore, in these two cases the natural man, while totally and extensively depraved, separated from God, is able to perceive certain truths about God. Even in Ephesians 2:1 which Dutch Calvinists often use to make their case that the natural man is a "dead corpse" (loading up "*nekros*" to say more than it is says, i.e., no ability to perceive natural theology), the natural man has certain cognitive knowledge of God's holiness and righteousness—even though this and any other truth in natural theology is insufficient alone for eternal salvation.