

## Romans 1:18-32. Idol Thoughts?

### Introduction

Plagiarism is a major problem. These days, students can purchase pre-written papers on the Internet. Donald McCabe of the US Center for Academic Integrity Research, notes that a June 2005 study of 50,000 undergraduates at more than 60 colleges showed that on most campuses 70% of students admit to some cheating. 50% admitted to one or more instances of serious cheating on written assignments. Students even cheat in Ethics exams.

Albert Einstein said, "*The secret of creativity is knowing how to hide your sources.*" In 1962 Francis Crick, James Watson and Maurice Wilkins successfully did this when they were jointly awarded the Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine for advancing the understanding of the molecular structure of nucleic acids and the nature of DNA. Crick and Watson became household names. Accolades poured in. Yet the real credit for this ground-breaking achievement belonged primarily to Rosalind Franklin. It was Franklin's data they used. Unpublished drafts of her papers show she had determined the overall -form of the DNA helix. But in Watson and Crick's celebrated paper on the nature of DNA Franklin's evidence is only vaguely acknowledged.

Doesn't this leave a bad taste in your mouth? Why should Watson and Crick get all the credit for what was substantially achieved by Rosalind Franklin? Watson and Crick suppressed the truth about who was really primarily responsible for their findings. Plagiarists suppress the truth about who is really responsible for their achievement.

### Our Unrighteousness: Failing to Give Glory to God as Our Creator

In Romans 1:18-25 Paul talks about the way we people suppress the truth about who is really responsible for our entire existence, for the very air we breathe, for every blessing we enjoy, for every gift and ability we possess. Paul declares that the truth is this: God created the world and ever since he has plainly revealed himself to everyone, so that no-one has any excuse for failing to see that it is God's limitless power and his wonderful divine nature that is expressed in everything we experience. In verse 21 he tells us the obvious: the only right or righteous way to respond to the truth that God is our Creator is by giving glory to him as God and giving thanks to him.

Wilson Mizner quipped, "*If you steal from one author, it's plagiarism; if you steal from many, it's research.*" What we have done is the very worst form of plagiarism imaginable. We have failed to adequately or appropriately acknowledge the Author of all that we are and have. We radically lack integrity because we have often failed to acknowledge our Source. As Paul says in verse 22, we think we know better and, 'claiming to be wise' we make ourselves fools. Instead of giving God the glory we have persuaded ourselves that the credit for all that we are and all that we have belongs to other things to which we have given Godlike status in our lives.

Plagiarism can result in failing an assignment or an entire course and even being expelled. Our failure to acknowledge the true Author and Source of all that we are and have results in something far more terrifying. As Paul puts it in verse 18: "*The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth by their unrighteousness.*" The NIV translation "wickedness" is poor. The word is *adikia*, "unrighteousness." The whole

point is that the revelation of God's righteousness in the gospel (verse 17) includes the revelation that God's righteousness is utterly opposed to people's unrighteousness. God's righteousness expresses itself as wrath or anger when it is confronted by human unrighteousness. Righteousness means acting rightly in the context of a relationship. We are creatures and whether we like it or not we are in a relationship with our Creator. The only right or righteous way in which we as creatures can relate to our Creator is by acknowledging him as our Creator, that is, giving glory to him as our God and giving thanks to him. Instead, we have suppressed the truth "in unrighteousness" by failing to honour our obligation as creatures to give glory to our Creator and give thanks to him for all we are and have. In Matthew 1 we see Joseph and Mary effectively in a marriage relationship, though prior to sexual relations. But Joseph discovers Mary is pregnant. In verse 19 we are told Joseph was a righteous man. What this means is that he considered his relationship with his wife and decided the only right way to act in this relationship was to divorce her, though he intended to temper this righteous action with mercy, not wanting to publicly disgrace her.

### **God's Righteousness as Wrath: Opposing Our Unrighteousness**

In the same way God is righteous, always acting rightly, always honouring the obligations he has placed upon himself in his relationships. In the Bible God's righteousness is never an abstract quality. It is always active, dynamic. God is righteous and therefore he is not only acting rightly but always acting to put things right. As the Creator God is committed to creating a universe in which all is right. This includes two dimensions: (1) removing from this universe everything that is not right - the outworking of his wrath; and (2) making wrong things right - the outworking of his grace when he justifies the ungodly.

Just as Joseph's righteousness in his relationship with Mary moved him towards divorcing her, similarly, God's righteousness, as revealed in the gospel, moves God to divorce himself from sinful people. So, in the gospel, God's righteousness is first revealed as wrath, which comes to a head at the Day of Judgment. In Romans 2:16 Paul talks about this coming Day "*when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.*" The word *gospel* literally means "news", not "good news." As is clear from this verse, the gospel includes bad news as well as good news. At 2:5 Paul calls this same day "*the day of God's wrath.*" The gospel proclaims the bad news that God in his wrath will judge people and will send many to everlasting hell. That's what he means when he says at 2:9: "*There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil*", that is, never-ending turmoil and eternal misery. In Hebrews we are told that "*God is a consuming fire*" (12:29) and that: "*It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*" (10:31). If Romans 1:18 applies to you then you should be terrified.

There is no place for unrighteous people in the new heavens and the new earth our Creator will bring into being. People are unrighteous, not acting rightly because, as we have seen, they fail to adequately or appropriately acknowledge God as their Creator. At the heart of being righteous and acting rightly is being wide open to the truth, to God's revelation of himself as our Creator and, therefore, giving glory to God as God. Since all that we are and all that we have comes from God it follows that giving glory to God also involves glorifying him with all that we are and with all that we have. This means that our entire lives should reflect and express his glory, which is precisely what God intended when he first created people "in his image and likeness."

### **Our Idolatry: Dishonouring our Creator and Degrading Our Humanity**

But we have not only dishonoured God but we have also degraded and perverted our humanity. In verse 23 Paul is making a statement of monumental importance. It is very easy to misunderstand what Paul is saying here and many commentators have indeed missed the point. At first glance it looks as though Paul is merely addressing the way non-Jewish animists and people in many religions bow down before idols made out of metal, wood or some other material and shaped in either human, bird, animal or reptilian form. And, yes, at a superficial level Paul is indeed alluding to such practices, by way of highlighting the extent to which people have degraded themselves.

The worship of idols was commonplace in Paul's world. How distressing it is to see people dishonouring God and degrading themselves as they bow down before idols. Today, Hindus are doing this as they worship an estimated 330 million gods. A visitor to a Buddhist temple was trying to identify the statue before which worshipers were bowing. Turning to one of the locals, he pointed to the image and asked, "What is the name of this god?" "Why do you ask?" the man replied. The visitor shrugged, "Oh, just idol curiosity!" Curiosity killed the cat. The lure of idols continues to bring death.

But take a closer look at verse 23. What does the phrase "birds and animals and creeping things" remind you of? When God was about to create man he said (Genesis 1:26): *"Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."* Romans 1:23 shows people corrupting their own humanity, their identity as those created in God's image, when they worship the likenesses of birds, animals and creeping things. George Bernard Shaw was on the right track when he observed, *"The savage bows down to idols of wood and stone, the civilized man to idols of flesh and blood."* Look closer still at verse 23? On the one hand, Paul speaks about *"the glory of the immortal God."* On the other hand, he literally speaks about *"the image of mortal man."* The word "image" goes with "mortal man", not with "birds and animals and creeping things." This is deliberate. As I have stressed, Paul is centrally concerned with how we have corrupted our humanity, our identity as those created in God's image. When we use the word "image" with "man" we should be thinking of how the glory of God is abundantly displayed in man as the one created in God's image. Instead, we have this despicable behaviour by which we have exchanged the glory of the immortal God for the corrupted, perverted "image" now associated with man as the one who has become mortal, fated to die.

In verses 29-31 Paul will list many of the sins that illustrate how people have become *"filled with every kind of unrighteousness"* (yes, scrap that word "wickedness" again). Evil, greed, depravity, envy, murder, strife, etc., all have their roots in that sin which lies at the root of our unrighteousness, namely our idolatry. Paul is saying that when we suppress the truth, failing in all our being to give God the glory due to him as our Creator, this is essentially, necessarily and inescapably idolatrous. That is, if we do not give the glory to God then inevitably we give the glory to something else. De Montaigne observed, *"Man is certainly stark mad; he cannot make a flea, and yet he will be making gods by dozens."* Calvin says, *"Man's nature, so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols."* Richard Burton, not the movie star but the 19<sup>th</sup> century ethnographer, was spot on when he said, *"The more I study religions the more I am convinced that man never worshipped anything but himself."* As the central contrast

of verse 23 makes plain, the pre-eminent expression of our degrading and despicable idolatry is that we put ourselves, "mortal man", in the place of God. We have exchanged the truth for a lie. So no longer do we base our lives on what God reveals about himself. Rather, we base our lives on the lie, on what man, what people like ourselves develop as alternative foundations on which to base our lives. So, for example, the Humanist Manifesto II declares: "*We affirm that moral values derive their source from human experience.*" It adds: "*Human life has meaning because we create and develop our futures.*" Jean Paul Sartre said: "*people make themselves who they are.*" Such worldviews are idolatrous, refusing to acknowledge that as creatures we are accountable to God and instead making us central, along with our experience and capacities.

It is banal and superficial to speak of people making an idol of their car, their career, their reputation and social standing, their family, etc. At a secondary level this is appropriate, at the level of "birds and animals and creeping things." More profoundly, idolatry involves developing belief-systems, philosophies of life, worldviews and cultures that become for us the basis upon which we build and shape our lives. Besides, the worship of even physical images and idols is never merely a ritualistic, external matter. Both in the ancient and modern worlds idolatry is always part and parcel of an alternative way of understanding reality. So in Canaan when the Israelites bowed down before the Baals and the Ashtoreths of Canaanite religion it was because they rejected God's revelation and preferred to believe the Canaanite way of explaining reality, of explaining, for example, how the blessings of fertility and security were best achieved.

To the extent that your worldview, your belief and value system, is shaped by the society in which you live and not by God's Word, then to that extent you have substituted the image of mortal man for the glory of the immortal God. If you have never given your life to Jesus then it is impossible for you to give glory to God and this necessarily means that your entire life dishonours God and degrades yourself.

The wrath of God is terrifying. Firstly, it culminates in the Day of Wrath, when all those who have not been put right with God will experience everlasting misery. Secondly, it involves letting you do what you want. See verses 24-27:

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. <sup>25</sup>They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

<sup>26</sup>Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. <sup>27</sup>In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

If you want to live a life independently of God, turning your back on him, living as you please, then God will let you do just that. But realize that when God does this he is judging you. Do notice that verses 24-27 do not say that God's judgment is expressed in the consequences will follow from sexual immorality, homosexuality and lesbianism. When God gives people over or up to such practices this is judgment in itself. If that is your condition you are in an extremely dangerous position, because you are liable to be lulled into a false sense of security and will leave yourself completely unprepared to stand before God, as you most certainly will, on the terrifying Day of Judgment.

Verse 28 summarises the idolatry of which we have spoken. Notice the pun. People have not see the knowledge of God as having worth or value and, therefore, God gives people up to a worthless or valueless mind, which justifies and rationalizes doing that which ought not to be done. Indeed, at bottom all people do in fact know God is their Creator then it necessarily follows that if all the layers are stripped away we all know we have violated our relationship with the Creator and that the only right thing for him to do is to judge us as those deserving of death (v32). Yet such is the depth of our idolatrous unrighteousness that we refuse to face this truth and instead not only persist in our justifying the way we live but even applaud those who live this way. As Eric Hoffer perceptively commented, "*When people are free to do as they please, they usually imitate each other.*"

### **Justifying Faith: The Opposite of Suppressing the Truth in Idolatrous Unrighteousness**

What is the opposite of suppressing the truth in idolatrous unrighteousness? It is responding to the truth that God is our Creator in faith. Paul uses Abraham to illustrate the essential nature of the faith by which God declares us to be right or righteous in his sight. Romans 4:17 states: "He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed - the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were." Abraham believed God is the giver of life and the Creator. Now jump to verses 20-25:

Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness." The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness - for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

You and I are called to have a faith like Abraham's, a faith that believes God is our Creator, the giver of life, the one, indeed, who raised our Lord Jesus from the dead so that our sinful lives might be put right. How did Abraham's faith in God as his Creator express itself? He gave glory to God, being persuaded God had the power to do what he had promised. May you and I give glory to God as our Creator for all that we are and have and may we give him glory as we cling to the wonderful promises he has given us. Let me conclude with the closing words of this entire epistle (Rom 16:27): "*To the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.*"