

Main Street UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Romans 1:18-32 **“You Become What You Worship”**

January 24, 2015
(3rd Sunday after the Epiphany)

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Following Christ From City Center!”

IIA1: ROMANS 1:18-32 "YOU BECOME WHAT YOU WORSHIP"

Jewish Polemic v. Gentiles (//Wis. Sol. 13-15, Syb. Or. 3.8-45), 5:1 Chiasm

1) vv.18-23 WRATH REVEALED: NOT GIVE THANKS = IDOLATRY, THESIS AS WARRANT.

18 a1 For the wrath of **God** is (being) revealed from heaven //1:17a, *Wrath = Love's Active Opposition To Evil*, 11:22
 against **all** impiety (*asebia*) and **wickedness** (*adikian*) of men v.29, *Reckoning Under Way Now*, 1 Thess. 1:9-10
 who by their **wickedness** suppress the truth; *about God & people*, Not Ignorance; Truth Seen & Denied, Culpable

19a a2 since (*dioti*) what can be **known** *about God* is plain to them, Is Evident, Ps. 8, Acts 17:27-28
 b for God has shown it to them. **General Revelation (Creation); Truth Is Plain/Shown/Perceived (3x)**

20a b For ever since the creation of the world **Gentiles Know Something Of God From Creation**
 his invisible nature, **Unseen/ Seen, God Is; We Are Accountable**
 namely, his eternal power and deity (godhood), **God Is Personal, Powerful, Other**
 has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. **Invisible God Thru Visible Creation**

b b' So they are **without excuse**; **We Know The World Is Not God //Wisd. Sol. 13:1-5, 6-9**
Dioti = Because, Paul's Appeal To Natural Theology

21a a'2 Although (*dioti*) they *knew God* **Ignorance Of God Is Deliberate, Not Fated**
Mind they did not honor (glorify) him as God or give thanks to him, **Ps. 14:1, Our Purpose Is Worship Of God**
 b but they *were made* futile in their thinking **1. p.v., Ps. 94:11, Object Of Primary Contemplation**
 and their **senseless** **minds** (hearts) *were* darkened; **2. p.v., Wis. Sol. 11:15b-16, Idols → Corrupted Heart**

22 a'1 claiming to be wise, they *were* made fools, **3. p.v., 1:14, Gen. 3, Exchanged (vv. 23, 25, 26b)**
 23 and **"EXCHANGED** the glory"/ of the immortal God **3 Cycles, Wisd. Sol. 11:15-16, Ps. 106:20 (Ex. 32), Jer. 2:5, 11**
 for images/ resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles. **4 Ex., Gen. 1:20-25, 26; Ps. 14:1, 53:2**
(4) Dt. 4:15-19, Worship What Intended To Rule, Gen. 1:26-28

Within Order 2) v.24 GOD GAVE THEM UP NO. 1: HETEROSEXUAL SIN. Wisd. Sol. 14:12-14, 26-27

24 Therefore (*dio*) **GOD GAVE THEM UP** in the lusts of their hearts to impurity (uncleanness), **Gal. 5:19**
Body to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, **Image Marred, Honorable Desire/Dishonorable Use**
Ps. 81:11-12, Degraded Mind → Debauched Body

3) v.25 CORE PROBLEM: NOT WORSHIP BLESSED CREATOR (//vv.22-23).

25 because they **EXCHANGED** the truth about God/ for a (the) lie/ **a-b, Exchanged/Given Up (3x)**
 and worshiped and served the creature/ rather than the Creator, **b'-a', The Fundamental Sin**
 who is blessed for ever! Amen. **Doxology + Amen At Center, a-b//b'-a'**
Idolatry Has Mental, Sexual, Social, Eternal Consequences, Distorts All!

2') vv.26-27 GOD GAVE THEM UP NO. 2: HOMOSEXUAL SIN. Restraint Withdrawn

26 For this reason **GOD GAVE THEM UP** to dishonorable passions. **Only After Fall = Dishonorable Passion**
Outside Order For their women **EXCHANGED** natural relations **Lets Us Stew In Our Increasingly Juices**
 for unnatural, **Exchanged: Glory/Images, Truth/Lie, Natural/Unnatural**
 27 and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women **gave up = synonym, Lev. 18:22, 20:13**
 and were consumed with passion for one another, **Sin = Out Of Control Appetites, 1 Cor. 7:9**
 men committing shameless acts with men **From Dignity To Bondage**
 and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error. **Addiction, Wrath Is Intrinsic**
1 Cor. 6:9-11, 1 Tim. 1:10, T. Gad. 5:1, Wis. Sol. 11:16, 14:30

1') vv.28-32 GOD GAVE THEM UP NO. 3: NOT ACKNOWLEDGE GOD, DESERVE DEATH.

28 1 And since they did not see fit to **acknowledge God**, //v.21, *Mind (v.28), Conduct (vv.29-31), Ps. 106:41*
Mind/Act **GOD GAVE THEM UP** to an unfit (worthless) **mind** and to improper conduct; //12:1-2, 1) Mind + 2) Deed
Tear Social Fabric; Life Poisoned, Not Causes Of Wrath But Evidence

29a 2 they were filled with **all** manner **6:16, Cardinal Vice List (4), Wisd. Sol. 14:23-27, Evil Flowers (21)**
Social of **wickedness**¹ (*adikia*), evil², covetousness³, malice⁴;// **ia end, General: [4 Abstract Feminine Dative Nouns]**
These Vices Are Signs Of Wrath Now Present

b 2' full of envy¹, murder², strife³, deceit⁴, malignity⁵;// **ph sound, [5 Genitive Nouns]: Belief Effects Behavior**
Paul's Goal = Horror/Revulsion
 30 they are gossips, ³⁰slanderers, / haters of God, insolent/ **8 (4x2) Adjectival Nouns, Masc. Pl. in 6 Pairs**
 haughty, boastful, / inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, // **Vice List, Syb. Or. 3.764-66**
//Wisd. Sol. 14:23-29

31 foolish (**senseless**), faithless, / heartless, ruthless; //v.1 = 2 a vices, [Last 4 Adjectives Begin With a-privative]
Promotion **Diagnosis Before Cure: Alienation From God, Visible In Corrupt Life**

32 1' though they **know God's decree** that those who do such things **deserve to die**, v.20, *Wis. Sol. 14:22, Promote Evil*
 they not only do them **vv.28-32 = 1 Gk. Sentence, "This is the Gentile world we all know."**
 but approve those who practice them. **Is. 5:20, Suppress Truth/Promote Lie, Base Mind/ Corrupt Actions, Cheer**

A Brief Treatment Of IIA1: Romans 1:18-32

With the salutation and thanksgiving (1:1-17) complete, Paul opens the body of his treatise (1:18-15:43) with a diagnosis of the human condition East of Eden. The surface structure of the thought unit is a 5:1 concentric pattern (1-2-**3**-2'-1') with multiple inclusions to open and close the paragraph: *God* (v.18//v.28a), *all* (v.18//v.29), *wickedness* (v.18//v.29), *known* (v.19)//*know* (v.32), *minds* (v.21c//v.28), *senseless* (v.21//v.29). The legal term *without excuse* (v.20c) is parallel to the forensic terms *decree* (v.32a) and *deserve to die* (v.32a). Assonance (similar sounds) is found in the echo of two alpha-privative vices in v.18 (“impiety”/*asebia*, “wickedness”/*adikia*) parallel to four in series at the end: “senseless”/*asynetous*), “faithless”/*asynthetous*), “heartless”/*astorgous*, “ruthless”/*aneleemonous*). At the center (3. v.25) is the reason for our decline which is idolatry, the worship of non-gods and the creation of a false religions. On either side of the center (2. v.24 //2' vv.26-27) we find the phrase *God gave them up* applied to physical lust, first heterosexual (v.24), then homosexual (vv.25-26).

A second ordering principle is a thesis (v.18) and its grounding (*dioti*, vv.19-20, vv.21-23) leading to three cycles of effects signaled by the paired phrases *exchanged* (vv.23, 24, 26) and *God gave the up* (vv.24, 26, 28). The first effect is cognitive (v.21b-22a: *futile thinking, darkened hearts, foolish wisdom*) the second bodily (v.24//vv.25-26: heterosexual/homosexual immorality), the third broadly social (vv.28-32). Not even a death sentence (v.32a) is enough to restrain the cycle of corruption and those who promote it (v.32b). Human wilts under the weight of the fundamental lie of idolatry. Life will have a motivating center, even if a false one, and we become like what we worship. In reading his Bible and reflecting on the meaning of Jesus Christ as God’s medicine, Paul comes to the root of our pathology. We choose to suppress our knowledge of God and place our loyalty and hope elsewhere, and this is what life now looks like. Paul wants his hearers to say, “Yes, this what life looks like without God.”

Jewish critique of idolatry and immorality has a long history, and many of Paul’s critiques are found in *The Wisdom of Solomon* 13-14, thus he modifies a tradition. The ongoing revelation of God’s resistance to sin and evil (v.18, *the wrath of God*) is parallel to the ongoing revelation of God’s *righteousness* in the gospel (v.17). Human sin works along two axes simultaneously as found in the initial vices of *impiety* (vertical irreverence to God) and *wickedness* (horizontal injustice to others). Ignorance is no excuse because we *suppress the truth* and shut our eyes to the light. Rebellion of the will, not ignorance of the mind, is our problem. From the description of our present state and God’s resistance (v.18), Paul then looks behind the problem to its origin through the use of two *dioti* (*since, for although, because*) sentences: vv.19-20, 21-23. The perception of God’s power and deity are intuitive and universal because of God’s general revelation through creation. Since all know (vv.19-20: *plain // has shown // clearly perceived*), there is no excuse. But the refusal to honor God in worship has multiple effects as we live alienated from the truth and life of the Creator. Like cut flowers, we wilt. Thinking is corrupted (vv.21-23), sexuality distorted (vv.24//vv.26-27), and society fully infected with vice (vv.28-32). The method of God’s wrath is intrinsic; God’s let’s us have what we desire, but at high cost. We give up (*exchange*) the truth for the lie, and God’s frees us to experience consequences. Sanctified sexual expression in marriage yields to fornication in which people made in God’s image become merely objects of gratification. Inflamed sexual desires may be bent back on one’s own gender, thus homosexual activity as a vivid example of departure from natural order (vv.26-27). The punishment of sin is just more of the same, a phenomenon we know as addiction. Rather than being bonded to God through worship and love, our desires get stuck to practices that degrade and destroy. Things are as not bad as they might be, but the whole of life in all its parts is diseased. Nothing is pure and whole, yet God sustains a broken world

YOU BECOME LIKE WHAT YOU WORSHIP

“Therefore, God gave them up to....”

The absolutely worse thing that can happen is our common lot as sinners.

ROMANS 1:26

Mary Poplin is a professor and former Dean of Education at the Claremont Graduate University near L.A. She attended a Methodist church as a child, but soon began a spiritual search that took her through Buddhism, Transcendental Meditation, even telepathic attempts to bend spoons—remember Uri Geller on TV? In 1993 became a believer through a power encounter, and here is her story:

“[I knew] a graduate student who lived differently. First of all, he prayed for me and would say things like, ‘If you ever want to do anything with your spiritual life, I’d like to help.’ That was irritating; I thought I was doing plenty with my spiritual life. You know, I was bending spoons. The more distressing thing is, he’d ask questions like, ‘Do you believe in evil?’ I couldn’t answer the question consistently.

He worked at Claremont for a year, and when he left I had a dream. I was in a long line of people suspended in the air. The line seemed eternal on both ends. Jesus was greeting us in line. When I looked at him, I knew immediately what I was seeing. I couldn’t even look at him, but for a second. I fell at his feet and started weeping; the only way I can describe the feeling is that I could sense every cell in my body, and I felt total shame in every cell. Then Jesus grabbed my shoulders, and I felt total peace, like never in my life. I woke up crying. So I go to the phone and call this gentleman who never told me he was a Christian. "I need to talk to you about my spiritual life."

He said, "Let's meet," and at dinner asked, "Why do you think you have to do something with your spiritual life now?"

Out of my mouth came something I'd never thought about, "I have *some black thing* in my chest. I don't know what it is." I told him the dream.

"Do you have a Bible?" he asked, and made sure I had one before

we split that night. "You could read five Psalms a day and one chapter of Proverbs." I thought, I'm really going to do it this time. And then he said, "Since Jesus was in your dream, you might read the New Testament." That's how casual he was about that.

I began to read, and we began to meet once a week. That was November. In January my mother wanted to go to North Carolina where she grew up. We went to this little Methodist church, not because she was religious; she just wanted to see her friends. When we got there, I was really moved to just go up to the altar and give my life to the Lord. It wasn't even an altar call. It was a communion call. The guy said you don't have to be a member of any church to take communion. You just have to believe Jesus Christ lived, died for your sins, and want him in your life. When he said that, I was so powerfully moved I actually thought, even if a tornado rips through this building, I'm going to get that communion.... I knelt down and said, 'Please come and get me. Please come and get me. Please come and get me.' And when I took the communion, I felt free, like tons of things had been lifted off of me. I began to have an insatiable desire to read the Bible."

I share Dr. Mary Poplin's circuitous journey from Methodist roots into other religions, into occult powers, then back to Jesus through a dream, a friend, a Bible, and a later a deliverance and conversion at a Methodist communion rail in order read her last words, a perfect bridge to the passage before us:

"Romans 1 says that God is obvious to everyone, and the minds of people who deny him become darkened. Though they think themselves wise, they're actually foolish. That was me." Then this comment, "But the Scriptures began to heal my mind *so I could actually think again.*"¹

When we turn away from the knowledge of God which is imprinted in every heart, as witnessed to in the complexity and grandeur of creation and which echoes

¹ "The Dick Staub Interview: Mary Poplin Calls Claremont Her 'Calcutta,'" www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/decemberweb-only. Her most recent book, coauthored with Dallas Willard, is *Is Reality Secular? Testing the Assumptions of Four Global Worldviews* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2014). Our best current treatment of conversion, both into and out of Christian faith, is Scot McKnight and Hauna Ondrey, *Finding Faith, Losing Faith* (Waco, TX: Baylor Press, 2008).

in conscience and the moral law, it's not that we stay the same. We turn away for a better deal, but it does not come. Instead, we devolve. When the center is ignored, life comes apart. Our minds are darkened, our cognitive powers impaired, our bodies and appetites affected, and our entire culture corrupted by vice and violence. Since God is there to be sought and found through the hints given to all, to ignore God is deliberate retreat from reality with devastating effects. This is the Apostle Paul's world view, the widest angle on which he can set his lens and answer the big question, "What's wrong with our world?"

Now, while it may not appear so, Paul is an optimist. Other Jews in his day said the Gentiles had neither reasoned their way to God or attained knowledge of God.² But not Paul. In his read, the issue is not ignorance, not that we have no common knowledge of God, but that we deliberately close our eyes to what's given. Three times in verses 19 and 20 he hammers the idea of universal general revelation:

"Since what can be known about God *is plain to them*, for God *has shown* it to them. For ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his personal power and deity, *has been clearly perceived* in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse."

That there is a transcendent personal Creator of incredible power *is plain, has been shown*, and *is clearly perceived*. Atheism, the denial of the God of Christian and Jewish theism, may seem to be an heroic protest against convention and the continuing pain of our world, but to Paul it's the height of folly and primary evidence of rebellion and idolatry. So when some ancient person in the great long ago comes out of their tent at night to stare at the star-filled heavens and there feels an intense sense of awe answered in the insight that since every human artifact has a human maker, then the earth below our feet and the heavens above our heads are the work of an even greater Maker, they are onto something properly basic and philosophically defensible. And if that awareness comes to speech in something like, "I don't know *who* you are, but I know *that* you are. Your presence is everywhere, and I want to know you more," that's worship. And if that person does not then close their eyes to

² e.g., *The Wisdom of Solomon* (WS) 13:1, "For all men who were ignorant of God were foolish by nature; and they were *unable* from the good things that are seen to know him who exists, nor *did they recognize* the craftsman while paying heed to his works..." (ital. ad.). On the relation of *Wisdom of Solomon* to Romans, see Frank Matera, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010), 43-56. I have little doubt that Paul read WS.

avoid the light given and the obligations that go with it, a life changing relationship has begins. They are now pointed in the right direction, rightly related to God by a trusting response to divine revelation; and that’s a good beginning. So when we make our witness to Jesus,, we are building on a foundation laid long ago by God in every life. It may be buried, forgotten, or suppressed, but if Paul is right, it’s there to be uncovered. And in children and some adults, it may be very close to the surface.

In her book *The Religious Potential of the Child*, Sofia Cavalletti tells of a 3-year-old girl who grew up in an atheistic home where no one ever spoke of God:

“One day she asked her father, ‘Where does the world come from? Her father replied– in a manner consistent with his ideas– with a discourse that was materialistic in nature. Then he added: ‘However, there are those who say that all this comes from a very powerful being, and they call him God.’ At this the little girl began to run like a whirlwind around the room in a burst of joy and exclaimed: "I knew what you told me wasn't true; it is Him, it is Him!"³

I often find it helpful in pastoral conversations to ask, “Did you have any vivid awareness of God as a child? I hear the most amazing stories. Dr. Robert Coles is a long time professor of psychiatry at Harvard with a special interest in the religious life of children, and this has led him to interview children around the world. In his book, *The Spiritual Lives of Children*, he offers evidence that all children have a sense of God, including things like prayer, visions, and personal moral reflection. He calls children *pilgrims* who are trying to figure out what it all means and where it all leads.⁴ And, as they age, the culture often suppresses such knowledge, which sounds a lot like what Paul says in the passage before us, verse 21:

“Although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him,” with the result that “they were made futile in their thinking and their senseless lines were darkened,” which then channels the religious impulse into man-made substitutes, “Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images

³ Mahweh, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983, 31.

⁴ Charles Talbert, *Romans* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 73. See also “A Way Of Seeing: The Work of Robert Coles,” www.scottlondon.com/articles/coles.

resembling moral man or birds or animals or reptiles.”⁵

When in our sin and rebellion we turn away from the light God gives, the effects are total; nothing is untouched. Life’s most basic relationship has been severed, not by God but by treasonous creatures who bear the divine image. We end up believing foolish things, empty things, deadly things, even evil things that may open us to active darkness. And since life will have a center of some kind to fill the hole in our souls God designed for himself, we substitute a range of sometimes crude– say the images of people or birds or animal or reptiles in the ancient world, and at other times more sophisticated idols– things like money and status and pleasure and control and religion and education and beauty and power, all of which are idols for the same reason that none of them are God. Each idol we add to our personalized pantheon brings a different kind of bondage, since behind the non-gods we welcome are spiritual powers which mean us no good.⁶ In case you guessed, that’s *the black thing* in Poplin’s chest as revealed in the dream and banished in her sacramental encounter with the Lord. Things really left! Probably picked up in her occult adventures, which are never merely innocent. To me this is not a theoretical reality; I’ve been with people who had such experiences, especially when coming to Christ for the first time or else returning to him after wandering into dangerous foreign territory. Maybe one day I will tell you one of the stories, maybe not!

In idolatry we invest something in creation with more significance and meaning than it was designed to bear. Nothing in creation, no matter how good– not even a great husband or wife– is an adequate substitute for the Living God, for whom and in whose image we are made. I turn from God and try to find something or someone to bear the full weight of meaning, and it simply will not hold. The mercurial Mark Driscoll once summarized it in a pithy statement, “Idolatry is taking a *good* thing and making it a *god* thing, and then it comes a *bad* thing.”⁷

On the back of your Scripture sheet you’ll find a paragraph from Tim Keller’s book *The Reason for God* to read later⁸ And, I warn you ahead of time, orthodox

⁵ An echo of the four categories of idols in Dt. 4:15-19.

⁶ 1 Cor. 10:20.

⁷ PreachingToday.com search under Romans 1:18-32.

⁸ New York, NY: Dutton. 2008.

Presbyterians are good at this idol-identification thing since their mentor, John Calvin, once said that the human heart is nothing but a factory of idols. Keller then came up with a twenty item questionnaire for self-appraisal, each of which begins with the phrase *Life only has meaning if ...*, or *I only have worth if ...*. Here are the first ten.⁹ “Life only has meaning if..., or I only have worth if....

I have power and influence over others. (Power Idolatry, the worship center for which is the corner office perhaps)

I am loved and respected by _____. (Approval Idolatry, the worship center for which is accessed every time you engage in strategic name-dropping).

I have this kind of pleasure, a particular quality of life. (Comfort idolatry, the worship center for which may be your huge customized bath room or names in a little black book.)

I am able to get mastery over my life in the area of _____.” (Control idolatry, the worship center for which may be the gym or an AA meeting).

People are dependent on me and need me. (Helping Idolatry, the worship center for which is the list of people who let you manage their life).

That’s the first five. Have you been exposed yet? Here are the second five, again with the same introduction, “Life only has meaning, or I only have worth if...

Someone is there to protect me and keep me safe. (Dependence idolatry)

I am completely free from obligations or responsibilities to take care of someone. (Independence idolatry)

I am highly productive and getting a lot done. (Work idolatry)

I am being recognized for my accomplishments, and I am excelling in my work. (Achievement idolatry)

I have a certain level of wealth, financial freedom, and very nice possessions. (Materialism idolatry)

There are ten more if you want to explore them!

Friends, despite what you may have heard, the real alternative to monotheism—a relationship with the one God— is not atheism: no god, but polytheism: many gods, multiple alternative centers of loyalty, and in our day the old gods and goddesses

⁹ Tim Keller, *The Gospel in Life: Grace Changes Everything, Study Guide* (Grand Rapids, MI Zondervan, 2010), 40. Summarized at benterry.com/idolatry.

have come back in new disguises.¹⁰ Whatever you look to for comfort and meaning and energy and pleasure and demand that it deliver on your terms is an idol, a false non-god who cannot save but only deliver a temporary fix. It's something in creation you overload with expectations only God can fulfill. Keller writes:

“Why do we lie, or fail to love, or break our promises, or live selfishly? Of course, the general answer is ‘Because we are weak and sinful,’ but the specific answer is that there is something besides Jesus Christ that we feel we must have to be happy, something that is more important to our heart than God, something that is enslaving our heart through inordinate desires. The key to change, and even to self-understanding, is therefore to identify the idols of the heart.”¹¹

But the effects of idolatry do not stop with mental impairment since we are each one whole person; the effects of not worshiping God infect the whole organism. The biological desires associated with our God-given sexuality as male and females capable of physical love and the deep bonding of marriage are soon out of control because they are no longer guided and channeled into the deep rivers of commitment but into this, and then that, hookup, or this or that video fantasy, or this or that romance novel, or this or that affair. When human beings turn from the love and worship of God to other centers of loyalty, we lose self-control in this area because we are by nature pleasure-seekers. Without God's truth, the tenderest parts of the self are exposed, then exploited and trampled. Modesty is not a problem to be overcome; it is a level of self-protection in a predatory world.

It not that sexual sins of all varieties are the cause of wrath, which is simply God's push-back against all that is wrong. Wrath is what life looks like when God folds his hands— to use a human metaphor— and let's us go our own way. God's wrath is not something added-on, as if God is peeved and getting even. God does not have to add anything. Sin is its own punishment; the damage to us and others is intrinsic, not imposed; it is in the thing itself. So three times we hear the frightening phrases that when we “exchanged” something true for something not true, “God gave us up.”

¹⁰ For a brief, insightful analysis, see Dr. Peter Jones, *The Pagan Heart Of Today's Culture* (Phillipsburg, PA: P & R Publishing, 2014). As an aside, Peter is a personal friend and grew up in Liverpool as a boyhood friend of John Lennon. Ask me about him.

¹¹ Idem.

The Lord says to his children, “Thy will be done. Do as you please, and see what the consequences are.” STD’s to scar and shame, abortions because conceptions are often collateral to promiscuity, sons and daughters without fathers, mothers without husbands, rape, incest, child abuse, the pornification of culture, trafficking, men as players, women as marks, the degradation of honorable relationships between men and women, the loss of the capacity to be faithful, and the pain— oh the pain of broken hearts and mangled dreams. What was designed to draw and man and woman together in a lifelong bond, and perhaps the gift of children, is now everywhere degraded, even in the churches. Verse 24 is our diagnosis, “Therefore, God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity— and the Greek word here means sexual defilement— to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves.” God lets us go our way, and we damage ourselves and one another. And when we wink at such do we not fall under the sanction of verse 32? “... though they know God’s decree that those who do such things deserve to die, not only do they do them *but approve those who practice them.*” Is this us? Maybe I just deal with too many casualties.

This is not Paul the prude or frustrated crank; this is Pastor Paul making sense of what he sees in the streets of the Empire and deals with in the lives of his converts. What is better or more tender and satisfying than a good marriage where the respect and loving bond are guarded and kept strong? And what is more hurtful than what we have today? In Paul’s words, “we exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature— in this case our appetites— rather than our Creator, who is blessed and happy and joy-filled for ever.” We have ignored the Giver and spoiled the gift. We have believed a lie to our harm, and to our children’s harm.

Did you know that seventy percent of live-ins never marry, and those who do have a forty percent higher chance of divorce.¹² It’s not trial marriage; at a popular level it’s benefits without responsibilities for guys; it’s *let’s play house* and hope he marries me for the girls; and it’s leave the back door open just in case a better deal comes along for both; it’s divorce practice, and that is not a moralistic preacher opinion but a sociological fact. Read the footnotes and buy the books. That lives-in go to war on afternoon TV because the other person cheated is a back-door witness that we all intuitively know we were meant for faithful monogamy and so feel rage and deep hurt when someone makes promises with their body they do not keep with

¹² For the statistics, see Glenn Stanton, *The Ring Makes All The Difference* (Chicago, ILL: Moody, 2011); Mike & Harriett McManus, *Living Together: Myths, Risks & Rewards* (New York: Howard Books, 2008).

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their life. Paul was right. When God is not at the center of our minds and our affections and our seeking and our teaching and our maleness and our femaleness, life goes to pieces in intimate areas; people are trashed, and we call it *sophistication*! But Paul has a different idea, “Claiming to be sophisticated,” he says, “they became fools.... Therefore God *gave them up*... to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves.” This is how life looks without God’s wisdom. God resists what destroys people; and the pain is meant to wake us up.

What we have before us in our *whatever, whenever, whoever* culture is nothing new; in fact it’s not close to being as unbridled as what Paul faced. I recently watched a History Channel special on Pompeii– destroyed by Vesuvius just two decades after Romans was written– and I did not want Lori to walk through the room while it was on, but she did. “Phil,” she asked, “what are you watching?” “Oh, just doing some sermon research on The History Channel,” which was true but not convincing!¹³ Vegas and New Orleans and South Beach are tame by Pompeii and Rome standards, which is why Paul spoke so clearly on the destruction that comes when the fires of human desire are not kept within the fireplace of marriage. Go God’s way and everything about us is enhanced as love grows and deepens; go the world’s way of worshiping your appetites and watch how quickly life and culture corrode and become crude and mean. It’s been this way all along, says Paul, and in every generation someone must tell us why we do what we do and offer an alternative. Today it’s me. That this critical passage is excluded from the Revised Common Lectionary accepted by ours and several other denominations makes me wonder if the excision was deliberate or just accidental?¹⁴ Nothing is more counter-cultural and offensive in our day than to teach the church’s doctrine of original sin, to name our precious modern idols, and to place moral limits on self-expression. People hate it, because sinners are rebels! “No one is going to tell me what I can and cannot do!” Churches that follow only the lectionary will never have to deal in public worship with Paul’s analysis, and that is a loss because this is the most insightful text in the New Testament dealing with issue of sin as idolatry and its layered consequences. It’s not yet the good news of a cure, not yet gospel, but it is a penetrating diagnosis of what’s wrong with us all, and I gladly stand under its full

¹³ www.youtube.com/watch?v=5uHuFYyO4go.

¹⁴ For a chart on which passages from Romans are included in the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), go to www.textweek.com/romans. This is confirmed at the official RCL website at Vanderbilt,lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu.

indictment because if I accept the pain of the diagnosis, maybe I will welcome the full cure offered in Jesus Christ. I am an idolater still; even now my heart often wanders off looking for an easier deal and a better way, and so each day I need to worship the God who comes to save me bearing a cross. No halfway measures will do.

I am also thankful the new Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, together with Anglican archbishops from around the world— and after thirteen years of uncertainty— just last week put our sister church, The Episcopal Church, in *time out* to give them three years to reconsider their decisions on the Christian doctrine of marriage, which is a departure from apostolic faith and practice.¹⁵ Things move slowly in such high places, and when appeals and reason do not work, sanctions are applied. I do not think they will bring repentance, but I welcome it as a shot across the bow to our own bishops not to follow in the path of claiming new light that trumps Scripture. That our own African bishops have recently issued a sharp letter of warning to their American colleagues is a further sign of hope in troubled times.¹⁶

So what about Paul’s parallel treatment of same sex relationships in verses 26 through 27? As one who tries to keep up with both the academic and pastoral side of this contentious issue, I tell you that it is impossible to keep up with the opinions and all the nuances.¹⁷ But here is my read as one who bears the care of all sorts of sinners who want their way over God’s way. Human sexuality is immensely

¹⁵ The official report is, “Walking Together In The Service Of God In The World,” www.primates2016.org/articles/2016/01/15/communique-primates. For commentary, see Jeffrey Walton, “Anglican Communion Leaders Suspend Episcopal Church,” juicyecumenism.com/2016/01/14/anglican-communion-leaders-suspend-episcopal-church. For a protest, see “Bishop of Montana responds to the Canterbury primates communique,” anglican.ink/article/bishop-montana. Let the Methodists take heed!

¹⁶ Available at um-insight.net/perspectives/african-united-methodist-bishops.

¹⁷ On complexity, a book review will do: Preston M. Sprinkle, “Romans 1 and Homosexuality: A Critical Review of James Brownson’s *Bible, Gender, and Sexuality*,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 24:4 (2014), 515-528. I have found the testimony of former lesbian Dr. Rosario Butterfield inspiring (*Openness Unhindered: Further Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert on Sexual Identity and Union with Christ* [Crown and Covenant Publications, 2015]), as well as the honest reflections of the celibate, gay New Testament scholar Dr. Wesley Hill (*Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010)).

complex, and we may never know the precise origins of all variations, what is nature and what is nurture. But finally that is not the issue. We all now live, as Paul so clearly outlines, in a fallen world where the whole of our humanity is not as it ought to be, so we need both clear boundaries and abundant love to live with one another, and that the United Methodist Church currently has and ought not change. It is summed up in the epigram, “Celibacy in singleness and fidelity in heterosexual marriage.” No one lives in Eden any longer, so there can be no simple equation between my current desires— which ever way they point— and God’s will. To say *This is just the way I am so I may as well*, is not Christian reasoning but fatalism. Would you reason the same way if you were an alcoholic looking for an excuse to drink or a kleptomaniac who found great satisfaction in stealing? We have teaching that mirrors the Christian consensus, and we have disciplinary standards and church courts to deal with flagrant violators, especially clergy, but nothing is harder on the church than the trials of its leaders. It just hurts.

It is instructive that Paul dealt with corruption within the male and female design before he turned to variations outside the pairing since he was convinced that divine design— originally in Genesis, and then evidenced throughout Scripture— was a complementary single biological pair in a lifelong union and open to children. It is at the heterosexual end of the continuum that most of the problems are found because that’s where the overwhelming percentage of us live; only a small percentage, 1 to 2 percent, face the disability of unwanted same gender attraction. Paul first deals with violations within the creation norms of male and female, then violations outside them. And, if he had more room, he might have cataloged all the other possible combinations which then and now continue.

Did you know there is a growing discussion on polygamy as the next frontier in family and constitutional law, and after that what? As soon as marriage is no longer one man and woman based the hardware of creation, and as soon as *how I feel* is taken as more important than *how I’m made*— which is where we are now, I see no logical place to stop the parade to the radical equality of any and all adult arrangements, no matter how bizarre, and for the church to be under pressure to affirm them all. Once *hetero* is optional, why keep the binary? Why not join all manner of persons however they choose? And when I ask my progressive colleagues why not a Methodist pastor with two wives, they cannot give an answer other than Scripture and tradition— which they have already discarded, or a weak protest from feminism. One laughed recently and said, “Why not? I keep getting these emails that say *Asian women want to date you*,” and he was serious with a smile.

We Methodists, tolerant bunch that we are, said little when the revolution started back in the 60's when birth control— a good thing according to most Protestants— gave new freedoms, often exercised without corresponding responsibility.¹⁸ *Free love* was a slogan for adult recreation, with little appreciation of God's purposes of bonding two lives together with the glue of passion and loyalty in marriage. Bond and tear, bond and tear, till all that was left were notches on bedposts and hearts in pieces. We went along for the ride without much understanding where it was leading; our biggest fear was being *behind the times* and being thought *old-fashioned*. Where did we lose our way so that staying up with the times was more important than keeping the faith? My answer is we first grew comfortable and then grew sloppy and then were coopted, just like ancient Israel.

Now that our culture, as enacted by our highest authorities in the Supreme Court, has formally defined itself over against biblical norms and natural law because of our commitment to the rights of individuals in matters of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, I welcome the debate as to the nature of the church in an altered situation. I for one welcome the new stance of opposition, of the faithful having to relearn the lessons of standing over against the illusions of the culture as a principled alternative, with or without tax exempt status if it comes to that. What does it mean to be *in the world* but *not of it*? We United Methodists, having so long grown up with the American experiment, and having seen ourselves as loyal and principled citizens of *the middle way*, may have to reexamine our social supports and political arrangements. We and our convictions have been, in recent days, shoved from the center to the edges, and here we now live a bit bewildered and confused.

There is yet another layer in Paul's analysis, and since his concerns go far beyond intimate issues, his eye falls on the culture as a whole. When people deny the knowledge of God and turn to creation for substitutes, their humanity is corroded. God's gives us what we choose, and what we get is a mess, the signs of which Paul catalogs in verses 28 through 32. Here for the third time is the same pattern of abandoning the truth of God for lies of our own construction, verse 28: "And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, *God gave them up* to a worthless mind (a cognitive consequence) and to improper conduct (a behavioral consequence)." It is not that our thinking is unaffected and our behavior bad; it's that foolish, destructive living is the fruit of a corrupted mind that does not worship the true God.

¹⁸ The history is well told in Karen Booth, *Forgetting How To Blush: United Methodism's Compromise with the Sexual Revolution* (Fort Valley, GA: Bristol, 2012).

It was common in that world for moral instruction to include vice and virtue lists, things to avoid and examples to emulate.¹⁹ Paul’s list of twenty-one vices fall into four categories, and he says not that people merely *had* them but were *filled* with them. The plague is holistic and systemic. I particularly like the way he ends the litany: no wisdom, no trust, no love, no compassion; *senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless*. Think of ISIS as the most recent example of this extreme form of moral cancer. And while each vice may be examined, the cumulative impact is what Paul’s after, for his hearers to say, “Yes, that’s us, and that’s me in the midst of the us!” This does not mean Paul ignored the fact that some are better than others and some even noble by comparison, but he had enough insight to know that even in the best are deep, dark flaws that point to the truth that when God is displaced from our central love and loyalty, human thinking and character decline.

Our most recent example is the once-beloved Bill Cosby, admirable on many fronts as comedian, educator, and particularly his long role as Dr. Huxtable, and now we are angry because we feel so deceived. Not as bad as it might be, as bad as can be imagined, because then we could not survive, but there is no part of us left unspoiled and untouched, and so we sense deeply that life is not as intended, not as it ought to be, and that itself is a pointer back in the right direction. Paul is a tough thinker; his collected letters made it into the New Testament because the church judged over time that reading them in worship was used by God to keep them in the center of the new faith. Paul was good medicine, then and now.

CONCLUSION

If you ever feel depressed about our world, and if you ever feel embarrassed and ashamed by your own behavior, there is a place to start a new life, and it’s not far away. It begins, says Paul, with returning to worship the Living God who has shown his face to us in Jesus, and we do it here every week. You are never more than a week away from beginning your detox from idolatry and its side effects. Never more than a week away from saying with us, “Blessed be God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. And blessed be God’s kingdom, now and forever. Amen.”

You become like what you worship. Is that good news or bad news for you?

¹⁹ On the recovery of virtue ethics, see N.T. Wright, *After You Believe* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2012), Chapter 2, “The Transformation of Character,” 27-73.
