

WITHOUT EXCUSE: CLASSIC CHRISTIAN EXEGESIS OF GENERAL REVELATION

THOMAS C. ODEN*

The theme of general revelation is plagued by many controversies, hazards and potential misconceptions: Is Almighty God revealed clearly in creation and the providential ordering of the cosmos? Is this revelation intended for all and accessible to all? Is it saving knowledge? Does general revelation tend toward or lead to saving knowledge without further efficacious saving grace through the revealed Word? All of these questions were critically appraised in early Christian exegesis of Rom 1:18–22.

The purpose of this paper is to treat general revelation from a theological perspective with special reference to the Church fathers and ancient Christian exegetes. I hope this presentation might serve two modest purposes: to provide some ancient Christian exegetical guidelines concerning the substantive issues of general revelation, and to demonstrate a classic method of inquiry into general revelation.

I. INTRODUCTION: A CASE STUDY IN ORTHODOX EXEGESIS

1. *Objective.* My modest objective is to show textually that there is a well-defined, reliable, pre-European, classical Christian teaching of general revelation consensually received for a millennium before the Reformation that has been generally received and valued not only by the Lutheran and Reformed traditions but also by the evangelical and revivalist traditions, whether sanctificationist, Baptist or pentecostal, as well as by Eastern Orthodox and traditional Roman Catholics. This is a Spirit-led tradition of exegesis to which worldwide Christians of all cultural situations have a right to appeal insofar as it is accountable to Scripture.

2. *Method.* This teaching will be demonstrated by the method of orthodoxy—that is, by appealing textually to those consensual exegetical documents of the earliest Christian centuries that sought to interpret the mind of the believing Church—prior to its divisions—concerning those texts of sacred Scripture that pertain especially to general revelation.

3. *Text.* Arguably the weightiest text to which all Christian interpretations of general revelation appeal is Rom 1:18–22. No text on general revelation is more frequently or consequentially referenced by the worldwide

* Thomas Oden is professor of theology and ethics at Drew University, Madison Avenue, Route 24, Madison, NJ 07940.

ekklēsia of all generations. No contemporary discussion of general revelation can ignore this paramount Scriptural locus. Orthodox, Roman and Reformation teachings and catechisms, and even pentecostal and charismatic teachings, are alike (and quietly attest their kinship) in appealing consistently to Romans 1 in any serious discussion of general revelation, so much so that there is no Christian doctrine of general revelation without this pivotal text, which epitomizes both the possibilities and the limitations of the idea of general revelation. Hence we focus on this text alone.

4. *Consensuality defined.* By classical exegetes I refer in this case to pre-Protestant, pre-European, premedieval exegetes of the first millennium during the era of the undivided Church. Who are these principal sources of classic Christian exegesis? Only those who gained the most general consent by both the Asian, African, and western Church traditions as universally-esteemed great doctors of the Church: Athanasius, Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom in the east, and Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine and Gregory the Great in the west. Among these Chrysostom and Augustine were most influential regarding perplexities of general revelation. In addition to these eight, there are a number of widely respected classic Christian teachers cited by various ecumenical councils as most generally reliable to the Church in all its eastern and western, African and proto-European varieties: Cyprian of Carthage, Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory of Nyssa, Cyril of Alexandria, Leo of Rome, and John of Damascus. To these we will add several key exegetes who have focused especially on the Romans text: Tertullian, Origen, Ambrosiaster, Theodoret of Cyr, Prosper of Aquitaine, an anonymous commentary of about AD 405, and the fragmentary commentary of Gennadius of Constantinople (d. 471).

By “consensual” I do not imply that there was no variety of interpretation under the vast umbrella of orthodox consent, or that all ancient Christian writers agreed or used the same language, but that a worldwide, intergenerational consenting community has had a thousand-year-old habit of freely receiving these exegetes as those who stand most faithfully within the east/west consensus defined by the ecumenical councils of the first millennium, excepting those rare instances where some point of exegesis was specifically rejected. Ever since Harnack it has been easier for critics to see the discontinuities than the continuities in the apostolic tradition.

5. *Thesis.* There is indeed a textually-defined, consensual, classic Christian teaching of general revelation. This can be demonstrated textually by presenting the evidences of consensuality in the interpretation of those key sacred texts upon which all agree that a Christian doctrine of general revelation must be grounded. So what follows is a highly textual evidentiary presentation.

My intent is simple: to show by citations how these classic Christian exegetes mostly of the first five centuries dealt with these verses. In doing so I will ask whether there is already formed in the first millennium a reliable, clear, central core of the classic Christian teaching on general revelation.

Note that we are not approaching the question deductively by attempting first to define what the Christian teaching of general revelation is and only then to see if that teaching is indeed found in Scripture and consensual exegetical tradition. Rather, we will proceed inductively to discern what the earliest Christian exegetes in fact said about precisely these key texts of the written canonical Word, read every Sunday in churches everywhere in the first five centuries. By this means we will ask whether there is indeed a classic consensual Christian teaching of general revelation to which Protestants and Catholics and Orthodox and charismatics and pentecostals can all confidently appeal. All these traditions acknowledge their accountability to the same Scriptures, and all are equally free to appeal to and respectfully cherish and celebrate these pre-European, premodern, premedieval classic homilists and interpreters of Scripture who wrote long before Orthodox and Catholics began quarreling, much less Catholics and Protestants.

Millions of evangelicals in Africa and Asia are looking toward pre-European exegesis to guide them soundly and freshly to listen to Scripture in ways not corrupted by postcolonial modern western premises. By pre-European I mean before Charlemagne, during most of the first millennium when what we today call Europe was largely tribalistic, animist, and without a written culture, and not a cohesive cultural entity or literary tradition.

Note that classical Christian teaching does not appeal to early consensual exegesis on the modern democratic premise that a majority of exegetes might vote in a particular way. Rather it proceeds on the entirely different premise that the whole Church is being actively guided by the Holy Spirit into all truth amid the hazards of history. All classic Christian exegetes from Ignatius and Irenaeus through Eusebius to Augustine were confident of that providential guidance. Those exegetes most widely remembered and gratefully received by Christians of all different languages and cultural assumptions, whose writings were most avidly preserved against all challenges by the Church of both east and west, are assumed in this worldwide trans-generational *communio sanctorum* to be indeed dependable guides to the witness of the Holy Spirit to the truth of the gospel.

6. *Why now?* There is a deep hunger among evangelicals for classical Christian exegesis, which has been so long and disastrously neglected. This yearning is accompanied by a growing sense of demoralization in relation to actual useful outcomes of post-Enlightenment historicist exegesis shaped by the ideology of reductive naturalism. There is an emerging evangelical awareness that vital preaching and mission must now go beyond the speculative form-critical imagination of the last seven decades. Meanwhile the models and examples of ancient exegesis remain shockingly unfamiliar to modern preachers and unfairly caricatured by Biblical scholars who have often not bothered to read the texts. Yet these patristic texts were familiar to Calvin, Wesley, Edwards and Hodge in their Greek and Latin originals. Today extensive ancient commentaries remain untranslated.

This brief case study on the *locus classicus* text on general revelation glimpses a preview of the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. I am deeply indebted to Gerald Bray, volume editor of the Romans volume of

ACCS, which will be available from InterVarsity Press in mid-1998, for the superb selection and translation of many previously unknown, untranslated patristic texts on Romans.

What follows is unadorned classic commentary in the catena tradition, with very little static interference from modern humanistic assumptions. I am pledged to unoriginality. That is not a joke but a solemn promise. As a former Bultmannian belatedly coming home to evangelical faith, I ask your prayers as I attempt this unpretentious intervention.

Soft, unrealistic fantasies about general revelation as if unaccompanied by any history of sin are especially prone to fall into ideological traps of humanistic faddism. In this arena, novelty is as addictive for avant-garde evangelicals as it is for others nurtured by and still belatedly feeding upon modernity's illusions. As a former addict, I plead that evangelicals might turn away from the temptation of compulsive exegetical novelty. Faddism is like dope for those modernizing evangelical junkies who are trying frenetically to accommodate to a dying modernity and validate their credentials with a morose university ethos.

II. PART 1: GOD IS MADE KNOWN IN CREATION (ROM 1:19–20a)

Having established that "the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the ungodliness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness" (Rom 1:18), Paul states this reason for drawing this emphatic conclusion:

1. "*What can be known about God is plain to them.*" What is it that can be known about God by any reasonable person whose eyes are open, anyone willing honestly to look at the very structure of the cosmos? Origen of Alexandria (AD 185–254), who wrote the first extensive commentary on Romans that set the pattern for many subsequent generations, commented:

Paul says that what can be known about God is plain to them [all the Gentile nations], thereby revealing that there is something about God which can be known, even if there is much that remains unknown. . . . It appears here that the wrath of God is revealed not to those who are ignorant of the truth, but to those who already know the truth, however imperfectly.¹

This revelation of God is not ambiguous. It is, as Paul says, "plain to them." The extraordinary intricacy of the visible structure of the cosmos makes transparently clear the majesty and deity of God. This point is made unmistakably in the great anonymous fourth-century commentator on Romans commonly called Ambrosiaster (once attributed to Ambrose, but now viewed as an independent Latin source probably prior to Ambrose):

The knowledge of God is plain from the very structure of the world itself. For God, who by nature is invisible, may be known even from things which are

¹ Origen *Commentarii in Epistolam ad Romanos* (5 vols.; ed. T. Heither; Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1990–95).

visible. For his work is made in such a way that it reveals its Maker by its very visibility, so that what is concealed may be known by looking at what is revealed. This is revealed so that everyone might believe that he is God, who made this cosmos, which is impossible for anyone else to do.²

Why is it so plain? The Pauline text itself answers: “Because God has showed it to them.” God has manifested this revelation, made it evident, shown its evidences to all. John Chrysostom (344/354–407) commented on God’s self-showing to all humanity, all history, throughout the whole cosmos, and especially in our hearts:

God has placed the knowledge of himself in human hearts from the beginning. But this knowledge they unwisely invested in wood and stone. They thus contaminated the truth, at least as far as they were able. Meanwhile the truth itself abides unchanged, possessing its own unchanging glory. . . . How did God reveal himself? By a voice from heaven? Not at all! God made a panoply which was able to draw them by more than a voice. He put before them the immense creation, so that both the wise and the unlearned, the Scythian and the barbarian, might ascend to God, having learned through sight the beauty of the things which they had seen.³

The silent panoply of creation is plainly available to the most uneducated beholder through conscience and reason, quite apart from the history of revelation and the revealed Word.

2. *The logic of Rom 1:20* moves from sensory evidences to rational conclusion to divine judgment. The classic Christian teaching of general revelation hinges on the intrinsic connection between three penetrating factors, all expressed in a single verse, Rom 1:20: (1) “Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature—namely, his eternal power and deity—has been clearly perceived.” How? (2) “In the things that have been made,” in visible creation. So what? (3) “So all are without excuse.”

This text establishes a primary premise: “Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature—namely, his eternal power and deity—has been clearly perceived.” From the creation this has been evident. But where is the evidence? How is this evidence made empirically intelligible? Here Paul asserts a second premise: God’s eternity, majesty and divinity have been obviously perceived from the beginning “in the things that have been made,” through all things visible. Then Paul abruptly proceeds to this decisive, surprising inference: “Therefore they are without excuse.”

Classic commentary focuses on the coherent correlation of these three interdependent clauses. One clause affirmed without the other would miss the whole point. If you assert general revelation without recognition that all are left without excuse, you have not read the whole sentence. If you assert divine judgment without making clear that it is based on what is clearly knowable to all humanity about God, you have condemned hastily.

² *Ambrosiastri qui dicitur commentarius in epistulas Paulinas* (CSEL 81.39, 41).

³ Chrysostom *Homilies on Romans* 3.19 (NPNF 1.11:352).

The systematic teaching that later would be called the doctrine of general revelation would hinge on the proper coherence of these three clauses. There is no doubt that this correlation was grasped quite early and consensually and very precisely in ancient Christian exegesis, as we will show. It has thenceforth been repeatedly set forth as dogma by the whole Church—that is, by all who take Paul’s letter to Rome as Word of God, by all who hear this letter read canonically in Christian worship, which is to say the whole Church of all times and places.

Let us listen emphatically to the ancient Christian exegetes as they take the text phrase by phrase, and let us see how this text was consensually understood by the most widely trusted exegetes of the first millennium.

“Since the creation of the world.” We begin with the first premise: To gaze upon the world, wrote Basil of Caesarea in the fourth century, is like discovering a training house for the soul:

You will find that the world was not devised at random or to no purpose, but to contribute to some useful end and to the great advantage of all beings. The cosmos is truly a training place for each rational soul, and a school for attaining the knowledge of God, because through visible and perceptible objects it provides guidance to the mind for the contemplation of the invisible.⁴

The human mind is created precisely to make this connection, according to Ambrosiaster: “Belief is not all that foreign to our mind or to our nature. Even though we cannot see God with our eyes, what we believe is not out of harmony with the nature of our minds and our way of speaking.”⁵

In what arena has God’s power and deity “been clearly perceived”? Everything in creation has the capacity to refract the glory of the Creator. Basil writes: “In all things visible, clear reminders of the Benefactor grip us. We shall not give any opportunity for sins, nor shall we leave any place in our hearts for the enemy, if we have God as a dweller in us by this constant remembrance of him.”⁶

But how can we discern with our poor eyesight God’s “invisible nature”? The creation is beheld through the eyes of the mind, according to Novatian (whose odd views on ecclesiology did not detract from the orthodoxy of his triune teaching): “The human mind, learning to know the hidden things from those which are manifest, may consider the greatness of the Maker from the greatness of his works, which it sees with the eyes of the mind.”⁷

In what physical theater is God beheld? Where does this recognition occur? Precisely “in the things that have been made.” The mind is never independent of the sensory apparatus. “For how,” mused Tertullian, “can the intellect be considered sovereign above the senses, when it is these senses that educate it for the discovery of truths? It is a fact that these truths are learned by means of palpable objects. Invisible things are discovered by the help of visible ones, even as the Apostle says in his Epistle.”⁸ Similarly Ori-

⁴ Basil *Hexameron*, *Homily 1* (FC 46.11).

⁵ CSEL 81.

⁶ Basil *Hexameron* 3 (FC 36.54).

⁷ Novatian *The Trinity* (FC 67.30).

⁸ Tertullian *A Treatise on the Soul* (ANF 3.199).

gen: "All who live on this earth have to begin with the use of the senses upon sensible objects in order to go on from them to a knowledge of the nature of intelligible things. Hence their knowledge need not stop short with the mere objects of sense."⁹ Mind and objective world cohere, according to Gennadius of Constantinople: "He created us with such a nature, placing a mind and reason within us and granting us these things so that by studying this visible world we might come to a knowledge of the invisible things which are his."¹⁰

"On what basis will the heathen claim at the judgement that they were ignorant of God?" asks Chrysostom:

Weren't they able to hear the heavens speaking more clearly than a trumpet through the well-ordered harmony of all things? Did you not see the hours of night and day remaining constant, and the good order of winter, spring and the other seasons remaining both fixed and unmoved . . . ? Yet God did not set so vast a system of teaching before the heathen merely to deprive them of any excuse, but so that they might voluntarily come to know him. It was by their own failure to recognize him that they deprived themselves of every excuse.¹¹

The purpose was not simply to deprive them of an excuse but positively to reveal his glory through the heavens and earth. The anonymous commentary on Romans of about AD 405 exclaimed: "Because we see the world, composed and fashioned by God, in its glory, we behold the whole of his work every day."¹² John of Damascus summarized the early Church's celebration of God in all things: "The very creation, of its harmony and ordering, proclaims the majesty of the Divine Nature."¹³

III. PART 2: WITHOUT EXCUSE

1. "*Therefore they are without excuse*" (Rom 1:20b). Now comes the surprising and decisive reversal in the text: God's offer to make himself clearly known through creation, being voluntarily suppressed and twisted into idolatry, leaves all humanity without excuse. "How does Paul mean that they are without excuse," asked Augustine, "except by reference to a kind of excuse that usually prompts human pride to voice such protestations as: 'But if only I had known'? . . . This kind of excuse is taken away" among the Gentiles by general revelation and among the Jews by the law.¹⁴

The very structure of the cosmos indicts and calls all beholders to repentance. Ambrosiaster reasoned as follows:

Although the power and majesty of God cannot by themselves be tangibly seen by the eyes of the creature, they may be known by the workings of the structure of the world. In this way God indicts those who lived against the

⁹ Origen *Against Celsus* (ANF 4.625).

¹⁰ Gennadius *Pauline Commentary from the Greek Church* (NTAbh 15.357).

¹¹ Chrysostom *Homilies* 3.20 (NPNF 1.11:352).

¹² *Ein neuer Paulustext und Kommentar* (ed. H. J. Frede; Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1974) 25.

¹³ John of Damascus *Orthodox Faith: Book 1* (FC 37.166).

¹⁴ Augustine *Grace and Free Will* (FC 59.252).

law, whether natural or Mosaic. For by the *habit* of sinning [intergenerationally conceived] they treaded upon the law of nature, wiping out any memory of him. They did not want to accept the law, which had been given for their reformation, and thus were doubly condemned. His power and deity are eternally revealed, so they are without excuse. In order that ungodliness might not be cheaply justified [by appealing to his general revelation], Paul wrote that the power of God and his eternal divinity were known [by those who by their foolishness chose not to honor] God *whom they knew existed* and has provided for their welfare.¹⁵

Is God then revealed sufficiently to justly deprive human pride of excuse? According to Origen,

humans know this truth by the natural and God-given powers of the mind. Enough wisdom is given to them so that they might know what may be known of God by apprehending the invisible things from those things which can be seen by using the powers of human thought. For this reason God's judgement is just on those who, before the coming of Christ, could have known God, but instead turned away from him and fell into worshiping images of men and animals.¹⁶

2. *Futile reasoning.* "For although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened" (Rom 1:21). Here it is clearly asserted that all humanity primordially "knew God." Augustine observes:

Notice that Paul does not call them ignorant of the truth, but says that they held the truth in iniquity. And he does not fail to answer the obvious question: How could those (apart from the covenant with Israel) to whom God had not given the Law, have a knowledge of the truth? For he says that through the visible things of the Creation they reached an understanding of the invisible things of the Creator.¹⁷

Yet precisely those who knew God as God "did not honor him as God," as is proven in the history of sin. Gennadius stated this point sharply:

The pagans knew that there was a God. It is clear that they did not receive judgement because of this. For it was not for want of knowledge that they were condemned, but for their response to their capability of knowing. For each one glorified some supposed "god" in the sense that whatever he imagined God to be, that he served. Thus they corrupted the whole relation by their peculiar and mistaken ideas. They abandoned God's way of allowing humanity to know him [as his glory is revealed in creation] and preferred their own, falling into the deepest foolishness, outdoing themselves in their so-called wisdom by adding to their folly, descending to the worship of reptiles and inanimate objects.¹⁸

In this way "they became futile in their thinking." Ambrosiaster commented on this futility:

¹⁵ CSEL 81.41 (italics mine).

¹⁶ Origen *Commentarii*.

¹⁷ Augustine *The Spirit and the Letter* (LCC 8.209).

¹⁸ Gennadius *Commentary* (NTAbh 15.358).

Truly this is futility, that knowing the truth they [voluntarily] *decided* to worship something else, which they *knew* was not true. Hiding from God they worshipped idols. A cloud of error covered their heart. Although they [reasonably] should have honored the Creator all the more from the beautiful things which he made, they clung to what they could see, saying that the things which they could see were sufficient for their salvation.¹⁹

They imagined that saving knowledge would come from the darkness of their natural knowledge of God, which had become idolatrously distorted. The anonymous commentary of about AD 405 related this futility to the history of Greek philosophy: "This applies to Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Democritus, Epicurus and all the philosophers who considered themselves wise."²⁰ Similarly Augustine: "Here the Apostle has in mind the Romans, Greeks and Egyptians, all boastful of their renown for wisdom."²¹ In much the same way Prosper of Aquitaine wrote: "It is well known how Greek schools and Roman eloquence and the search of the whole world in the quest of the supreme good, even with the most penetrating study and outstanding ability, accomplished little by their labor, except to become *futile in their thinking*."²² This futility of reasoning whirls in a downward gyre.

Paul next asserts that "their senseless minds were darkened." This idolatrous darkening has had an accelerating effect within the history of sin, according to Augustine: "Surely, this darkening of the heart was already a penalty and punishment. But further, by that penalty, by the blinding of the heart because of the abandonment by the light of wisdom, they fell more and more into grievous sins."²³ Hence there is no pretense or expectation in patristic exegesis that the natural knowledge of God in and through general revelation is of itself a saving knowledge.

3. *Romans 1:22–23*: "Claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles." "They imagined that they were wise," Ambrosiaster observed, "because they thought they had explored the natural sciences, investigating the courses of the stars and the quantities of the elements," reducing knowing to measurement and empirical investigation, "while rejecting the God who made them. Therefore they are fools, if they think of these things as more worthy of praise than is the One who created them."²⁴ "Having a high opinion of themselves, and not being patient enough to go the way that God had commanded them," wrote Chrysostom, "they became immersed in a way of thinking which made no sense."²⁵

Who "became fools"? Anyone who exchanged worship of the creation for the Creator. Here is the fourfold regression of reasoning, according to Chrysostom: "(1) Paul's first charge against the idolaters was that they *missed*

¹⁹ CSEL 81.41, 43 (italics mine).

²⁰ *Paulustext* 25.

²¹ Augustine *The City of God: Book 8* (FC 14.39).

²² Prosper of Aquitaine *Grace and Free Will* (FC 7.380).

²³ Augustine *On Nature and Grace* (FC 86.39).

²⁴ CSEL 81.43.

²⁵ Chrysostom *Homilies* 3.22 (NPNF 1.11:352).

finding God” who had evidently made himself known. “(2) His second was that, although they had a wonderful and clear *path* for knowing God, they *did not walk* down it. (3) The third is that they nevertheless *pretended to be wise*. (4) The fourth was that not only did they not find the Supreme Being, but sought to *lower God* to the level of devils, stones and wood. In 1 Corinthians Paul pulls down this pride, letting the cross itself deal them the blow, where he says:²⁶ “the foolishness of God is wiser than men”²⁷ The great Antiochean exegete, Theodoret of Cyr, adds: “They increased their guilt by their claim, for in considering themselves wise they showed that in fact they were fools.”²⁸ Augustine summarized: “It is *pride* that turns man away from wisdom, and *folly* is the consequence of turning away from wisdom.”²⁹

They “exchanged the immortal God for images.” Ambrosiaster chronicled this spiraling deterioration of natural reasoning toward absurdity:

So blinded were their hearts that they exchanged the majesty of the invisible God, which they knew from the things which he had made, not into men, but what is worse, and an inexcusable offense, into the mere effigy of men, merely a depiction, so that the image of a corruptible man was called by them a “god.” Moreover, they did not even dare honor living people with this name, but elevated the images of dead men to the glory of God! What great idiocy, what immense stupidity, in that they knew they were worshipping them to their damnation, among whom an image was more powerful than the truth, and the dead were mightier than the living! Turning away from the living God they preferred dead men, among whose number they found themselves.³⁰

“People like this,” joked Gregory of Nazianzus, “make it hard to tell which was the more contemptible, the worshipers or that which they worshiped. Perhaps the worshipers by far, since they were rational beings and recipients of God’s grace, who foolishly chose something inferior to themselves as their benefactors and defenders.”³¹

The images resembled “mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles.” Ambrosiaster jests:

They so diminished the majesty and glory of God that they gave the title of “god” to the images of things which were small and puny. For the Babylonians were the first to deify a notion of Bel, who was portrayed as a dead man[!], who had supposedly once been one of their kings. They also worshiped the dragon serpent, which Daniel the man of God killed, of which they had an image. The Egyptians also worshiped a quadruped which they called Apis, in the form of a bull. Jeroboam copied this corruption by setting up calves in Samaria, to which the Jews were expected to offer sacrifices. . . . By doing this, those who knew the invisible God did not honor him. Hence, they were unable to be wise even in the things which are visible. For one who has problems with the big things will not be wise in the little things either.³²

²⁶ 1 Cor 1:25.

²⁷ Chrysostom *Homilies* 3.23 (NPNF 1.11:352–353; italics mine).

²⁸ Theodoret *Interpretation of the Letter to the Romans* (PG 82 col. 61).

²⁹ Augustine *On Free Will* (LCC 6.214; italics mine).

³⁰ CSEL 81.45, 47.

³¹ Gregory of Nazianzus *Oration 28: On the Doctrine of God*.

³² CSEL 81.45, 47.

Chrysostom offered this reprise:

The heathen ought to have known that God is Lord of all, that he made them out of nothing, that he works by his providence, and that he cares about them. For these things are the glory of God. To whom then did they ascribe lordship? Not even to men, but to an image made like corruptible man! Nor did they stop there, but sank to the level of beasts, or even worse to the images of beasts.³³

4. *Romans 1:24–25*: “Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature instead of the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.” Theodoret explained: “By *gave them up* [*paredōken*] Paul means that God permitted this to happen. He simply abandoned them to their freedom because they had fallen into extreme ungodliness.”³⁴

Similarly Ambrosiaster:

To *hand over* means to permit, not to encourage or to force. They were helped by the Devil [but only] to carry out in practice the things which they themselves had [voluntarily] conceived in their lusts. Those who never thought of doing good were handed over to their own self-defilement. They damaged each other’s bodies with abuse. For even now there are men of this type, who are said to dishonor each other’s bodies.³⁵

God abandoned them “in the lusts of their hearts to impurity.” All idolatry is willed, as Chrysostom insisted: That

God *gave them up* means that he left them alone. . . . God left those who were not minded to receive what comes from him, but were quick to desert him, even though God had fully done his part [in revealing himself]. After all, he had set before them, as a form of teaching, the world. He gave them reason, and an understanding capable of perceiving what they needed to know. Yet the people of that time did not use any of those things to draw nearer toward saving knowledge, but rather they perverted even what they had received into its opposite! What could God have done about this? Could he have forced them to do what was right? Yes, but that would hardly have made them virtuous. All he could do then was to leave them to their own devices, which is what he did, so that in that way, if in no other, having tried and discovered the things they lusted after, they might turn away from what was so shameful.³⁶

Generations earlier, Origen had reported this inference as an established ecumenical consensus:

This is the faith of the church: For just cause those who, in their wickedness, suppress the truth revealed by God are abandoned by God, and because they are abandoned, they are given over to the desires of their own hearts. The desire of their heart was that they should disgrace their bodies in uncleanness and abuse, and that with corresponding neglect towards the worship of God,

³³ Chrysostom *Homilies* 3.23 (NPNF 1.11:352–353).

³⁴ Theodoret *Interpretation* (PG 82. col. 64).

³⁵ CSEL 81.47, 49.

³⁶ Chrysostom *Homilies* 3.24 (NPNF 1.11:354).

they should abandon the glory of the incorruptible God for the wicked and base forms of men and animals, and think so little of themselves as to live like irrational beasts when in fact they were rational men.³⁷

God did not protect them from “dishonoring . . . their [own] bodies.” The anonymous commentary of about AD 405 confirms this: “In saying that God gave them up to their own lusts, Paul is not implying that God is the direct cause of their idolatry. Rather he is saying that God did not bring immediate judgement on them even after much patience and longsuffering. God simply allowed them to act according to their own desires.”³⁸ Augustine mused on the psychological dynamics of this retrogression: “When the *evil* will receives *power* to accomplish its purpose, this comes from the [permissive] judgement of God, in whom there is no unrighteousness.” Do not blame God for what humans have willed. “His punishment is carried out in this way as well as in others, and it is not less merely because it is hidden, though the wicked only know they are being punished when some conspicuous penalty makes them feel, against their will, the evil of the sin which they committed willingly.”³⁹

“They exchanged the truth about God for a lie.” Here is the essence of the exchange, according to Ambrosiaster: “Ignoring what rocks and wood and other metals really are, they attributed to them a reality that did not belong to them. The truth of God was turned into a lie when a rock was called God. . . . They did not deny God, but worshiped a creature as God. In order to justify this, they gave these things the honor due to God, so that their worship did dishonor to God.”⁴⁰ The great Athanasius earlier had commented on the same verse: “So far did their impiety go that they proceeded to worship demonic powers, and proclaimed them as gods, while fulfilling their own lusts.”⁴¹

They “worshiped and served the creature instead of the Creator, who is blessed forever.” Through all these regressions, Chrysostom comments, God remains

blessed for ever, for even if the unbelievers treated God insolently, God is not overwhelmed, nor is any harm done to his glory, for he continues for ever blessed. Suppose, as it sometimes happens, that a person receives the insults of others with equanimity, and does not feel their sting. Think of how much more easily God ignores such insults. For God’s nature is imperishable and unalterable, God’s glory is unchangeable and immutable.⁴²

IV. PART 3: THE SUPPRESSION OF THE TRUTH OF GENERAL REVELATION AMID THE HISTORY OF SIN

In this way the truth of general revelation, while clearly given, has become suppressed amid the history of sin.

³⁷ Origen *Commentarii*.

³⁸ *Paulustext* 25–26.

³⁹ Augustine *Spirit* (LCC 8.238).

⁴⁰ CSEL 81.49.

⁴¹ Athanasius *On the Incarnation of the Word* (LCC 3.66).

⁴² Chrysostom *Homilies* 3.25 (NPNF 1.11:354).

1. *“The wrath of God.”* Now we return to v. 18: “For the wrath of God is revealed against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth.” Ambrosiaster deciphers the puzzle in this way:

Just as the righteousness of God is revealed in the one who believes, so ungodliness and unrighteousness are revealed in the one who does not believe. From the very structure of heaven it appears that God is angry with them. For this reason he made the stars so beautiful, that from them he might be known as their great and wonderful Creator, and alone be adored. It is written in the eighteenth Psalm [LXX]: *The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows his handiwork,*⁴³ and so the human race is made guilty by the natural law. For all could learn this by the law of nature, with the structure of the world bearing witness that God its author ought alone to be loved, as Moses said. But they became ungodly, not worshiping the Creator, and so unrighteousness appeared in them, in that seeing they suppressed the truth, not confessing the one God.⁴⁴

In this way God’s plain revelation in creation continues to stand as a testimony “against all ungodliness and wickedness . . . suppress[ing] the truth.” Origen argued for an implied distinction:

Ungodliness refers to sin against God; wickedness, to sin against human beings. For those who suppress the truth by their wickedness sin against both God and humanity. Humans know this truth by the natural and God-given powers of the mind. Enough wisdom is given to them that they might know what is knowable of God, i.e. what may be reasonably known of God, apprehending the invisible things from those things which can be seen, using the powers of human thought. For this reason God’s judgement is just upon those who, before the coming of Christ, could have known God, but instead turned away from him and fell into worshiping images of men and animals. To sum up: to worship anything at all apart from the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is the offense of ungodliness.⁴⁵

2. *“They are a law to themselves.”* We turn finally to Rom 2:14–15: “When Gentiles who have not the Law do by nature what the Law requires they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the Law. They show that what the Law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them.”

They “do by nature what the Law requires . . . what the Law requires is written on their hearts.” What law is written on the hearts of the Gentiles? Origen explains:⁴⁶

When the Apostle says this, he clearly does not mean that the Gentiles keep the Sabbaths or the new moons or the sacrifices which are written down in the Law. For this Law is not what is written on the hearts of the Gentiles. Rather it is that which can be discerned naturally, e.g. that they should not kill, or commit adultery, that they should not steal nor bear false witness,

⁴³ Ps 19:1.

⁴⁴ CSEL 81.39.

⁴⁵ Origen *Commentarii*.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

that they should honor father and mother, etc. It may well be that since God is the one Creator of all, these things are written on the hearts of the Gentiles. . . . They have the Law written on their hearts by God, *not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God.*⁴⁷

“Their conscience . . . bears witness.” “Conscience and reason in this way take the place of the Law,” wrote Chrysostom. “By saying this, Paul showed that God made them independent, giving them the freedom to choose virtue and avoid vice. Do not be surprised that he proves this point, not once or twice, but several times. . . . Even before the Law was given, the human race enjoyed the care of Providence. . . . Paul is not speaking here of the righteous only, but of all humanity.”⁴⁸

“Their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them.” The trial in final judgment is prerehearsed by conscience here and now, according to Origen: “Who can doubt that a trial is properly conducted when there are accusers and defenders and witnesses all present? . . . See therefore how on that day, when God will judge the secrets of men, our thoughts will either accuse or defend our soul—not the thoughts which we will have then, but the ones which we have now.”⁴⁹ “Therefore,” declared Ambrosiaster, “nature itself acknowledges its Creator by its own judgement, not by the [Mosaic] Law but by reason, for the creature recognizes its Maker in itself.”⁵⁰

V. CONCLUSION

We conclude that there is a substantive consensus of classic Christian commentary on Rom 1:18 ff. that confirms with Paul that all humanity is offered some true, even if limited, knowledge of God by contemplating the majesty and goodness of God in the whole of creation. But the ancient Christian writers did not presume or imagine from this that such knowledge could constitute a saving knowledge of God. Rather, it took away any excuse by which natural humanity might plead a righteousness of its own in the presence of God, whose righteousness is once for all incomparably revealed on the cross.

This consensus is clearly found in the earliest written Christian recollections of the meaning of Paul’s letter. It was a maturing exegesis in the second and third centuries and was maturely stated in the fourth century and following. In time it became appropriated and reconfirmed by Luther, Calvin, Wesley, and North American evangelical revivalism as rightly and thoroughly grounded in Scripture.

⁴⁷ 2 Cor 3:3.

⁴⁸ Chrysostom *Homilies* 3.25 (NPNF 1.11:365).

⁴⁹ Origen *Commentarii*.

⁵⁰ CSEL 81.75.