

Does Romans 1:18–21 Teach Natural Theology? Yes, and No!

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INTRODUCTION

Among the reformed, “natural theology” is hotly contested. Debates rage over how Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, the post-reformation reformed divines, and Cornelius Van Til understand natural theology. However, Paul’s own understanding, detailed in Romans 1:18–21, cannot be lost. Modifying J. V. Fesko’s metaphor, this study takes up a shovel instead of sword or scalpel. With it, I will unearth misplaced exegetical and dogmatic stones and repack the dirt, reestablishing an exegetical foundation for future theological debates about natural theology.¹ In returning to the *locus classicus* of natural theology and surveying it anew, I hope to refocus a present discussion which seems to me as having listed away from exegesis into the realm of systematics and historical theology, and needs to find its textual footing anew. As such, my exegesis of Romans 1:18–21 will answer the question: does the unregenerate man have a natural theology? The answer will be *both* yes, and no!²

To prove this, I will first define important terms for this debate. Second, I will provide an exegesis of Romans 1:18–21. This exegesis will reveal

that the natural man lives in perpetual inward contradiction between two inflexible realities: his knowledge of God as Creator, and his failure to express himself toward God in honor and gratitude. In other words, “yes,” the natural man has a knowledge of God as Creator; “no,” man never uses this knowledge correctly. Only regeneration overturns this second inflexible failure in man. Third, from this conclusion, I will enlist several voices among the Reformed who’ve effectively captured this inward contradiction, before ending with suggestions for future research.

DEFINING OUR TERMS

To lay our foundation, we must define two crucial terms and their relationship to each other: *revelation* and *knowledge* of God as Creator.

- Revelation of God as Creator: Revelation given by God testifying to *who* he is and *what* he does in creation. God reveals himself as Creator. Creation displays God’s divine majesty and greatness.³ Besides Romans 1:18–21 (and 22–32), other texts detailing general revelation includes Romans 2:14–16; Acts 14:15–17; 17:22–31, and Psalm 19, 29, and 104.
- Knowledge of God as Creator: What I mean narrowly by “natural theology.” This knowledge is appropriated from revelation in creation into the understanding of the image bearer. It is, like revelation, granted by God.⁴ Nature testifies to (and results in knowledge of) God as Creator. This knowledge concerns God’s eternal power and divine nature. Crucially, any deficiency in natural theology emerges because it is *our theology*, subject to our finitude, but more importantly, our depravity. God does not intend his creatures’ knowledge of him to be inert. Knowledge of God as Creator is only properly *knowing* when *resulting in* gratitude and honor toward God as Creator.

This knowledge, certainly apprehended among the unregenerate, is defective *only* because it is simultaneously suppressed and distorted from achieving its God-intended end: righteous honor and gratitude expressed toward God. This incongruence between knowledge and misuse of knowledge is unjust (unrighteous). This suits man for condemnation. *True* knowledge of God *must* result in honor and gratitude of God. The natural person does not accept the things of God’s Spirit. They are folly to him. He is unable to understand due to a lack of spiritual discernment (1 Cor 2:14). The revelation of God as Creator is one of those “things of the Spirit of God”

which the natural man, though he knows the truth, chronically subverts from its proper end, the glory of God.

Finally, in defining knowledge of God as Creator narrowly as “natural theology,” I presently leave aside the broader discussion of any formal or discursive “natural theological” method detailed in any scholastic system (be it medieval, reformational, or post-reformational). Biblically defining the boundaries of the knowledge of God as Creator must be settled *before* any “natural theological” method. As Steven Duby observes, in light of Scripture, “the knowledge of God the Creator given by the Creator himself in the marks of his wisdom and power in the grandeur and order of creation [...] is the first and most fundamental sense of the phrase ‘natural theology.’”⁵ Any discursive, systematic, or formal attempt at “natural theology,” is a cart placed behind the horse of “natural theology” in this first sense.⁶

EXEGESIS OF ROMANS 1:18–21

To understand Romans 1:18–21 we must detail its relationship to Romans 1:16–17. In Romans 1:15 Paul confesses his eagerness to preach the gospel in Rome. In 1:16 Paul gives the reason: because (γὰρ) he is unashamed of the gospel. Paul’s confidence in the gospel is because (γὰρ) it is God’s power for salvation for believers. In 17a Paul explains the warrant for the gospel’s power, because (γὰρ) God’s righteousness is revealed in it from faith to faith (ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν). This idea is proven through appeal to Habakuk 2:4 (καθὼς γέγραπται), where the righteous by his faith/faithfulness will live, contrasted with the “puffed up” and unrighteous person.⁷

Romans 1:18 and 1:17 are logically connected (γὰρ), though Paul doesn’t state how. How does the revelation of God’s saving righteousness in 1:16–17 relate his wrath revealed in 1:18? It is unlikely Paul employs γὰρ adversatively in 1:18, which is an unusual use of the particle.⁸ It is better to understand 1:18–32 (and through 3:20) as an extended treatise detailing the need for God’s saving righteousness received by faith detailed in 1:16–17. This subordinates 1:18–3:20 as a unit in support of 1:16–17. As Harvey observes of 1:18, “Paul now explains (γὰρ) why the righteous person must live by faith: humankind’s actions earn God’s wrath rather than his righteousness[.]”⁹ Similarly, Cranfield suggests Paul uses γὰρ to show “that the revelation of the wrath of God against men’s sin makes it abundantly

clear that there can be no question of men's having a status of righteousness before God in any other way than ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν."¹⁰

Thus, Romans 1:18 is both the doorway into the larger unit (1:18–3:20) where warrant for the revelation of the righteousness of God in the gospel (and in his righteous wrath) is shown, and more narrowly as a thesis statement for 1:19–32, where Paul unpacks the reason humanity is due condemnation.¹¹ If 1:16–17 is what *God has done* in light of the human condition, 1:18–32 are the opening strokes of Paul's sketch of the *bleak anthropological backdrop* upon which the glory of God's saving righteousness in the gospel is displayed (1:16–17).¹²

In Romans 1:18 Paul leads with the fact that God's wrath is revealed (ἀποκαλύπτεται) from heaven. As the gospel of Jesus reveals (ἀποκαλύπτεται) the righteousness of God (1:17), God's wrath is revealed (ἀποκαλύπτεται) because of humanity's ungodliness and unrighteousness. The verb ἀποκαλύπτεται means to “uncover” or “disclose,” actions performed by God. In 1:17 the “righteousness of God” (δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ) is a subjective genitive, ἀποκαλύπτεται a divine passive. This accords with 1:18, where the “wrath of God” (ὀργὴ θεοῦ) is likewise a subjective genitive, God being the subject and ἀποκαλύπτεται again a divine passive. There is symmetry here, God performing each revelation.

Both instances of ἀποκαλύπτεται are present tense, meaning any preconditions are satisfied for this revelation to occur. In 1:16–17 the precondition was God's timing in fulfilling his promise given through the prophets, the fullness of time achieved (Rom 1:2–3a; cf. Gal 4:4). In 1:18 the precondition is the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men suppressing the truth of God within them. However, though God's wrath is being revealed in Paul's time, the precondition (suppression of the truth) has been satisfied since the world's beginning.

God discloses his wrath against ungodly and unrighteous people. Ungodliness (ἀσέβειαν) means living contrary to fitting religious beliefs and practices.¹³ It also means to act impiously, incongruent with what is considered normal or proper in relation to deity.¹⁴ The emphasis falls on living in antithesis to what pleases God. God's wrath is revealed where righteousness and piety are absent. However, though piety is absent, knowledge isn't. Man's certain knowledge in fact serves to reveal this

incongruity between knowledge and righteous religious expression toward God.

In 1:18b Paul explains why man is considered ungodly and unrighteous: they unrighteously suppress the truth. More literally, “the truth in unrighteousness is suppressed.” These people occupy two conditions simultaneously, in contradiction: they possess the truth, but suppress it. The natural man fails to live in proper (righteous) congruence between truth known and *whatever is opposite of suppression* (unloosed honor and thanks of God). The truth is present and known (“yes”), but it is not celebrated. It is suppressed (“no!”). For Calvin, this contradiction between genuine knowledge and failure to employ this knowledge properly is the warrant for man’s condemnation, because “though the structure of the world, and the most beautiful arrangement of the elements, ought to have induced man to glorify God, yet no one discharged his proper duty: it hence appears that all were guilty of sacrilege, and of wicked and abominable ingratitude.”¹⁵

We must define what *suppression* means. Κατέχω is a present active participle, performed by man. The root ἔχω means to “possess or contain, *have, own*[.]”¹⁶ But Κατέχω means to prevent something from happening, or to cause it to be ineffective. To “*prevent, hinder, restrain*” whatever would otherwise be liberated, unrestrained, and effective without the action of Κατέχω.¹⁷ God exposes and vindicates his truth in righteous wrath against mankind who unrighteously cover God’s truth. God is saying “yes, you know me. *And* you should worship me. But you don’t, so I will achieve glory via my wrath.” Man, a self-contradicting fool, lies to himself that he doesn’t know God (Ps 14:1).

If man possesses the truth but restrains it, keeping it from achieving its God-intended end (detailed in 1:21), how does Paul describe this truth?

First, in 1:19 Paul describes it as knowledge about God not merely possible to know but plainly known: “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.”¹⁸ God’s revelation is effectively appropriated as “theology” or “knowledge” because God chose to reveal himself, and accomplishes his purposes. *Plain* (φανερών) and *shown* (ἐφάνηρωσεν) employ the same root (φανε-). φανερών adjectively modifies this knowledge of God (γνωστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ), *because* God has ἐφάνηρωσεν, or made it so.

Obtaining this knowledge depends on God, not man.¹⁹ As knowledge of God as Redeemer depends “not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy” (Rom 9:16), so the knowledge of God in the dimensions of Romans 1:18–21 (as Creator) depends not on human effort, but on God’s sovereign revelatory act.²⁰ As Schreiner observes, “Paul does not refer to a long process of reasoning by which people come to a knowledge of God’s majesty is critical [...] God has stitched his greatness into the fabric of the human mind so that his majesty is instinctively recognized when one views the created world.”²¹ Knowledge of God as Creator (i.e., “natural theology”) is established by God.

Should a discursive process of acquiring this knowledge be suggested, there would be some for whom God’s wrath due for suppressing the truth is deferred until *after* this condition is met. This would make God’s indictment falsifiable, as there are some (such as infants) who have not yet reasoned their way to this knowledge and simultaneously suppressed. Our text prohibits any postponement. God’s wrath *and* saving righteousness are clearly revealed, independent of human endeavors.

Moreover, God’s majesty in creation has been *understood clearly* (νοούμενα καθορᾶται), furthering undercutting a discursive process. νοούμενα and καθορᾶται are passive, distancing a discursive process from the text. Man would be *active* in a discursive process. Instead, Paul paints a precondition without exceptions that man *receives*. And, if without exception, “perceiving God” as a discursive process is unlikely as Paul exhaustively removes any excuse.

However, even if Paul *does* mean a knowledge of God acquired through discursive processes, the results remain: men are still without excuse. Natural theology in either case (a discursive species, or implanted knowledge) results invariably in knowledge truly held *and* simultaneously suppressed, warranting God’s wrath. Any species of natural theology only escapes suppression with regeneration.²²

Next, observe how Paul describes this disclosure of revelation in 1:19. What is known about God is plain (φανερὸν) because God has revealed it (ἐφανέρωσεν). Silva notes Paul uses φανερῶ and ἀποκαλύπτω virtually synonymously, especially where God’s righteousness in Christ is revealed, or the mystery of Christ and the gospel hidden in the past is now revealed (Rom 1:17; 3:21; Eph 3:5; Col 1:26).²³ The righteousness of God

revealed in the gospel (1:17), God’s wrath revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth (1:18), and the revelation unto men the knowledge of God as Creator are each performed by God (1:19).

This comports with Doug Moo’s observations that “righteousness of God” in 1:17–18, 3:21, 3:25–26, and 10:3 emphasize first a divine activity, and secondarily human reception of righteousness as a status. In Romans 3:21 God’s righteousness is “manifested” apart from the Law. In 3:25–26 it is “shown.” In 10:3 Israel fails to submit to God’s righteousness, instead seeking to establish their own, implying a “contrast between their righteousness and the righteousness of God” which suggests a divine activity.²⁴ However, Moo notes the concept of “the righteousness of God” includes “both God’s activity and, more remotely, the status of those who experience God’s righteousness.”²⁵ God’s sovereign revelation and human appropriation of revelation stand together, secured by God’s power.²⁶

In 1:20 Paul enumerates the content of this knowledge clearly known (1:19) and suppressed (1:18). It concerns knowledge of God’s eternal power and divine nature, God’s “invisible attributes.” God’s invisible attributes (ἀόρατα αὐτοῦ) being understood (or perceived/καθοράω) isn’t oxymoronic. Rather, God makes the visible world a symbol for disclosing his invisible majesty. Man is pervaded by God’s revelatory environment, unable to escape knowing him.²⁷ The final part of 1:20 confirms this, where from “the things that have been made” (τοῖς ποιήμασιν) man’s knowledge of God as Creator arises invariably. Creation, God’s revelational medium, births this knowledge into us.

These invisible attributes seen are God’s *eternal power* (ἄιδιος δύναμις) and *deity* (θειότης). Silva notes the adjective ἄιδιος describes “a distinct attribute of deity,” namely his *eternal* (ἄιδιος) power.²⁸ Cranfield considers θειότης (*divinitas*, “divinity”) as a reference to the divine nature and properties, whereas θεότης (*deitas*, “deity”) “denotes the divine personality[.]”²⁹ This is semantically possible, but a false dichotomy. The revelatory acts of God in 1:17–18 are personally unveiled by God upon unrighteous people. God *himself* has been sinned against, not his divine nature abstracted from his personality. Likewise, it is not an abstract divine nature known from creation, but God the Creator. As Schreiner notes, “The word deity (θειότης) doesn’t focus on God’s existence so much as it communicates his

majesty and greatness. Hence, Paul doesn't refer to two different attributes of God here but stresses God's power[.]”³⁰

This knowledge has *only one* precondition, it has been mankind's possession ἀπὸ κτίσεως κόσμου/from the creation of the world. Cranfield observes that Paul stresses “the self-revelation of God here referred to has been continuous ever since the creation.”³¹ Since this self-revelation is collocated with “what can be known about God” (1:19) and this revelation is “clearly perceived” (1:20) since creation, no one has ever been ignorant of God's revelation of himself as Creator.³²

Not only has there never been a time when the revelation of God as Creator hasn't been understood, but there has *concurrently* (since the Fall) never been a time when this knowledge hasn't been suppressed from its proper end. Schreiner notes,

Paul is not exploring human consciousness so that people upon reading this text should try to detect precisely when they rejected this knowledge of God in their personal history. The rejection of God is concurrent with the knowledge of him, with the result that it is impossible to excavate one's past and find a point in which there was saving knowledge of the true God through natural revelation.³³

Man's inexcusability and fittingness for condemnation at the end of 1:20 is warranted by a constellation of three things: (1) Man suppresses the truth (1:18b); (2) A truth about God that is plainly known (1:19a), because God has shown it to them (1:19b), telling them of his eternal power and divine nature (1:20a); (3) A truth that man has plainly known since the creation of the world (1:20b).

These factors warrant man's condemnation, removing any excuse (Romans 1:20c). Since the fall this has been God's legal case against mankind. There is no informational or temporal justification for man's unrighteous suppression of the truth. They have had a “natural theology” all along, *and* they have abused it. They have never used it aright, as the noetic foundation from which should spring honor and gratitude of God as Creator. This inward contradiction warrants his condemnation. The natural man knows God, but his ethical outworking from this knowledge is amiss. Man knows *unrighteously*, instead of righteously or truly.

Calvin observes the proper, righteous outworking of this knowledge, “The effect of our knowledge rather ought to be, *first*, to teach us reverence and fear; and, *secondly*, to induce us, under its guidance and teaching, to ask every good thing from him, and, when it is received, ascribe it to him.”³⁴ Man is inexcusable because he misuses God’s efficacious revelation, which has gifted him a certain knowledge of God.

In 1:21 Paul recapitulates his whole argument: “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 foolish hearts were darkened.” Man knowing God assumes God’s revelation is satisfactory. But man abuses God’s testimony of himself in creation. This positive reception of revelation as knowledge but negative outworking of ingratitude and dishonor of God are the dimensions for how man “suppresses the truth in unrighteousness.” Man *does* appropriate God’s revelation as knowledge, and *should* move from knowledge toward God in praise. But man *refuses to honor God or give him thanks*. True “natural theology” does two things. It first truly receives knowledge of God as Creator, and secondarily moves another step, to praise and gratitude God as Creator. This tandem, *if separated*, vitiates true “natural theology.”

For this reason, the natural man’s foolish heart is darkened, becoming futile (profitless) as he refuses to do what is profitable, praising God his Creator. Therefore, in this doxological register the natural man never speaks correctly about the God he knows. Standing before him in creation, pressing upon him via the *sensus divinitatis* is this God, and this God he refuses to worship.³⁵ The natural man is part of the choir, the sheet music before him. In fact, he knows the music by heart, but he won’t sing right. He sings *incongruent* with how the sheet music, and his heart, tell him to. The music he knows and the music he sings are discordant.

The natural man understands the revelation of God but twists it, making himself the author and creator in vain antithesis to God. In final analysis, “The Bible does not consider knowledge of God without acknowledgement of God to be true knowledge of God!”³⁶ Natural theology is only *true* where true knowledge of God as Creator (which all people have) *and* true worship of God as Creator (which only the regenerate have) coexist.

THE RECEPTION-SUPPRESSION-EXCHANGE SYNDROME OF THE NATURAL MAN

Apart from the Spirit's regeneration, the natural man lives in inward contradiction between the truth he knows and his failure to express himself congruently. This "congruent expression" would be honor and gratitude of God as Creator. This contradiction is both the foundation and ceiling of any unregenerate natural theology. Unregenerate natural theology is, against Karl Barth, a "yes!" and "no!" affair.³⁷ Any general revelation of God as Creator is *both* known by man regarding the revelation itself and its testimony of God, *and* never arising to its proper doxological end, where is true "knowing."

Knowledge of God as Creator is the object of natural theology, which finds its rest in doxological expression. Among the unregenerate, this sabbath is never observed. The natural man has all the knowledge needed, but his interpretation is chronically askew. He *should* interpret the facts testifying within him constantly in a righteous, doxological response. But he doesn't.

This inward contradiction is the central concern of Romans 1:18–21, and has been observed by many among the Reformed. Francis Junius, commenting on the Fall and total depravity, notes how the inward light of nature is darkened: "As a consequence [...] *we see something of the truth* as though distantly through the gloom. *But* through these inborn shadows that surround us, *we do not see, except in a false fashion, that very truth of God which we do see.*" Natural theology, in the dimensions of Romans 1:18–21, is a "seeing" and a "not seeing," or, "yes" and "no." Man knows God but simultaneously fails to know him worshipfully.³⁸

Unregenerate natural theology fails to apprehend the doxological atmosphere Joe Rigney shows as the proper congruence between knowledge and expression:

For the pleasure of God is revealed from heaven upon all godliness and righteousness of men, who by their righteousness celebrate the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. For because they know God, they honor him as God and give thanks to him, and they become fruitful in their thinking, and their humble hearts are enlightened.³⁹

Calvin observes this incongruence among the unregenerate,

But herein appears the shameful ingratitude of men. Though they have in their own persons a factory where innumerable operations of God are carried on, and a magazine stored with treasures of inestimable value — instead of bursting forth in his praise, as they are bound to do, they, on the contrary, are the more inflated and swelled with pride.⁴⁰

This factory testifying inwardly to God should result in a bursting forth of praise to the Creator. Instead, it leads to man's vanity and swollen pride. The truth of God exchanged for a lie is the premise of this inward contradiction. Noting earlier in his *Institutes*, knowledge married to piety is the proper congruence, where true knowledge rests, "For, properly speaking, we cannot say that God is known where there is no religion or piety."⁴¹ Even the demons believe, and tremble (Jas 2:29). But though the demons have a theology, even a natural theology, they don't *know God*. So, any natural theology done by the unregenerate will be sinful and fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). God's glory from the human creature, flowering from true knowledge, is only possible where a pious heart extends to God in worship. Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin (Rom 14:23).

The proper congruence between knowledge and piety is one where we don't cultivate knowledge that rests "satisfied with empty speculation, [and] only flutters in the brain[.]" Instead, as the Spirit enables we cultivate knowledge which "will prove substantial and fruitful wherever it is duly perceived, and rooted in the heart."⁴² For Calvin, God's testimony in creation is his "witness" to man, whereby his "numberless varied acts of kindness" meet man and woo him to a knowledge of God. Yet, in contradiction, they "cease not to follow their own ways, in other words, deadly errors."⁴³ Calvin is saying that all the light necessary to lead to God is within and around man, but man goes his own way.

Immediately after this section, Calvin says the following,

But though we are deficient in natural powers which might enable us to rise to a pure and clear knowledge of God, still, as the dullness which prevents us is within, there is no room for excuse. We cannot plead ignorance, without being at the same time convicted by our own consciences both of sloth and ingratitude.⁴⁴

The natural man is unable to “rise to a pure and clear knowledge of God” as Creator. This “rising up” finds itself in the dimensions of honor and gratitude. Man is neither ignorant nor deficient in general revelation. The problem is located *ethically* or *religiously* within the natural man’s heart. His very own natural theology, without regeneration, fails to rise to a pure and clear knowledge of God as Creator. Instead, he suppresses this ascent, forging an idol down below.

In this same section, Calvin summarizes man’s inward contradiction:

Wherefore, when we wander and go astray, we are justly shut out from every species of excuse, because all things point to the right path. But while man must bear the guilt of corrupting the seed of divine knowledge so wondrously deposited in his mind, and preventing it from bearing good and genuine fruit, it is still most true that we are not sufficiently instructed by that bare and simple, but magnificent testimony which the creatures bear to the glory of their Creator. For no sooner do we, from a survey of the world, obtain some slight knowledge of Deity, than we pass by the true God, and set up in his stead the dream and phantom of our own brain, drawing away the praise of justice, wisdom, and goodness, from the fountain-head, and transferring it to some other quarter.⁴⁵

For Calvin — and Paul — *no sooner* is a knowledge of Deity obtained than we pass God by and set up phantoms, exchanging true knowledge of the Creator for a lie (Rom 1:23, 25). This exchange is achieved in our knowing subversion of glory due to God — warranted by nature’s testimony — to a lie. The natural man as theologian never speaks truly to the God who is there as Creator, for “speaking truly” exists only where man knows God as Creator *and* worships him. The natural man as a God-knower (a “natural theologian”) robs God of his glory.⁴⁶

The greatness of man’s sin is the inexcusable absence of God-ward affection despite his knowledge of God. “Man ought, therefore, as Calvin puts it, to recognize God. There is no excuse for him if he does not. The reason for his failure to recognize God lies exclusively in him. It is due to his willful transgression of the very law of his being.”⁴⁷ To clarify, “recognizing God” refers to dimensions of gratitude and honor of God as Creator. But Van Til is correct to note the law of man’s being — which is, the knowledge of God — is simultaneously transgressed.⁴⁸

As Van Til later observes, “The natural man is such a one as constantly throws water on a fire he cannot quench.”⁴⁹ Paul highlights this inward contradiction of knowing God and suppressing the truth in Romans 1:18–21. Common ground between the unregenerate and regenerate is *only part*, never whole. Regenerate man lives in *congruence* between his knowledge of God as Creator (“A”) and his pious affections for this God (“B”). The natural man lives in *incongruence* between points “A” and “B.” Thus, he lives in antithesis with regenerate man. Regenerate knowledge leads inexorably to God-ward piety. The natural man’s knowledge leads inexorably to an exchange of God-worship for creature-worship. Any truth (general revelation) marshalled around the natural man will be known by this man as pointing to God *and* simultaneously suppressed.

Any general revelation will pass through the natural man’s reception-suppression syndrome, his heart reinterpreting (exchanging) every fact as it points to God’s glory as instead pointing to the creature’s vain deification. This happens without the Spirit’s regeneration. Thus, common ground with the natural man must finally be realized as—though upheld partially by Common Grace—ground that is without the Spirit’s regeneration an absolute antithesis.

J. H. Bavinck has highlighted this inward contradiction in man as the source of his inexcusability. Commenting on Calvin’s understanding of man’s futile use of general revelation, “These shining lights have some effect on the human mind, but instead of arousing adoration of the true God, they cause humans to invent idols and create new religions.”⁵⁰ For Bavinck, fallen humanity are God-knowers who habitually, without notice, suppress and exchange the truth they know for lies. Bavinck draws our attention to this paradoxical fact,

Scripture clearly states that people do not know. ‘You sacrifice to one you do not know’; ‘You worship that which you do not know’; the pagans ‘that did not know God.’ An overwhelming flood of places in the Bible emphasize this not knowing. This forces the conclusion that the position of human beings is paradoxical. They know, and they do not know. Their legal position is that of knowing, but their actual position is that of not knowing. They proceed as unknowing knowers, as though they ‘might possibly find him.’⁵¹

This paradox is another way of describing the inward contradiction of the natural man. Bavinck locates this contradiction as pivoting around “suppressing” and “exchanging.” Bavinck suggests that suppression occurs “so directly, so spontaneously, so simultaneously with [alongside] the ‘understanding’ and ‘seeing clearly’ that at the precise moment that people see, they already no longer see; at the exact moment that they know, they already no longer know.” This why we must say “yes” and “no” to the prospect of natural theology.⁵² God *does* reveal himself clearly to every person as Creator. However, simultaneous to this revelation of God—who is standing before us in Creation—people “push it away, repress it, suppress it. They are knowers who do not know, seers who do not see. Their juridical position is different from their actual reality.” There “juridical position” is that of God-knower; their actual reality is a God-denier. Man contradicts himself. Legally the natural man is a God-knower and *should be* a God-worshiper. But he *acts* illegally, breaking covenantal stipulations. Man is without excuse, because he *knows* his covenant *obligations* and breaks them.⁵³

But, though repressed, Bavinck notes that “deep within the hidden recesses of people’s beings, that repressed and suppressed truth is still present. It has never simply disappeared but has always been alive and active.”⁵⁴ Man can try to suppress God, but — by God’s grace — “If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!” (Ps 139:8).

“Exchanging the truth for a lie” is intimately involved, and arises from, suppressing the truth. As Bavinck notes, “the cavity or empty space that occurs as a result of suppressing needs to be filled. It has to be the case that what replaces the [suppressed] truth and sweeps across the entire terrain must be manifest in something resembling eternal power and divinity.”⁵⁵ The natural man is an idol factory. God’s revelation as Creator “impinges on them and compels them to listen, but it is at the same time pushed down and repressed. And the only aspects of it that remain connected to human consciousness, even while torn from their original context, become the seeds of an entirely different sequence of ideas around which they crystallize.”⁵⁶

This reception and suppression of knowledge of God as Creator keeps “natural theology” from being possible in the sense of knowing anything true about God as Creator, for knowing God truly as Creator is a knowledge which is not suppressed, but liberated to exuberant gratitude and honor.

This actually *strengthens* what the Reformed should say about natural theology. We shouldn't conclude that man may be appealed to and that ground *may be* secured from which to navigate toward the Christian faith. Rather, this ground of knowledge is already indelibly engraved upon the human as *imago Dei*. It only remains, as apologists empowered by the Spirit, to press the natural man precisely at this juncture within his heart of knowing God and denying God.

Van Til observes this very point,

It is therefore utterly impossible for any man not to know God and morality. The natural man has knowledge, true knowledge of God, in the sense that God through nature and man's own consciousness impresses his presence on man's attention. So and inescapably has he done this, that try as he may, man cannot escape knowing God. It is this point that Paul stresses in the first two chapters of Romans. Man has the sense of deity indelibly engraven upon him. He knows God and he knows himself and the world as God's creation. This is objective revelation to him. Even to the extent that this revelation is within man, i.e., in his own constitution, and as such may be called "subjective," it is none the less objective to him as an ethically responsive creature, and he is bound to react as an ethical person to this objective revelation.⁵⁷

Every person knows God "naturally," but also simultaneously, if unregenerate, anxiously strives to "efface that knowledge of God." Moreover, the Spirit is, despite unregenerate man's inward contradiction, striving to call man back to God, and herein provides the place of common grace between believers and unbelievers, as man's inward contradiction hasn't been given full reign yet. An absolute antithesis is mercifully slowed, for now.

Van Til notes this, rightfully pointing out a necessary limitation of this "cooperation" without the Spirit's regeneration,

Men on both sides can, by virtue of the gifts of God that they enjoy, contribute to science. The question of ethical hostility does not enter in at this point. Not merely weighing and measuring, but the argument for the existence of God and for the truth of Christianity, can as readily be observed to be true by non-Christians as by Christians. Satan knows all too well that God exists and that Christ was victor over him on Calvary. But the actual situation in

history involves the other factors mentioned. Thus there is nowhere an area where the second factor, that of man's ethical hostility to God, does not also come into the picture. This factor is not so clearly in evidence when men deal with external things; it is more clearly in evidence when they deal with the directly religious question of the truth of Christianity. But it is none the less present everywhere. It is present in the field of weighing and measuring, in the field of externals as well as in the field of more directly religious import. It is present here in that the natural man attempts to impose his false philosophy of fact upon the things that he weighs and measures.⁵⁸

Man's ethical hostility to God doesn't show itself when people agree that $2+2=4$. It occurs a level higher, in the religious realm, where we worshipfully delight in the *why* behind $2+2=4$: because God! The natural man, though he may know his math, won't exult in the *why* behind this fact with us. He will know the truth at face value, but he will not penetrate deeper to "knowing God" in the religious and doxological realm that every "fact" of the universe (such as mathematics or any other area of general revelation) testifies to. The natural man's imposition of a false philosophy of reality—the creature—is nothing more than "exchanging the truth of God for a lie," that is. Man strips general revelation of its doxological and God-centered end, putting man in this seat, where man becomes the *telos* of revelation.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, Romans 1:18–21 shows that every unregenerate person since the Fall stands in two positions simultaneously: they know God as Creator *and* fail to worship him. This contradiction warrants their condemnation. There is no justification for man's robbery of God's glory. Further, only regeneration overturns this inward contradiction, whereby man may truly understand (doxologically or ethically) the things of God in creation (1 Cor 2:14).

This inward contradiction serves as the basis and ceiling of *all* of man's knowledge of God as Creator. Any discussion of natural theology must start with this biblical presupposition. This knowledge *and* its suppression is presupposed in any datum of natural revelation man encounters. Any revelation from the book of nature passes through this "yes and no" filter.

Only the Spirit — not in common grace, but in regeneration — overturns this, bringing congruence between man's knowledge and man's worship of God.

I want to remind the reader of my intent as I began this study. I aimed to exegetically reset the floor which has become convoluted, precluding reformed theologians from finding agreement. But much work remains, and I have obviously not settled this issue definitively.

To pursue consensus among the reformed regarding natural theology (either narrowly or broadly, in a more robust “natural theological method”), several future studies are needed.

First, triangulation of my exegesis with Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin's on Romans 1:18–21 is needed. Reformed theology is more than Calvin, but a reformed account of natural theology incongruent with Calvin is a divergence that must be seriously attended to. Do we really have a clear picture of how close Calvin and Aquinas are on the topic of natural theology? Comparing Calvin's understanding of “natural theology” with Aquinas' in their respective commentaries, and asking which is closer to the exegesis I have offered would be profitable. This would show where each thinker as an exegete stands, and would shed light upon if this area of Aquinas' thought should be retrieved among the reformed. In addition, more work is needed in explicating a fuller understanding of both Aquinas and Calvin's thought in each thinker's total corpus, to get an accurate picture of each thinker's account of natural theology.

Second, there is continued need for penetrating exegesis of Romans 1:18–21 itself, in addition to the other core texts about the “light of nature.” These texts include Psalm 19, 29, 104, Romans 2:12–16 Acts 14:15–17 and Acts 17:22–31, in order to give a full account of Scripture's allowance of “natural theology.”

Third, continued survey is needed into Calvin's concept of *sensus divinitatis*, the “sense of the divine.” Definitively establishing that Calvin's view of the *sensus* is not a capacity, but a covenantal epistemic reality, is needed. Consensus does not seem out of reach. Moreover, the importance of Calvin's *sensus* as the very center issue between those for and against “reformed presuppositionalism” merits attention. Knowledge of God and self are intimately related, foundational of all of man's knowledge of God.

Finally, we must explicate Aquinas' understanding of the natural knowledge of God. The account of the natural knowledge of God

offered in this study builds off Calvin. I have, through the glass of Calvin, examined Paul's understanding of the knowledge of God as Creator, observing that this knowledge is not merely *available*, but definitively grasped. Aquinas' commentary on Romans (in conjunction with his *Summa Theologica*) must be examined for determining whether he conceives of the natural knowledge of God as merely *available* or *irrefragably known*. Delineating this will establish whether Aquinas' view of the natural knowledge of God is robust enough, and does justice to Romans 1:18–21. Special attention must be paid to Aquinas' doctrine of man with this survey, so that the reformed pursuing this avenue of inquiry reckons with Aquinas' view of man's abilities, especially the noetic effects of the Fall, to determine if Aquinas' conception of man and his abilities is soluble with the reformed doctrine of total depravity.

There is much work to do, but it is my hypothesis that Aquinas' account will be shown as *less* robust in its offering of “natural theology” than Calvin's, or what I have offered here. Thus, in any “retrieval effort,” if it seeks to cohere with the spirit of reformed theology, this aspect of Aquinas' thought should be left aside.

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- ¹ J. V. Fesko, “Editorial: On Scholarship, Swords, and Scalpels,” *Themelios* 50, no. 2 (2025), <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/editorial-on-scholarship-swords-and-scalpels/>.
 - ² I leave aside — as Fesko correctly reproves — an “all or nothing” approach. In fact, regarding “natural theology,” I take an “all *and* nothing” approach. Yes, natural theology! And, *no* proper use of it!
 - ³ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, 2nd ed., (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 93.
 - ⁴ God sovereignly reveals himself, which includes the reception of this revelation as “knowledge.” This is true in both Creation and Redemption. However, in the realm of Creation there is the subsequent invasion of sin, resulting in inward suppression of the truth (but not removal of the truth as known).
 - ⁵ Steven J. Duby, *God in Himself: Scripture, Metaphysics, and the Task of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019), 71.
 - ⁶ Duby, *God in Himself*, 71.
 - ⁷ Schreiner, *Romans*, 80–81 observes that Paul follows the MT (הַיְהוָה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ) over the LXX (ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεώς μου ζήσεται). The MT includes the personal pronoun “his,” (the person's faith/faithfulness) over against the LXX which attributes the faithfulness to God by inserting the pronoun μου (my). Paul eliminates both pronouns. Schreiner notes the Qumran community interprets this text to connote law obedience *along-side* faith in the teacher of the community as the door to blessing, opposing Paul's meaning (and MT itself). Paul's wording in Romans 1:17 matches his wording Galatians 3:11 (ὁ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται) and comes close to Hebrews 10:38 (ὁ δὲ δίκαιός μου ἐκ πίστεως ζήσεται, “but *my* righteous one shall live by faith”). Paul (and Hebrews) emphasize the importance of personal faith, and “that faithfulness flows from faith” but that faith precedes and is the foundation for faithfulness (good works).

From faith to faith likely means the entire Christian life is subjectively bounded by faith. Human faith is the subjective doorway to participating in God's eschatological blessing (justification) powerfully revealed in the present. Rather than neutering God's sovereignty, this is so because, as Schreiner, *Romans*, 79 notes, "God's eschatological work is so powerful because it creates a new anthropological reality — faith." This has profound ramifications for the divide between the unregenerate and regenerate, divided by antithetical epistemological stances relative to this power of God: faith or unbelief. Back of this, each is a recipient of the sovereign revelatory work of God: wrath to those left to their epistemological unbelief, or saving righteousness for epistemological belief.

- ⁸ Schreiner, *Romans*, 83, who follows Hans Lietzmann, *Einführung in die Textgeschichte des Paulusbriefes an die Römer*, Handbuch zum Neuen Testament (Tübingen: Mohr, 1933), 33 and Longenecker, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 200–201, who see γὰρ not as adversative but a transitional particle, 1:18 developing a new — though related — thought to what precedes.
- ⁹ John D. Harvey, *Romans, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament*, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Robert W. Yarbrough (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2017), 35.
- ¹⁰ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; London: T&T Clark, 2004), 108.
- ¹¹ See Longenecker, *Romans*, 199, who lists 1:18 as the theme driving what is unpacked in 1:19–32. See also Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, ed. Eldon Jay Epp (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 148; David G. Peterson, *Romans* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2021), 110.
- ¹² Schreiner, *Romans*, 84 suggests an implied proposition exists between verse 17 (God's saving righteousness) and 18 (the revelation of God's wrath) which clarifies the thought progression: "God's saving righteousness is being revealed in the gospel by faith (17) [;] and we really need God's saving righteousness (implicit proposition) [;] because God's wrath is being revealed against all people who have sinned against his glory (18)."
- ¹³ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 532.
- ¹⁴ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 141 (Hereafter BDAG).
- ¹⁵ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. Henry Beveridge (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 67.
- ¹⁶ BDAG, 420 (emphasis original).
- ¹⁷ BDAG, 532.
- ¹⁸ Thus, this knowledge of God is not waiting for us to go out and get it. It erupts into our lives from God's end, born into our understanding by him. His revelatory action secures this result, rather than our own action.
- ¹⁹ As Schreiner notes, Paul doesn't suggest "knowledge of God's lordship and power is the result of careful deduction and reasoning so that the text can be used to encourage sophisticated rational argumentation as an apologetic for God's existence[.]" *Romans*, 93.
- ²⁰ If one objects that God's revelatory act does *not* accomplish what God intends, given man's suppression of the truth, we would simply refer this person back to the tension between the secret and revealed will of God.
- ²¹ Schreiner, *Romans*, 94.
- ²² The natural man will *always* plainly know, but simultaneously suppress, in any form of natural theology.
- ²³ Moisés Silva, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014) 589. Hereafter NIDNTE.
- ²⁴ Douglas J. Moo, "The Revelation of the Righteousness of God in Romans," in *Paul's Letter to the Romans: Theological Essays*, ed. Douglas J. Moo et al. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Academic, 2023), 28.
- ²⁵ Moo, "The Revelation of the Righteousness of God in Romans," 29. Cf Peter Stuhlmacher, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, ed. and trans. Daniel P. Bailey and Jostein Ådna (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 369, "Δικαιοσύνη Θεοῦ in Paul denotes God's activity of creating salvation and well-being for people, such that with one and the same expression both God's own activity and the result of that activity can be designated."
- ²⁶ Observe how the *power of God* secures the revelation of his righteousness in the gospel and his unveiled wrath (1:17–18). Power is an attribute the truth of which is suppressed by the unrighteous in 1:20. God's revelation in the gospel — and his wrath — is his decisive rectification of human disobedience. This disobedience is rooted in the noetic failure of humanity to acknowledge God (including his power). This failure is also rectified by the power of God in showing his righteousness to both the unrighteous and those he makes righteous.
- ²⁷ Contra, Cranfield, *Romans*, 114.
- ²⁸ NIDNTE, 165.

- 29 Cranfield, *Romans*, 11.5. Cf. Col. 2:9
- 30 Schreiner, *Romans*, 93.
- 31 Cranfield, *Romans*, 11.4.
- 32 This, again, undercuts a discursive process for acquiring this knowledge as being Paul's present concern.
- 33 Schreiner, *Romans*, 94.
- 34 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.2.2. "Ought" implies a deficit between what is and what should be. Man has the knowledge required for a proper, righteous response toward God, but falls short.
- 35 My wording clarifies but affirms Van Til's meaning: "I think you will agree, then, that no form of natural theology has ever spoken properly of the God who is there. None of the great Greek philosophers, like Plato and Aristotle, and none the great modern philosophers, like Descartes, Kant, Hegel or Kierkegaard and others, have ever spoken of the God who is there. The systems of thought of these men represent a repression of the revelation of the God who is there." Cornelius Van Til, "A Letter from Cornelius Van Til to Francis Schaeffer," accessed April 1, 2026, https://opc.org/OS/html/V6/4d.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com.
- 36 W. H. Velema and J. Van Genderen, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 76.
- 37 *Natural Theology: Comprising 'Nature and Grace' by Dr. Emile Brunner and the Reply 'No!' by Dr. Karl Barth* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002). Barth's "No!" incorrectly denies natural revelation and natural theology. I affirm a theology derived from nature, terming this "knowledge of God as Creator," but deny its proper attainment of "true" or "doxologically actualized" knowledge of God as Creator.
- 38 Franciscus Junius, *A Treatise on True Theology with the Life of Franciscus Junius* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2016).
- 39 Joe Rigney, *The Things of the Earth: Treasuring God by Enjoying His Gifts* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 169.
- 40 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.4.
- 41 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.2.1.
- 42 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.9. Emphasis mine. The context is knowledge of God as Creator, or the knowledge reflective of general revelation.
- 43 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.14.
- 44 John Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.15. Or in is commentary on Rom 1:20, "The manifestation of God, by which he makes his glory known in his creatures, is, with regard to the light itself, sufficiently clear; but that on account of our blindness, it is not found to be sufficient" (Calvin on Rom. 1:20).
- 45 John Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.15.
- 46 Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1992–1995), 1:176. "No one uses the natural knowledge of God rightly, for in reference to all who are in the state of nature it is written, 'There is none righteous, no not one: there is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one' (Rom 3:10–12). All the virtues of the heathen lack the true essence of virtue. They do not proceed from faith, are not in true harmony with the law, and are not performed to the honor of God. Rather, they are so beset with sinful qualities and circumstances that these virtues are nothing but glaring sins."
- 47 Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1955), 109.
- 48 Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 107.
- 49 Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 109, "For man self-consciousness presupposes God-consciousness. Calvin speaks of this as man's inescapable sense of deity." Following Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.1.1.
- 50 John Bolt, James D. Bratt, and Paul J. Visser, eds., *The J. H. Bavinck Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 97. Bavinck is summarizing Calvin's words in *Institutes*, 1.5.14, "It is therefore in vain that so many burning lamps shine for us in the workmanship of the universe to show forth the glory of its Author. Although they bathe us wholly in their radiance, yet they can of themselves in no way lead us into the right path [...] before their fuller light shines forth these are smothered."
- 51 Bolt, Bratt, and Visser, *J.H. Bavinck Reader*, 284.
- 52 Bolt, Bratt, and Visser, *J.H. Bavinck Reader*, 284.
- 53 Bolt, Bratt, and Visser, *J.H. Bavinck Reader*, 285.
- 54 Bolt, Bratt, and Visser, *J.H. Bavinck Reader*, 286.
- 55 Bolt, Bratt, and Visser, *J.H. Bavinck Reader*, 288.
- 56 Bolt, Bratt, and Visser, *J.H. Bavinck Reader*, 290.
- 57 Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 160–161.
- 58 Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 192.