

The First Step in Missions Training: Wrestling with God's General Revelation (part 1)¹

If you very seriously want to fulfill your calling as a missionary, to bring the biblical message to a needy world, what is the very first thing you should learn? Is it the language of the people you want to reach? Is it how to adjust to different cultures, where people really think differently and do things differently? Or is it the history of the people you want to reach?

If you read the life of the apostle Paul, you might think the most important thing for a missionary to learn is how to swim very well, in case a few of the ships on which you are riding sink. (See 2 Corinthians 11:25.) Or maybe, following Paul, you will want to learn how to walk distances that seem long to us. (The distance mentioned in Acts 20:13 was 32 to 40 km, i.e., 20 to 25 miles.) Or maybe you should learn how to sing very joyfully, in case you are beaten and thrown into prison for preaching the gospel. (See Acts 16:16-39.) I have wondered if singing while being beaten was standard operating procedure for Paul.

What is truly astonishing is Paul's first theme when he wrote his manual on missionary training. The book of Romans was written by Paul as a missionary training manual, one of the first text books in Christian history. He wrote it as an organic part of his missionary work, to explain his mission efforts to the church in Rome, to gain support from the church, and especially to train the entire church in Rome to become a missionary church. Of course, Christians have used the book of Romans for other purposes, perhaps as a source book for Christian doctrine or as a summary of theology, and there is nothing particularly wrong with these uses of the book. However, the arguments are convincing that Paul wrote his great epistle

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to the Romans to be a missions training manual, to help the church in Rome become a missionary church. You see this from the way the book starts, finishes, and is organized around the topic of the spread of the gospel to the entire world. The overwhelming theological, philosophical, and ethical content of the book does not stand alone; it is set within the framework of world mission and is properly called a “Charter of World Missions.”²

If this claim is true, then the book of Romans should again become central for missionary training. We want all our missionaries (which means all Christians!) to be able to say, with Paul, “I am not ashamed of the gospel,” and to really know what they mean with these words, why they are convinced this is true, how this relates to human experience, and what kind of life flows from this message.³

What is truly astonishing is that the very first theme of the apostle, after his missionary framework (Romans 1:1-15) and gospel summary (Romans 1:16-17), is *not* the gospel. Paul’s first theme is the divine-human conflict which forms the background for all of human experience prior to faith in the gospel. This conflict has to do with God’s general revelation, the human suppression of that revelation, God’s wrath, and his common grace. Paul regarded understanding these truths about God and humanity as the first step to prepare the Christians in Rome to become effective missionaries who were proud of the gospel in relation to their multi-religious and multi-cultural society; this understanding is also strategically important for our time. Paul understood that the entire human race is wrestling with God prior to the time when anyone hears

² Thomas Schirrmacher’s observations bear repeating: “Paul wants to proclaim the gospel to all people without exception, regardless of language, culture, and ethnicity (‘Greeks and non-Greeks,’ Romans 1:14) as well as regardless of education or social class (‘the wise and the foolish,’ Romans 1:14). . . . It is for that reason that he comes to Rome. . . . Romans 1:15 is not a superfluous introduction. Rather, it gives us the actual reason for composing the book of Romans, namely to demonstrate that the expansion of world missions is God’s very own plan.” Schirrmacher continues that it is the framework of Romans that confirms this missionary purpose of the letter. “The parallels between Romans 1:1-15 and 15:14-16:27 show that Paul does not lose sight of the practical missionary considerations of his letter during the entire epistle.” Quotations from Thomas Schirrmacher, “The Book of Romans as a Charter for World Missions: Why mission and theology have to go together,” a gift from the Theological Commission to the Missions Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance, distributed at the meeting of the Missions Commission, November 7, 2011. For his accompanying chart, see Appendix I.

³ In the first decade after the end of communism in eastern Europe, I heard cruel jokes about missionaries, mostly related to the lack of training of a few. One joke was that all a missionary needed to know was John 3:16 and *The Four Spiritual Laws*. Another, from the side of Christians who survived generations of oppression, was that missionaries were the people the sending churches could not endure in their own churches, so they sent them out. Paul clearly set a much higher standard of missionary preparation.

the gospel.⁴ Conflict with God is the central theme of human existence. Understanding this conflict, this mortal wrestling match between God and humanity, is the first step toward serious missionary courage and power. Understanding this conflict also provides crucial intellectual tools needed by all Christians as missionaries.⁵ The human race is lost and is continually suppressing their God-given knowledge of God. Nevertheless, even when people suppress their naturally given knowledge of God, the created order of the universe continually impinges on human life and consciousness, so that human life is a continual wrestling match with God and his created order, regardless of the belief or unbelief of a person or culture

A word of self-disclosure is in order. As a young man, I studied religions and philosophies in a secular university with a view to bring the gospel into the secular universities. Soon I came to the very painful conclusion that some of the evangelical apologetics I had learned did not stand up in light of the various cross currents which dominated the university, ideas which advanced students might call critical philosophy, post-modernism, or deconstructionism.⁶ If my previously learned weak apologetics was all I had intellectually, then I had to become ashamed of the gospel, the exact opposite of what Paul experienced. This realization forced me to ask how Paul could be so pointedly unashamed, really proud of the gospel, even though he was obviously aware of the various lines of secular and religious thought in his day, some of which were naively religious, while others were philosophically critical and skeptical. Learning from Romans 1 and 2 became a matter of personal spiritual survival as well as a matter of regaining thoughtful missionary zeal.⁷ But this experience was not only for me, since the philosophies and theories I encountered in the university represented similar ideas in many cultures. My experience may be similar to that of many other Christians. Understanding Paul's

⁴ I am borrowing the image of Jacob wrestling with God, Genesis 32:22-30, to describe the human condition.

⁵ The currently used division into chapters in the New Testament probably began in the thirteenth century; the place of the division between chapter 1 and chapter 2 of Romans might cause us to miss the continuity of Paul's teaching. In this book we are treating the first part of chapter 2 as a continuing part of chapter 1.

⁶ Paul's description of humanity in Romans 1 and 2 is a type of deconstruction of thought and consciousness but without a trace of the nihilism often suspected in normal deconstructionism. Paul's deconstruction is theologically based.

⁷ My personal study of Romans 1 and 2 was prompted by reading multiple books by Francis A. Schaeffer (1912-1984).

teaching on God's speech through creation, with the complex human response, offers answers that can change us all from being ashamed of the gospel to becoming confident in the gospel.⁸

To repeat: Paul's pride in the gospel, his intellectual courage in the gospel, and his missionary audacity were based on his understanding of the human condition before God. This is a condition of repressing God's general revelation, even though the entire human situation, including all of human experience, is made possible by a continual dialogue and conflict with God's word in creation. God's general revelation forms the hidden theological assumption for all of life for all people regardless of culture or religion, an assumption that is both used and denied at the same time by unbelievers as part of their conflict with God. Thoughtful missionaries (which we all should become) will make this otherwise hidden assumption explicit in their own understanding of life and the gospel; then we can use this understanding to present the gospel wisely and boldly.

This is a theory of knowledge, a philosophy of culture, a system of social criticism, an evaluative philosophy of religion, a complex philosophical anthropology, and a foundation for social ethics, all as a framework for world missions. Paul's complete worldview was unlike most philosophical theories we encounter, but this total worldview gave him both courage and guidance to lead the nations to faith in Jesus. Paul's God was continually speaking through creation in a manner that no one can avoid and which is the foundation for all of human consciousness, life, and experience, even if people often *want* to avoid God's presence and speech. It seems like people cannot acknowledge it. For Paul, God's self-revelation through creation, even when denied and suppressed, is fundamental for all that makes us human, including our internal contradictions, and especially our irrepressible religious drives and hard-to-deny ethical knowledge. Because Paul understood the complex, continuous, and universal divine-human encounter, he was proud of the gospel, confident in the truth and importance of the gospel, while living in a world of many religions, cultures, and philosophies. Paul's missionary

⁸ A continuing study of Romans 1 provided a crucial part of equipping me for 19 years of teaching ethics, religion, and philosophy in six secular universities in four different countries.

intellectual courage was a gift of God which came by means of understanding God's general revelation and the self-contradictory response of people in conflict with God.

It is my impression that even we Christians, not only atheists and adherents of other religions, sometimes neglect or ignore God's general word in creation, the word which eternally and continually precedes his special Word in Christ and in Holy Scripture; this weakness left me ill-equipped for our missionary calling, the main theme of Romans. This ill-equipped status can push us into either theological liberalism (which often appropriates a limited set of Christian truth claims on the basis of a philosophy of life, worldview, or narrative that is not biblical in its origin) or into extreme fundamentalism (which holds or presents Christian truth claims in an improper manner).⁹ We easily adopt a fight-or-flight relation to culture, education, and politics, unintentionally advocating either an ethics of holy withdrawal from the world or an ethics of domination over the world. Our evangelism, preaching, and educational efforts are weakened because we sound like there is no connection between the biblical message and the rest of human experience. The gospel can begin to seem irrelevant or marginal in importance, even to Christians. Minimizing God's general revelation dishonors God and implicitly expresses ingratitude toward God.

On the other hand, if we think more deeply, if we really meditate on God's general revelation, we will begin to receive God's gift of missionary courage, including confidence in the truth of the gospel and a renewed understanding of the relevance of God's twofold revelation to all of human experience. For me, meditating about what God is doing (and has been doing throughout human history) in his creation, even before people hear the gospel, has become part of my worship to my heavenly Father, into which I invite you to join me.

This study will be in four major parts: 1) an original translation of Paul's manifesto in Romans 1:16-2:5, which includes some matters of technical exegesis in the translation; 2)

⁹ In the several varieties of "theological liberalism," the biblical message is accepted, appropriated, and interpreted in light of a previously accepted worldview or philosophy of life, which then acts as a control belief or filter (replacing Christian dogma) to determine which portions of the biblical message are accepted and believed. Such worldviews and philosophies of life generally reject the idea of an objective moral law, a central element in general revelation. Extreme fundamentalism treats the people to whom the biblical message is brought as if they have no previous encounter with God or knowledge of God that will play a role in how the gospel is accepted.

“Wrestling with God: The Human Condition,” which is a targeted exposition of selected themes in this particular text; 3) “Faith Seeking Understanding,” a multifaceted study inspired by Paul’s method of thought, including reference to other biblical texts, addressing missionary questions related to philosophy, religions, and ethics; and 4) some academic appendices.

The goal is to take the first step to prepare believers to become missionaries: understanding the condition of the unbelieving world, which is continually in self-conflict and in conflict with God: fighting with God’s general revelation while also depending on God’s general revelation and God’s common grace, so that everyone is responding to that God in manifold ways. This can increase our intellectual and practical courage in communicating and applying the biblical message in the midst of a world that is never really secular.¹⁰

I. Romans 1:16-2:5 (original translation)

(16) I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God intended for salvation for each person who believes, first for the Jew and then for the Greek. (17) In it the righteousness of God is revealed by faith and unto faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous will live by faith.’

(18) For the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and injustice of men who suppress the truth by means of injustice, (19) since the knowledge of God is plain in them; for God has made himself known to them. (20) His invisible characteristics are received into consciousness through the creation of the world, namely his invisible power and divine nature, so that people are without an apology.¹¹ (21)

¹⁰ No bibliography and very few footnotes are included in this book, since that would unnecessarily extend its size and make it less accessible to readers. Implicitly, this essay is a dialogue with much of the history of theology and western philosophy, but to make that explicit at every point might exceed the patience of the reader and the writer. Some of this is in the appendices.

¹¹ Paul’s term in Greek which I have translated as “without an apology” is a legal term, *anapologetos*, meaning “without a defense.” This term situates the human race as the accused in God’s courtroom. It has little similarity to our common apology, “sorry.”

Although they knew God, they did not glorify him or give thanks to him, but became worthless in their thoughts and their senseless hearts were darkened. (22) Claiming to be wise, they became foolish and (23) exchanged the glory of the immortal God for the image of the likeness of mortal man, birds, animals, and reptiles.

(24) Therefore God gave them over by means of the covetous desires of their hearts unto uncleanness to dishonor their bodies among themselves, (25) particularly the very people who exchanged the truth of God for a lie and deified and worshipped the creation in place of the Creator, who is blessed forever, amen. (26) Therefore, God gave them over unto dishonorable passions; for example, the women exchanged natural sexual relations for those which are contrary to nature, (27) as also the men left natural sexual relations with women and burned in their desires for each other, man for man, contrary to the scheme of nature; and thereby they receive in themselves the repayment which was necessary for their delusion.

(28) And since they did not recognize the knowledge of God that they had, God gave them over to a confused state of mind, to do those things which are inappropriate. (29) They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, and malice. They are gossips, (30) slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant, and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; (31) they are senseless, disloyal, lacking in normal affections, and merciless. (32) They know the requirement of God that those who do such things are worthy of death, but they not only do these things, they also approve of those who do them.

(2:1) Therefore, you are without a defense,¹² O human, everyone who evaluates any actions as inappropriate; for whenever you evaluate, you also condemn yourself, for you do the same type of things which you evaluate negatively. (2) And we know that the judgment of God is based on truth when it falls on those who take such inappropriate actions. (3) Are you really being logical, O human, to think you will escape the judgment of God when you both give a negative evaluation of the actions of others and also do

¹² Here Paul uses the same key word as in 1:20, *anapologetos*, showing that he is continuing to explain the same theme.

similar actions yourself? (4) Do you despise the riches of God's kindness, indulgence, and patience, claiming not to know that this kindness of God should lead you to change your mind? (5) By means of your hard and unrepentant heart you are storing up additional wrath for yourself at the day of the revelation of the wrath and just judgment of God.

Questions for study and discussion:

1. Compare the introduction to Romans (1:1-15) with the conclusion (15:14-16:27). Why do you agree or disagree with the claim that the whole epistle is designed for missions training?
2. Compare this translation with the translation in your Bible. What fine nuances are different? How do these nuances influence your understanding of God and people?
3. How do you know the gospel of Christ is true? How do you know that God is real? Why should we not believe in many gods?
4. What will equip you to comfortably explain the Christian message to:
 - a. people who claim to be atheists?
 - b. people who think we cannot know truth?
 - c. people who think we all find or create our own truth?
 - d. people who follow another religion?
 - e. people who substitute morality for faith?
 - f. people who may be much more educated than you?
 - g. people who are less educated than you?
5. Do you feel uncomfortable when you talk about your beliefs or your ethics with people who think entirely differently from you? Why?
6. Who needs an “apology,” a defense of his/her beliefs?
7. In what ways is being a Christian an education in itself?

