

Unregenerate Knowledge of God

An Essay by John Frame

Good teaching proceeds from the known to the unknown. So a good apologist will want to have some idea of what an inquirer already knows about God. Do non-Christians have any knowledge of the true God? If so, what do they know? In what ways does that knowledge manifest itself?

Scripture says that unbelievers know God (Rom. 1:21), but it also says they do not know him (1 Cor. 2:14, 15:34, 1 Thess. 4:5, 2 Thess. 1:8, compare 2 Tim. 3:7, Tit. 1:16, 1 John 4:8). Evidently, then, we must make some distinctions, for in some sense or senses, knowledge of God is universal, and otherwise it is not.

Rom. 1:18-32 is the classic text on this question. Here Paul stresses the clarity of God's revelation to the unrighteous. God reveals his wrath to them (verse 18), and makes truth about himself 'plain to them' (19), 'clearly perceived' (20). That revealed truth includes his 'eternal power and divine nature' (20). It also contains moral content, the knowledge of 'God's decree that those who practice [wicked things] deserve to die' (32). Significantly, the text does not state that this revelation in nature communicates the way of salvation. Paul evidently believes that this additional content must come through the preaching of the gospel (Rom. 10:13-17). Thus he warrants the traditional theological distinction between general revelation (God's revelation of himself through the created world) and special revelation (his revelation through prophecy, preaching, and Scripture).

The knowledge given by general revelation is not only a knowledge *about* God, a knowledge of propositions. It is a knowledge of God himself, a *personal* knowledge. For Paul says, not only that the wicked have information about God, but that "they knew God" (21).

Nevertheless, according to Paul, the wicked do not make proper use of this revealed knowledge. Rather, they 'by their unrighteousness suppress the truth' (18). He continues, '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. Claiming to be wise, they became fools...' (21-22). Paul describes their foolishness as idolatry (22-23). In his view, idolatry is not an innocent search for the divine or the result of honest ignorance. It is, rather, willfully and culpably turning away from clear revelation of the true God. So it is 'exchanging the glory of the immortal God for images...' (23), exchanging 'the truth of God for a lie' (25).

Because they willfully turned from God's clear revelation, God 'gave them up' (24, 26, 28) to serious sin, particularly sexual. Even then, however, the original

clear revelation continues to function, for it serves as a standard of judgment. As Paul says, it leaves them 'without excuse' (20).

From this passage, we can understand the senses in which the unregenerate do and do not know God. They know God as they are confronted by his revelation. Other Scriptures tell us that this revelation is found not only in the natural world, but in their own persons, for we are all made in God's image (Gen. 1:27). So God's revelation is inescapable. But apart from the special revelation and saving grace of God, people exchange this truth for lies and engage in such wickedness that they become enemies of God, not friends.

It is the grace of God that turns this enmity into friendship, so that people come to know God in a higher sense than the knowledge of Rom. 1:21. This is the knowledge of God that Jesus equates with eternal life in John 17:3. Many other passages too describe various kinds of knowledge that presuppose saving grace, such as Rom. 15:14, 1 Cor. 1:5, 2:12, 2 Cor. 2:14, 4:6, 6:6, 8:7, Eph. 1:17, Phil. 1:9, 3:8, 3:10, Col. 1:10, 1 Tim. 2:4, 2 Tim. 1:12, Heb. 8:11, 2 Pet. 3:18, 1 John 2:3-5, 2:13, 2:20-21, 3:14, 19, 24, 4:2, 4, 6, 7, 13, 16, 5:2, 13, 19-20, 2 John 1:1. The unregenerate do not have this kind of knowledge. In this sense should we understand the passages that say they do not know God.

There have been two different accounts of unregenerate knowledge of God in the theological traditions. One, advocated by Thomas Aquinas, says that this knowledge comes through man's natural reason. In Aquinas' view, natural reason is sufficient to accomplish our earthly happiness, but a higher, supernatural knowledge is required for eternal life. Natural reason operates apart from divine revelation, but supernatural knowledge is based on revelation, which functions as a supplement to what we know naturally.

Reformed theologians have objected to this view that God never intended our natural reason to function autonomously, or apart from his revelation. For one thing, all human knowledge comes through revelation, either general or special or both. Further, even before the fall, God supplemented Adam's natural knowledge with verbal revelation. And after the fall our natural knowledge requires both general and special revelation for its proper functioning. Left to our own devices, as Rom. 1 teaches, we suppress and distort the truth of general revelation. Only God's grace, operating through the gospel given in special revelation, can enable us to see general revelation rightly. So Calvin spoke of special revelation as the "spectacles" by which we understand general revelation.

Calvinists, therefore, have been more pessimistic than Aquinas about the unbeliever's knowledge of God. Aquinas regarded the pagan Aristotle as a paradigm of natural reason, and he followed Aristotle closely in his proofs for God and in other philosophical and theological matters. Followers of Calvin, however, have generally not thought that we can learn much about God from non-Christians. And, since the knowledge of God is integral to all human

knowledge, some Calvinists like Abraham Kuyper and Cornelius Van Til have argued that non-Christian thought is radically distorted even in relatively non-theological subject matter. Yet the Reformed tradition (with significant exceptions) has generally also accepted the doctrine of 'common grace,' in which God restrains non-Christians from the full implications of their rebellion against him and thus preserves in them some inclination toward civic virtue and true beliefs.

On the Reformed view, unregenerate knowledge of God needs more than supplementation. It needs a radical reorientation. The work of the apologist is not merely to add information to what the unbeliever already knows. It is, rather, to "take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5). This will involve questioning the unbeliever's basic worldview, the most basic presuppositions of his thinking. So Reformed presuppositional apologists have spoken of an 'antithesis' between believing and unbelieving thought, corresponding to the biblical distinction between God's wisdom and the world's foolishness. But it has been difficult for them to reconcile and balance their doctrine of antithesis with the doctrine of common grace. If there is such an antithesis, so that the non-Christian opposes the truth of God at every point, how can we ascribe to the non-Christian any knowledge at all?

I have tried to address this question in my book *Cornelius Van Til*, listed below. To summarize, agreements between believers and unbelievers are never perfect agreements; they are always agreements with a difference. Believer and unbeliever can agree that the sky is blue, but the unbeliever tries to see this fact as a product of matter, energy, and chance. Christian and Pharisee may agree that God requires Sabbath observance; but the Pharisee will fail to see the mercy of God in the commandment and therefore the appropriateness of healing. Non-Christians, in other words, may agree with Christians on various matters, but seen as a whole their understanding of God is seriously distorted, and apologists must deal with that distortion.

The remainder of this article will consider three questions about unregenerate knowledge of God: (1) How is it obtained? (2) How is it suppressed? (3) In what ways does it continue to function, despite its suppression?

(1) Rom. 1 tells us that this knowledge is gained from God's revelation 'in the things that are made,' that is, the entire created world, including human beings themselves. But how do people obtain this knowledge from creation? Some apologists have thought that this knowledge comes about through rational activity, particularly through theistic proofs and evidences. But this understanding would limit the knowledge of Romans 1 only to those competent to understand and be persuaded by those arguments and evidences. Paul, however, sees this knowledge as universal. Romans 1 begins the argument that leads in Rom. 3:10-20, 23, to the conclusion that all have sinned and stand in need of God's grace. . So the knowledge of Rom. 1 renders all human beings inexcusable (verse 20).

If that knowledge were less than universal, the conclusion of Rom. 3 would not follow from it.

So the knowledge of God by creation evidently reaches all, even those who are not competent to formulate or evaluate proofs and evidences. Evidently we discern the general revelation of God by some form of intuition, an intuition that some are able to articulate and defend by proofs and evidences, but which does not depend on them. Alvin Plantinga says that we come to believe in God when our rational faculties are operating as God intended, and when they are placed in an environment naturally conducive to the formation of theistic belief. No better explanation of the process has been offered to date.

(2) How do people suppress the truth of this revelation? It is tempting to think of "suppression" in psychological terms, as when someone relegates an unwelcome truth to his subconscious or unconscious. But that is not the biblical picture. The enemies of God in the Bible, from the Egyptians (Ex. 14:4) to the Pharisees, to Satan himself, often acknowledge consciously the existence of God. In Rom. 1, the suppression is seen in idolatrous worship and illicit sexual behavior. The unregenerate deny their knowledge of God by their ethical rebellion.

When Scripture describes the knowledge of God that comes by grace, that knowledge is always accompanied by obedience and holiness. John says, 'And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments' (1 John 2:3). Thus Scripture closely relates epistemology to ethics.

So the difference between unregenerate and regenerate knowledge of God may be described as ethical. The unregenerate represses his knowledge of God by disobeying God. This disobedience may lead in some cases to psychological repression, or explicit atheism, but it does not always. The apologist should recognize, therefore, that the unbeliever's problem is primarily ethical, not intellectual. He rejects the truth because he disobeys God's ethical standards, not the other way around.

This ethical rebellion does, however, always inject an element of irrationality into the thinking of the unregenerate. To know God and his commandments, even his 'eternal power,' and yet to rebel against him, is supremely futile. In this sense, unbelief is foolishness (Psm. 14:1). Consider Satan, who knows God in some respects better than we do, yet who seeks to replace God on the throne. In some ways, Satan is highly intelligent and knowledgeable. But in the most important sense, he is supremely irrational. It is important for the apologist to understand that in the final analysis the position of the non-Christian is like this: often intellectually impressive, but at a deeper level ludicrous.

(3) The non-Christian's suppression of the truth is never complete. He can never eradicate the truth completely from his consciousness. If he could, he could not live at all. For this is God's world, and all the world's structure, order, and

meaning is God's work. Further, as we have seen, God's common grace restrains the non-Christian's distortions of the truth. So even Satan uses the truth for his own purpose, and there are some unregenerate human beings, like the Pharisees, who are relatively orthodox.

Therefore we can expect the unbeliever's knowledge of God to bubble up at times through his consciousness, despite his attempts to repress that knowledge. How does that happen? In several ways: (a) Unbelievers may sometimes display explicitly quite a lot of knowledge of the true God, as the Pharisees did. (b) The non-Christian must assume that the world is not a chaos, but that it is orderly and relatively predictable, even though this assumption in turn presupposes God. (c) In ethics, non-Christians often reveal a knowledge of God's law. Apologists like C. S. Lewis and J. Budziszewski have pointed out that principles like "Play fair," "Don't murder," "Be faithful to your spouse," and "Take care of your family" are universally recognized. Although many people violate these principles, they show they know them by making excuses or rationalizations, and by accusing others of violating the same principles.

In other words, they treat the moral law as law. Although some theorize that moral principles are mere feelings, conventions, or instincts, no one really believes that, especially when injustice is done to them. When someone treats us unfairly, we regard that unfairness as an objective wrong. But objective wrongs cannot be derived from mere instincts, feelings, conventions, evolutionary defense mechanisms, etc. Moral rights and wrongs are based on personal relationships, specifically relationships of allegiance and love. And that means that absolute moral standards must be derived from an absolute person. So develops the "moral argument for the existence of God," q.v. But that argument is based on conscience, a sense of objective right and wrong that is universal, that exists even in those who do not formulate it as an argument. Budziszewski also points out the terrible consequences that result from violating one's conscience. Apologists should draw on the data of the unbeliever's conscience to lead him to that greater knowledge of God, which is eternal life in Christ.

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