

St. Paul's Dangerous Idea (Part 1)

Co-missioners,

Last week we sent you a [brief exhortation by the late Robert W. Bertram](#) to let Scripture expose the deep problem with God that every hearer is caught in, and for which Christ crucified is God's liberating solution.

This week we send you the first part of a long essay in which Steven Kuhl discusses the theology Bertram had in mind when he wrote that exhortation. Not that Kuhl speaks directly to Bertram. Instead he's writing for people who would find Bob's counsel mystifying. These days that includes an increasing number of the church's active pastors, leaders, and theologians, for whom the notion of God-as-problem is itself problematic.

"Think again," says Steve. "Start by reading St. Paul."

The essay you're getting was extracted by Steve Hitchcock, a member of our editorial team, from a paper the other Steve delivered in 1997 at a conference on the encounter between science and theology. The original paper was entitled "Darwin's Dangerous Idea...and St. Paul's." As Steve Kuhl describes in an abstract, it addressed "the challenge that the 'new atheists' level against theology and theism."

The present extracted essay aims at another challenge, the sub-Christian theology now surging within the church, including its Lutheran quarters. Bertram zinged this theology with elegance last week. "[It] offers people no more than a little Jesus for little sins, that's all. No wonder Christ, the real Christ, is so often out of a job. He is constantly being told he is over-

qualified.”


Steve will remind us all why the real Christ is still so necessary in 2023.

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

St. Paul’s Dangerous Idea [Part 1]

by Steven C. Kuhl

Paul’s dangerous idea about God—or more precisely, the “righteousness of God”—is deceptively simple. Some have even termed it “paradoxical,” [2] though that description fails to comprehend the truly scandalous character of the idea. It stands in offensive contradiction to ideas about God and God’s relating to the world—to human beings in particular—that predominate in Western culture and in much of American Christianity. I will refer to these ideas here as “traditional theism.”



For all have sinned and
fall short of the glory
of God.

Romans 3:23

Paul's idea can be summarized as follows: The defining feature of the creation—the “natural world” as we know it, the human and non-human parts working together—is not the awe-inspiring design and complexity of it all (Romans 1:20; 8:18-23; etc.), however obvious and important this may be. Instead, what defines the creation is the “wrath of God” that rests upon it (Romans 1: 18; 3:23), giving it a dubious, ambiguous, meaningless, character. What also defines it—for Paul this is the most important feature—is the (theo)logical counterpoint to this wrath, namely the “mercy of God.”

This mercy, which is the basis for a truly meaningful (justified) existence in the world, does not exist “naturally,” but was established historically in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Romans 3:25; 5:6-11), is presently being made available to all humanity through the “Word” (Romans 10:8-17) and is appropriated by humanity “through faith” (Romans 1: 17b; :1:25; 4:5). [3] In other words, characteristic of Paul's thought is the fact that both the problem and the solution implied in human existence (the problem of “meaning,” as philosophy calls it, or the ‘justified life,’ as Paul calls it) are rooted in God's stance towards the world.

This idea of Paul's is not the idea of traditional theism, namely that God exists to guarantee consolation and meaning in our lives regardless of circumstances. Indeed, Paul's idea actually negates this theism. For Paul, before God can be seen as a solution to humanity's need for meaning, that very same God must first be *negated* as the source of meaninglessness and self-doubt; for Paul, before God can be seen as the focus of our consolation, that very same God must first be *overthrown* as the ultimate threat to our existence.

If this idea sounds strange, it only underscores just how systematically misunderstood, distorted, or avoided Paul's

dangerous idea about God has been in Christian theology.

Traditional theism and God's wrath

I must first give a brief account of how Paul's dangerous idea relates to and, more importantly, negates traditional theism. From that discussion we will see that "last things" (eschatology), not "first things" (origins), is the central issue of Christian theology. We will also see that the chief metaphor for understanding God's relation to the world is not the theological image of God "the Architect," in which creation is seen as an edifice and humankind as God's craftsmen. Rather, it is the juridical image of God the Judge or Critic, in which the creation-as-a-whole is seen as the defendant on trial and humankind is viewed as creation's chief representative, the locus of the world's accountability before God.

Traditional theism is essentially radical monotheism, to use H. Richard Niebuhr's term. God is by definition monolithic and unchanging, consistent in essence, character, and style of rule. If the world seems changing and unstable, it is only because it lost the original vision, the beatific vision of God and the "first principles" of life.



Photo by [Andrik Langfield](#)
on [Unsplash](#)

Therefore, the primary focus of traditional theism is on God as the Architect of the world and the world as God's edifice, "God's watch," to use the familiar metaphor. Having lost the original sense of joy and meaningfulness inherent in being God's creation, having fallen into a kind of spiritual amnesia, the world is in need of restoration or recapitulation through a reintroduction of the original knowledge and memory of God and the first things of life.

In modern theology, this traditional theism has found its home in a highly sophisticated discussion of epistemology and hermeneutics, focusing single-mindedly on the theme of "revelation." Whereas once it was thought that God as the ground of being and meaning could be secured by logical proof (Anselm, for example), ever since Kant's critique a new tack was in order.

"Revelation," variously defined, became the theological workhorse for establishing Meaning in human existence. Whether it be Paul Tillich's "Correlation of Revelation and Reason,"

Karl Barth's "positivism of revelation" (as Dietrich Bonhoeffer disparagingly called it), H. Richard Niebuhr's "Reasons of the Heart," Wolfhart Pannenberg's, "History as Revelation," or Karl Rahner's idea of "God's self-communication," the basic premise is the same: humanity's fundamental problem is its *epistemological* distance from God as the ground of being and meaning for which "revelation," variously conceived and connected to Christ, is the solution .

In a sense, that is the starting point of theology for Paul. His is a theology "from below" not "above." It does not begin with metaphysics, primordial origins, or speculation about God or the Ideal World. Rather, it begins with what is happening now between humankind and God in the confines of human history.

According to Paul's dangerous idea, then, humanity's biggest problem is not the epistemological/hermeneutical one of traditional theism. To the contrary, says Paul, "what can be known of God is plain" (Romans 1:19)—and that is the problem! What can be known of God "naturally," according to Paul, is God's wrath, God's angry judgment upon sinful humankind (Romans 1-2). Humanity understood as God's designated steward of creation (Genesis 2:15) and creation's God-appointed representative before God (cf. Romans 8:19) "has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

The concept of "the glory of God" (Romans 1:23; 3:7, 23; 4:20; 5:2; etc.) permeates Paul's thought and is the closest synonym we have in Scripture to the modern concept of "meaning." By "falling short of the glory of God," Paul means not only that humanity, individually and as a species, has failed to live up to God's expectations—making it impossible for God to glory or delight in humankind—but also that humanity, because of that failure, is unable to glory or delight in (a wrathful) God. This makes it impossible for humankind to glory or delight in its own

existence.

Put into modern terms, Paul regards humankind, along with the whole creation, as sunken into a state of meaninglessness or futility not because people have no sense of God or the true nature of their existence in the world, but precisely because they do (cf. Romans 8:20).

This wrath of God, as Paul describes it, is not arbitrary, capricious, or episodic. Quite to the contrary, God's wrath is wholly just, because God is holy and just in his judgments (Romans 3:5-8). This wrath pervades the creation because God never relinquishes his rule over the creation for a moment (cf. Romans 2:1-11). Accordingly, the concept of God's wrath so informs Paul's world view that he sees all of history as the playing out of one divine purpose: *God's determination to bring the whole world to account* (Romans 3:19).

Paul and Accountability

Accountability—the idea that humanity, individually and collectively, is under a universal call to *justify* its existence before God—is at the heart of Paul's worldview and is the chief issue for theology. [4] “To hold accountable” here does not necessarily mean that the ones under call can *fulfill* their responsibility or actually justify before God what they have made of the creation and life (Romans 2:13; 3:20, etc.). Indeed, over and over Paul insists that humankind has absolutely no grounds to “boast” before God about what it has made of life (Romans 2:17-23; 3:27). In Paul's view self-justification before God is ultimately impossible, again, not because of a lack of knowledge about God and the creation but because of a lack of integrity on the part of humanity. People may weave all kinds of stories to *explain* what happened in the midst of daily life (like Adam and Eve in the garden), but that is very different

from giving a *justifiable* answer.

"To be held accountable" or "to be responsible," in other words, is a juridical concept that means simply "to be brought to justice" or "to bear the consequences." Therefore, according to Paul, what the truth about God the judge guarantees human beings is not the assurance that all is right with God, not the joy of glorying in God and their existence, not Meaning in the glib sense of traditional theism. Instead, it guarantees a day in court where they receive a confirmation of the meaninglessness of their existence, and are led to despair of God and of the very day that they were born.

For Paul, the evidence that God's intends to bring humanity to account for the condition of the creation is all around. Stated simply, it is exhibited in the fact that humanity has a "knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:20); that people instinctively "pass judgment on one another," thereby witnessing to their recognition of right and wrong; that the world is a critical place where judgment occurs "naturally" and where people discover that God is a critical God (Romans 2:1-11). The thoroughness of God's judicious rule—that people do ultimately "bear the consequences" for their deeds—is sealed in the fact of death (Romans 6:23). [5]

To be sure, the timing and process by which this accountability happens is complex. Sometimes judgment is meted out (revealed) in the moment, as when people or institutions pass judgment on another (Romans 2:1); sometimes it is manifest in God's abandoning people ("giving them up") to the murky consequences of their actions (Romans 1:24, 26, 28); sometimes it is simply "stored up" (hidden) for a future day (Romans 2:5). Nevertheless, God's Wrath, God's relentless call to justice, is eminently displayed in the give and take of history to any who would dare to acknowledge it.

Moreover, for Paul, the mechanisms through which this critical state of affairs between God and humanity is played out are "hard wired" into reality in a wholistic way: inwardly and outwardly. Inwardly, the encounter is evidenced by what Paul calls the "conscience," humankind's unique inner life of "conflicting thoughts" which "accuse" and "excuse" them moment by moment (Romans 2:15). Outwardly, the encounter is evidenced in that web of relationships Paul calls "the Law," better known by us moderns as "culture" (cf. Romans 13)

Pushed Further into Sin

The danger this idea of Paul's presents to traditional theism should be obvious. Far from guaranteeing meaning (in the sense of glibly inviting people to "glory in God" in spite of their circumstances), the God who created and rules this world, the God we experience "naturally," actually guarantees the opposite: meaninglessness, or as Paul calls it, *katakrima*, "condemnation" (Romans 5:16, 18). "The law," Paul's favorite term for summarizing God's immanent call to accountability, ultimately "brings wrath" (Roman 4:15).

The idea of God as presented in traditional theism, in Paul's view, is therefore nothing but a pious illusion, an opiate of the people, something that fails to probe the "critical" depths of the human condition before God.

To be sure, it is understandable psychologically why people might want to cling to something like traditional theism—even though it is by no means justifiable theologically! In the give and take of daily life, people are unable to face and meet the full consequences of their accountability before God.

And, when push comes to shove, pressing that accountability too thoroughly may very well push people farther into sin, into outright rebellion against God and sabotage of the creation. For

“the law of God”—when disclosed in all its fullness—not only “brings wrath” (Romans 4:15) but actually “increases trespasses” (Romans 5:20).

Theological knowledge, in so far as it is a knowledge of sin and wrath, may actually make things worse by exacerbating the deadly spiral of sin, law and death (Romans 6:23; 1 Corinthians 15:56). For this reason, Paul himself would not have dreamed of venturing so “wretchedly” deep into the phenomenon of human responsibility *except* that he had in his hand a trump card by the name of Jesus Christ (Romans 7:24-25).

Paul himself suggests that he would never have dug as deeply as he did into the human condition (namely, to the point where God himself is implicated in humanity’s sense of meaninglessness) had it not been for the mind-blowing, hole-filling solution he came to believe in Jesus Christ, crucified and raised (cf. Galatians 1:13-16). In a real sense, Paul was a pragmatist. He spoke only of what he experienced. He was well aware that “the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18). Only as he experienced meaning (a justified existence before God) in Jesus Christ, could Paul truly appreciate the depth of meaninglessness (God’s condemnation) that was his before.



Rev. Dr. Steven Kuhl

Endnotes

[1] Extracted from "Darwin's Dangerous Idea...and St. Paul's." The original was presented in 19976 at the proceedings of the Institute for Theological Encounter of Science and Theology (ITEST) and published in *Creation and Evolution: The Proceedings of the ITEST*, paperback, March 1998, pp. 76-103.

[2] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (Harper and Row, 1951), 159-70. For my own extended critique of this description see Steven C. Kuhl, *Christ and Agriculture: Toward a Theologically Useful Understanding of the Crisis in Agriculture Utilizing the Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr, Martin Luther, and St. Paul* (Ann Arbor, MI, UMI Dissertation Services, 1993).

[3] The most systematic treatment of Paul's dangerous idea is presented in Romans and Galatians. However, this theme is not peculiar to Paul. It is the Christian message, a message that permeates, not only the Old Testament writings, as Paul's own

use of them shows, but all the writings of the New Testament as well.

[4] H. Richard Niebuhr, in his classic little book, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (Harper and Row, 1963; paperback, 1978), has reintroduced the concept of responsibility as the key metaphor for doing theology in a powerful way. Unfortunately, he was unable to make full use of his insight because he remained fettered to the concept of “revelation” and traditional theism. That this is so is reflected in his inability to make sense of the cross and the doctrine of atonement (i.e., justification), p. 176.

[5] For humanity, death is not simply a biological phenomenon but the end of the trial in the sense that no more evidence can be presented (for or against) the worthiness of this life. As they lived, so shall they be judged.

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