

St. Paul's Dangerous Idea (Part 3)

Co-missioners,

For the past two weeks Steve Kuhl has been exploring how St. Paul thinks about God, and how this contrasts with presumptions common to much of American Christianity. Today we send along the final section of Steve's essay. A reminder that we extracted the essay from a longer paper Steve presented in 1997 at a workshop on the encounter between science and theology. We hope to have the original paper available in our online library in the near future. May the extraction serve in the meantime to underscore why we at Crossings tout Christ crucified.

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

St. Paul's Dangerous Idea

([continued from Part 2](#))

by Stephen C. Kuhl

Gnosticism and Creation

Gnosticism is a pseudo-Pauline version of the Christian faith that first emerged as Christianity encountered Greek thought and Hellenistic culture. Gnosticism set forth to resolve the tension between God's wrath and mercy that is characteristic of Paul's theology by positing an absolute dualism in the nature of things: two Gods (one wrathful and evil, one merciful and good) and two corresponding worlds (one material and evil, one spiritual and good).

Gnosticism is a creation-denying spirituality in that it identifies essential humanity, not with the created world, but the with divine itself. [8] In this view, humanity is essentially spiritual but caught in the material. Gnosticism was roundly rejected in the second and third centuries by what became known as orthodox and catholic Christianity. Nevertheless, Gnosticism keeps emerging perennially, in many and various forms, among Christian as well as other religious movements.

In the creation account of Genesis 2, humanity, *adam*, is essentially linked with *adamah*, the earth as are all other living beings. Biblically speaking, then, all creatures, including humankind, trace their “common descent” from the earth (Genesis 2:7; 19).

Nowhere in all of Scripture are the nature and implications of this representative role of humankind *within* the creation more thoroughly worked out than by Paul himself in Romans 8—only now, not from the perspective of “origins” (first things) but from the perspective of eschatology (last things). For Paul, there is not a hint of Greek/Gnostic dualism in his understanding of anthropology or cosmology. Paul does not posit a split between body and soul, or between humanity and the rest of nature. As humankind fares so fares the whole creation, and vice versa.



Holy lamb – Parish church in Althofen

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As Paul views the “present time,” the “whole creation” suffers under “a curse” due to bad representation on the part of humankind: humanity’s arrogant disobedience before God (Genesis 3:17; Romans 8:20). As a result, says Paul, all things are “subject to futility” or meaninglessness (Romans 8:20).

As Paul presents things, creation itself seems to know of its inherent need for humanity, that as humanity fares so fares the whole creation. Even more, Paul gives the distinct impression that the creation itself is not without “hope” (Romans 8:20). This hope is founded neither on the belief that the creation will survive regardless of what happens to humankind, nor on the idea that creation has no need of a representative before God, but on the fact that a new humanity is coming on the scene.

Paul calls that new humanity the “children of God” (Romans 8:21), a new humanity “in Christ” that is presently being reconstituted (“glorified”) from the old, discredited humanity through its participation in the suffering of Christ. These children of God have “received a spirit of adoption” (Romans

8:15), says Paul, and thus have become “heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ”(Romans 8:17) making them worthy, capable and meaningful representatives of the creation before God.

Fallen Creation

Paul’s understanding of God as Creator is very different from that of traditional theism. The dominant metaphor for understanding God in traditional theism is a “pre-fall” image, that of “God as the Great Architect,” the “proof” of which is the pervasiveness of design throughout the world .

For Paul, on the other hand, the dominant metaphor for God is a “post-fall” image, that of God as judge, the proof or evidence of which is the *pervasiveness of judgment* throughout the world (Romans 2:1-11). This is not to say that for Paul the creation does not exhibit “design,” and that this design does not elicit wonder and awe, thereby hinting at the existence of a Designer. Indeed, it does! But even so, from Paul’s perspective, this evidence of design is not sufficient to establish what we would call “a meaningful life” or what Paul calls “faith,” that is the ability to glory in our existence before God.

For in Paul’s view creation is a “fallen” creation, distorted by sin, under the sentence of death, and “subject to futility” and meaninglessness (Romans 8:20). Indeed, as the Psalms also make clear, the presence of design may well invoke just the opposite of awe: a sense of the meaninglessness and insignificance of human existence (Psalm 8:4; Psalm 90; Psalm 144:3-4).

Therefore, for Paul, contrary to traditional theism, creation is not the ground or presupposition of Meaning, but of Meaninglessness. This is so because creation, as we know it, is characterized by the deadly clash of human sin and the wrath of God. For Paul, Meaning in any deep sense is not grounded in creation, origins, or “first things,” but in Christ,

eschatology, “last things.” Meaning is a matter of the new creation, of God changing his approach to sinful humanity and recreating them “in Christ.”

For this reason, Paul rarely speaks of a “benign Creator,” not because God as judge is not good and right in Godself (Romans 7:7-13), but because God as judge cannot possibly elicit joy in sinners.

Moreover, in traditional Hebraic fashion, Paul never ever presumes that people can, with their own naked resources, behold this God in nature. This is so not for want of evidence of this God’s existence or because of some great epistemological barrier between the finite and the infinite, but because sinful human beings cannot possibly face up to a God who judges them so thoroughly and so fairly. [9] Rather, it is human nature, says Paul, to “exchange the truth about God for a lie” (Romans 1:25), whether that be the lie of traditional theism which obscures the truth of God’s judgment, or the lie of atheism which obscures the truth of God’s existence.

On the surface these two interpretations of reality—the traditionally theistic and the atheistic—appear to be opposites. But from Paul’s perspective they are like two fighting foxes joined at the tail: two clever ways of avoiding the “truth about God” as judge. Therefore, for Paul, “inscrutable” and “unsearchable” are more apt terms for describing God (Romans 11:33), even—especially!—for those like himself who have received mercy in Christ by grace for no apparent reason at all.

Paul and Teleology

I come finally to **the third matter at issue** in Paul’s dangerous idea about God. It has to do with the question of teleology, or purpose in the world.

The central question is this: is the world a goal-directed system? Is it directed, that is, toward a “telos,” an end in an absolute sense? One of the central assertions of traditional theism is that the world is indeed directed toward an absolute goal, one that is bigger than sum of the myriad of goal processes that comprise the world. While the exact shape of this “telos” is debatable, the fact that the world is goal-directed is not.

Again, the real issue is “Meaning” in the deep sense of the term, whereby people are able to glory in their existence before God, and to do so in an absolute sense. As we have said, human existence is not simply a matter of survival but of having a justifiable existence—an existence worthy of being. In traditional theism, this understanding of teleology has been grounded in a strong notion of divine providence and the sovereignty of God. God’s sovereignty insures meaning, stability, and salvation. Divine providence assures us of Meaning all along life’s journey.

However, for Paul, the overarching purpose of God’s work in the “natural world”—the world as represented by sinful humanity—can be summed up in one word: “repentance,” an honest acknowledgment of sin (Romans 2:4). But that’s precisely the problem! For such a goal undercuts humanity’s basic need for meaning in life, the need to believe that one’s existence is, in the last analysis, justifiable and worthwhile, and therefore meaningful. While it is true that “the knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20) abounds in the world—to wit, the endless stream of people “passing judgment on one another” (Romans 2: 1)—true repentance does not. By calling sinners to capitulate in their own demise, true repentance—the kind of repentance whereby people acknowledge that they are *sinners to the core* (Romans 3:10)—contradicts the most basic human instinct to survive.

To be sure, most people's lives are filled with many moments that are relatively meaningful, purposive, and secure (cf. Romans 2:1-11). Every defendant has his or her bright (glorious) moments on the witness stand of life. Indeed, such bright spots undergird the natural human inclination to cling to the presumption of innocence, the primal belief that in the last analysis their life will be deemed ultimately meaningful (justifiable) in the wider scope of things.



The Last Judgment – Gherardo Starnina

From [Wikimedia Commons](#)

But, as Paul argues, such a presumption of meaning is an illusion. For in the last analysis, all our bright moments will serve as little more than failed courtroom antics launched in order to “suppress the truth” about sin and wrath, but ultimately of no avail (Romans 1:18; see also John 16:8-11).

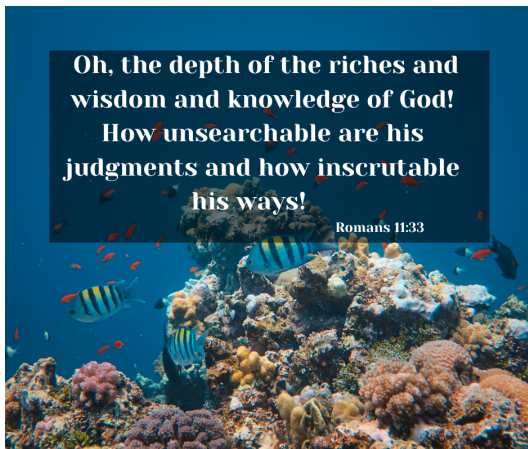
Of course, for Paul, this dangerous idea about God and God's wrath is not intended to be the last word on the "telos" of God. Paul's idea is not simply morbid existentialism. Nor is Paul interested in revealing this truth simply because it is true. Some things are better left unsaid. Rather, Paul's ultimate purpose is to proclaim the fact that, in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has introduced a new, contravening "telos" into the world of sinners. "Jesus Christ is the end of the law [the old "telos"] so that there might be righteousness [a meaningful existence] for those who believe" (Romans 10:4).

Again, for Paul, the world has become a very complicated place since Christ. There are now two very different kinds of "endings" at work in the world, the anthropological line of demarcation of which is faith. Faith so unites the believer with Christ that Christ's ending (his death and resurrection) becomes the believers ending—not only metaphorically, but historically. Believers expect not only to die, but also to rise outwardly, bodily, in the future, even as Christ himself already died and rose bodily (the theme of 1 Corinthians 15).

Even more, believers expect—and willing collaborate in—an inward kind of dying to sin and rising. This they do each and every day through the practice repentance and forgiveness. In repentance Christians indeed make use of God's wrath and the knowledge of sin that it brings, not despairingly but hopefully, because of the forgiveness of sins that is theirs in Christ through faith. For Paul repentance and faith are the primary way the new life contravenes the old *already*. This is how Meaning replaces meaninglessness *in history*. This is how the new telos co-opts and subverts the old telos *day by day* (Romans 6).

"The Mystery of Life"

What still remains to be said is how the idea of these two possible endings of life (one meaningful, one meaningless) informs Paul's view of the "mystery of life." The "mystery of life" is not sufficiently probed by the question about the origin of life, "How did life begin?" Nor is it sufficiently probed by the question of traditional teleology, "To what end is life going?" Rather, since Christ, the most crucial question concerning the mystery of life is "Which ending?" More to the point, it has to do with the question "Why are some ending up 'in Christ' and some not?" "Why do some believe and others disbelieve?" "Why is God merciful to some and not to others?"



From Canva

This question, for Paul, does not grow out of idle, philosophical speculation but from his disturbing missiological experience with his own Jewish people (Romans 9-11). They seemingly had all the advantages in the world (Romans 9:4), and yet they could not tally that advantage into faith and repentance.

Why so? Unlike either the Semipelagians (who find the reason in the particular character and potential of each human being) or the Calvinist Predestinarians (who find the reason in God's hidden, eternal, and unchanging will towards each human being),

Paul has no answer. For Paul the question of how and why some people acquire Meaning in the deep sense of the term and others do not remains the great “mystery of faith,” to use the phrase of the Eucharistic Prayer. However, what Paul does know for certain, as one who has been called to be an apostle, is that his task is not to explain the mysteries of life but to be a steward of those mysteries. His task is simply to proclaim Christ and let God do the rest (Romans 10:6-17). For in this way “God’s purposes of election continue, not by works but by his call” (Romans 9:11-12).

Endnotes

[8] On the prevailing Gnostic character of religion in America, see Harold Bloom’s illuminating work, *The American Religion*. According to Bloom the character of religion in America, from the Southern Baptist Convention to the Mormons, is essentially Gnostic, regardless of the various names the different groups use to describe themselves.

[9] This idea is reflected throughout the Scriptures in the idea that no human being can look upon the glorious face of God of Creation and live. The *locus classicus* is Exodus 33:20, but the idea is already plainly at work in Gen 3:10, when primordial humanity could not bear to be confronted by God because of their sin.

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
A publication of the Crossings Community

St. Paul's Dangerous Idea (Part 2)

Co-missioners,



Rev. Dr. Steven Kuhl

Today Steve Kuhl will plunge us into the scandals that lie at the heart of St. Paul's thinking about God and his proclamation of Christ crucified. We can't urge you strongly enough to take the time for a close and careful reading—all the more if the theological milieu you interact with regularly ignores the distinction between Law and Gospel and touts an amenable god.

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

St. Paul's Dangerous Idea

([continued from Part 1](#))

by Steven C. Kuhl

The Remarkable Duel

This brings us to the **second major point** about Paul's dangerous idea about God. If meaninglessness is rooted in the wrath of God upon sinful humanity, how is meaning (a sense of glorying in God and one's existence before God) possible?

For Paul, the solution to meaninglessness is so ingenious that no human being could have ever imagined it. For it is nothing less than an incredible duel within the Godhead itself, God resolving to oppose Godself, right within the confines of human history. In short, the solution entails a change in God. Not a change *of* gods, as though simple idolatry were the issue, but a change *in* God, God changing God's own approach to humankind.

As Paul explains it, only as God changes—overrules, overthrows—his natural, critical approach toward sinful humankind is Meaning possible. And that, according to Paul, is exactly what God is doing “in Christ.” The phrase “in Christ” is for Paul a technical term for identifying the basis of a new, meaningful (justified) kind of existence before God, one in which people can actually *glory in God*, rather than *despair of* God (cf. Romans 3:24, 26; 6:3, 11, 23; 8:2). Therefore, for Paul, Meaning is secured neither through the revelation of an eternal, but hidden, Meaning rooted deep within creation (as traditional theism proposes), nor through the potential, but in no wise guaranteed, outcome of continued human striving and evolution.

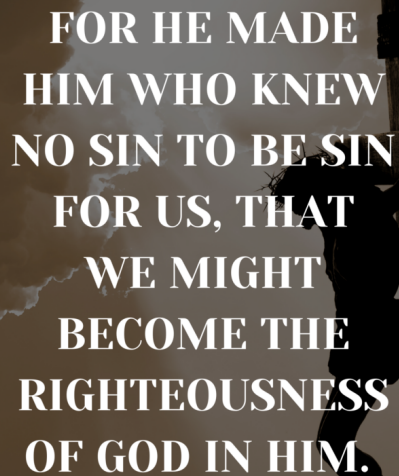
Rather, Meaning is secured only as God negates, supplants, overrules his righteous wrath on a fallen world, thereby effectively changing his nature, that is, his approach towards humanity in history. **Paul's dangerous idea about God, then, is not only about how a holy and wrathful God is dangerous to a sinful humanity. More importantly it's about how *God endangers***

Godself in the event of Jesus Christ for the sake of the world's salvation.

In the event of Jesus Christ, God's wrath, which is holy and righteous in every respect, is overruled by God's mercy, thereby establishing the basis—through faith in Christ—for a justified, meaningful human existence. Paul describes this change in approach as follows:

For while we were still weak [helpless under the wrath of God], at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (Romans 5:6-11)

For Paul, Meaning (i.e., a justified, meaningful life in which one can "boast" or "glory in God," and hence, in one's own existence) is the outcome of a conscious change of approach by God toward sinful humankind. This approach, as Paul speaks of it, is not a mystical experience or a new idea about life, but a real historical, one-of-a-kind event which begins with God becoming, not just one-of-us, but one-*with-us* in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus so sides with sinners that he actually "becomes sin" for them (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:21), subjecting himself to the judgment and death which befalls them.



**FOR HE MADE
HIM WHO KNEW
NO SIN TO BE SIN
FOR US, THAT
WE MIGHT
BECOME THE
RIGHTEOUSNESS
OF GOD IN HIM.**

2 Corinthians 5:21 nkjv

From Canva

What this means is the central concern of Christian theology. Elsewhere Paul describes what Jesus was doing when he “died for us” like this: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law [i.e. the wrath of God and meaninglessness] by becoming a curse for us” (Galatians 3:13).

As Paul views reality, humankind is “by nature” a creature under God’s wrath, burdened with meaninglessness, in a word, “cursed.” As Paul envisions it, the event of Jesus Christ, the pinnacle of which is the cross, is nothing less than a “remarkable duel (*mirabile duellum*) between life and death,” as the old Latin hymn put it, a battle between the God encountered “in nature,” who is right in condemning sinners to death, and that self-same God who “in Christ” desires that all shall live. In the cross this conflict within God is played out right in the confines of human history. (This very thought so exhausts traditional monotheism that Christianity had to come up with new language—Trinity—to confess the God they had come to know in Christ.)

In Jesus Christ, God the Son so sides with cursed humanity over against God's law and wrath (God's curse) that law and wrath are left with no alternative but to curse and condemn Jesus *with* humanity. At this point, *the point at which Jesus submits himself to judgment and death*, the old-world view of law and wrath comes undone, or more precisely, implodes. For the Jesus who is wrapped up in the fate of sinful humanity is also the Son of God! And for God's law and wrath to curse Jesus, the Holy Son of God, is high treason, blasphemy, an attack on the very God whose honor they are obliged to serve.

The result is a great reversal unlike anything that is seen in nature: *Resurrection*. "In Christ" wrath is overruled by mercy, and death yields to life. Thus, says Paul, "Christ is the end of the law" (Romans 10:4), for the law and wrath have no claim on him or on those whose lives are wrapped up with his through faith. "Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness [a justified, meaningful existence] for everyone who believes" (Romans 10:4).

As a result of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ—for Paul, *the* crucial fact upon which his whole argument depends (see 1 Corinthians 15: 12-28)—a new zone has been established in space and time where Meaning is secured, where people can "glory in God" and "boast" of their new-found existence in Christ. That zone is identified by Paul elsewhere as the "'new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:16; Galatians 6:15) and its entry is marked by "faith." "Faith" is Paul's favorite term for describing human beings who are "in Christ," who are themselves changed by the change in God. Faith is Meaning secured.

Here Paul's theological anthropology comes into play, anthropology which, formally at least, resembles George Herbert Mead's concept of the social self. The self is essentially a relational reality: we *are* our relationships. In the case of

Paul's theological anthropology, *we are as God is to us*. For Paul, then, faith is not primarily a psychological phenomenon but a wholistic description of the new person or self in Christ. Faith means "It is no longer I (the sinner self) who lives, but Christ (the righteous self) who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20).

Conversely, "sin" is not primarily understood by Paul as a deed either. Rather sin is a wholistic description of the person under wrath, regardless of what they are doing at the moment. Faith describes the person to whom God shows mercy; sin describes the person to whom God shows wrath (Romans 7:4-6).

The deeds that a person of faith performs are called "the fruits of the Spirit" because they are a response to the overall reality of mercy (Romans 8:9). The deeds that a sinner performs are called "works of the law" because they are a response to the overall reality of wrath (Romans 7:7-14). Theologically, how we are related to God makes all the difference in the world.

Faith Comes from What Is Heard

According to Paul, God approaches people in this new and merciful way through something very earthy: the "Word," the "proclamation of Christ" (Romans 10:14-17; 1 Corinthians 1:21; etc.). "Faith comes from what is heard and what is heard comes through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17) just as the wrath of God is mediated through the "communicative structures" of the natural world, so the mercy of God is mediated through the "communicative structures" of the new creation [6] in its impact on the world through the Church, the body of Christ in the world (Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12).

And yet, there is this difference. Everyone "naturally" participates in and connects with the reality of wrath. That is the starting point of human existence and the basis for the doctrine of "original sin." But not everyone participates in the

Christological world of mercy, nor do they automatically connect with it. Moreover, this disconnect is not simply a function of geographical proximity to communicative structures of the gospel or due to some particular predisposition of the individual person. It is simply that not everyone who hears the proclamation of Christ outwardly necessarily “hears” the message or connects to it inwardly, that is, believes. Some remain unbelievers and under wrath, even though the “word is near” (Romans 10:8), while others become believers and enjoy mercy and a sense of meaning.

This fact, that some connect with the Word and some do not, undergirds a great dilemma for Paul (Romans 9-11), such that he is beset with “great sorrow and unceasing anguish” (Romans 9:2). For the dilemma highlights **the most dangerous aspect of Paul’s idea about God: Grace**. For Paul, grace is not the “gestalt of grace” referred to in modern versions of traditional theism, namely, a hidden meaningfulness that only needs revealing. Rather, the term “grace”—it means simply God’s “favor” or “pleasure,” referring to God’s new approach towards humanity in Christ—implies no constraint (gestalt) whatsoever on God’s part to give it. Nor is there any meritorious feature in the human character to warrant it, not even the fact that humankind is God’s creature (Romans 9: 21 ff). Grace implies God’s freedom, specifically, that disturbing freedom exhibited in the fact that God “has mercy on whomever he chooses, and he hardens the heart of whomever he chooses” (Romans 9:18).



African Lion

From – <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki>

Given this freedom on the part of God, Paul became keenly aware that unbelief does not simply implicate human beings as sinners, but, far worse, it implicates God as holding back on grace. The end result is that grace is as scandalous as the wrath it is intended to overcome, if not more so.

For Paul, this scandal of grace is *not* a problem of metaphysics or logic or biblical interpretation, but rather a practical problem that emerged in his own missiological experience with his own people, even as it continues to emerge in the missiological experience of every believer today. Some believe and some do not; some are saved and some are not.

This scandal of grace is a peculiarly Christian problem. After all, the unbeliever who has no sense of salvation in Christ simply casts it aside as a non-problem, as a logical inconsistency. Not so the person of genuine faith who knows she is saved by grace and no merit of her own; a person marked by a concern for the salvation of others because she shares with Paul the same "mind" as Christ (Philippians 2:1-5; Romans 15:3). For this person of faith, that some are saved while others are not

is an enduring problem and a constant source of “great sorrow and unceasing anguish” (Romans 9:2).

Ironically, then, what is usually presented by traditional theism as the most endearing aspect of the Christian message (namely, God’s grace) is for Paul its most problematic aspect. Indeed, it is at this point of “great sorrow and unceasing anguish” for those who are perishing that the question of the “mystery of our existence” is most acute for Paul. And, significantly, he has no answer to it. All he has is a simple counsel: let that problem be God’s problem [7]—and proclaim Christ (Cf. Romans 11:33-36).

For since the coming of Christ, the world has become a much more complicated place. Since the coming of Christ, God exhibits two very different approaches to the world. Paul identifies them as two kinds of “righteousness”—two paths to a meaningful or justified existence. One is the old, straightforward, “natural” righteousness, “the righteousness of the law,” which for sinners ultimately means that “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). This old righteousness ultimately undergirds the experience of meaninglessness, not because of any fault in the law, but because of sin (Romans 7:7-13).

The other kind of righteousness is the new, unpredictable “Christological” righteousness, “the righteousness of faith,” which ultimately means—even for sinners, especially for sinners!—that “the one who is righteous through faith will live” (Romans 1:17). This righteousness establishes Meaning in the world.

Both approaches are from the self-same God (no Gnostic dualism here) and yet both are diametrically opposed (no simplistic monotheism either). Both approaches are holy and good in themselves, and yet only as the new supplants the old is true

holiness and goodness –a meaningful existence, the new creation–established in the world.

Endnotes

[6] These “communicative structures of the new creation” are usually referred to as the means of grace. Luther’s listing of the five ways the gospel “offers counsel and help against sin” is a helpful way of identifying this communicative structure. They are: 1) the spoken word, 2) baptism, 3) Holy Communion, 4) confession and forgiveness, and 5) the mutual conversation and consolation of fellow Christians. Martin Luther, “The Smalcald Articles, Article IV” in *The Book of Concord: The Confessional Writings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Theodore Tappert, translator and editor (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 310.

[7] I am much indebted to Robert Bertram for this understanding of Paul. The phrase “let that problem be God’s problem” actually comes from a paper Bertram delivered under the title, “Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus. That Depends: *Which* Salus? Some Theses on Luther’s De Servo Arbitrio,” for the 1997 Luther Congress at Hamburg, German. Bertram shows how Paul’s concern about *God’s freedom* to save or not to save human beings, as opposed to humanity’s freedom to choose or not choose salvation, was the central issue for Luther in his debate with Erasmus on free will.

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
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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.



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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.



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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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