1. Romans 1:1

Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, summoned to be a missionary, selected for God’s good news (1:1).

In accordance with the conventions of his day, Paul opens his letter by identifying himself. Whereas in modern letters, it is customary to begin with one’s return address and the date, in the ancient Roman world one began by giving the author’s name. After his name, Paul supplies a brief description of who he is.

Paul identifies himself as a missionary whose authority comes directly from Jesus and depends on obeying him. In some of the later books of the New Testament, the term “apostle” which I have rendered here as “missionary” is already a synonym for twelve people who were leading followers of Jesus during his lifetime and apparently symbolized the twelve tribes of Israel (e.g., Acts 1:25–26). By contrast, in Paul’s writings, an “apostle” is someone who saw Jesus after the resurrection and received from him a commission to preach the Christian message to others (cf. e.g., 1 Cor. 9:1). The Greek word apostolos literally means someone who is sent out to do something. By referring to himself as “apostle,” Paul tacitly reminds his readers that Jesus appeared to him after the resurrection and gave him a call to preach. Hence, he will tell people what God wants them to do and urge them to obey. Nevertheless, Paul stresses that he has no independent authority and dignity. Instead, he remains only a “slave” of the one who summoned him.

The claim that he is Jesus’ missionary and slave implicitly places Paul in the line of the “servants” in the Old Testament who in response to a personal call from God proclaimed the Lord’s will.

As a missionary, Paul stresses that he is bringing “good news.” The English phrase “good news” translates the single Greek word euangelion, from which we get terms like “evangelist.” Euangelion is composed of the roots, eu meaning “well”
or “good” and *angelia* meaning “message” or “tidings.” Later, because of Paul, *euangelion* (traditionally translated “gospel”) became a technical term for the Christian message as a whole or for a book about the life of Jesus. Here, however, it still has its original meaning of wonderful tidings. This opening reference to good news should remind us that no matter how negative Paul will be in his subsequent evaluations of a sinful world and an imperfect church, his proclamation remains one of joy and hope for all.

**Questions for reflection:**

Does the authority of Christian preachers or teachers come directly from Jesus or from other human beings? Does a Christian leader who has credentials (such as a degree in biblical studies) have an authority to preach that does not come from knowing Jesus? What is that authority, and what are its limits? Is the message that the church is preaching today still joy and peace for all? Or has the element of judgment made our message primarily negative? When we act as God’s servants do we see ourselves as part of a long line of holy men and women stretching back to biblical times?

---

2. Romans 1:2–4

Previously, God promised through his prophets in the holy scriptures the good news about his Son. By blood he was born from David’s lineage. By a sanctified spirit he was installed Son of God in power at his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ, our Lord. (1:2–4)

In his introduction of himself Paul is careful to give a brief summary of his message. Thus, he emphasizes that Jesus is the fulfillment of the ancient Jewish prophesies and is the expected messianic descendant of King David. Paul also stresses that
through the resurrection Jesus has become Lord of the universe. In the ancient world a “son” shared in his father’s social standing. Hence, when Jesus became “Son of God in power,” he shared in the universal authority of God himself. Of course, a “son” was also someone who was supposed to obey his father, and by calling Jesus God’s Son, Paul reminds his readers that Jesus was obedient to God.

This proclamation that Jesus was both David’s son and Lord of all would have pleased the mixed audience for whom Paul was writing. Jewish Christians at Rome would have appreciated Paul’s recognition that Jesus was the descendant of their national hero King David and fulfilled the ancient prophecies in their scriptures. By contrast, Gentile Christians would have appreciated Paul’s suggestion that Jesus’ human lineage is no longer of primary importance. Paul contrasts Jesus’ physical descent and spiritual identity and implies that the latter is what is truly significant. Yes, physically Jesus was a descendant of David, but that fact is primarily of historical interest. By his resurrection Jesus has now become Lord.

Of course, the early Church as a whole was divided between Jews and Gentiles, and, as we shall see, it is likely that Paul hoped this letter would win him support from both groups, not only in Rome, but elsewhere too.

The theme that Jesus is the son of David does not occur in Paul’s letters to other churches, and apparently Paul specifically included it here to please Jewish Christian readers. Later in Romans Paul will again note that Jesus was descended from Jewish royalty. Thus, in 15:12 Paul quotes a prophecy from Isaiah about the coming of a descendant from David’s father, Jesse, and clearly assumes that Jesus fulfills this prediction. In his epistles to other congregations, however, Paul does not stress that Jesus is David’s descendant. As we will see, in Romans Paul tries to make the gospel especially relevant to Jewish Christians. Apparently then, this opening reference to Jesus’ descent from the Jewish royal family was also meant to appeal to this group.
In addition, it may be that Paul emphasized that Jesus was descended from Jewish royalty to overcome the hostility from Christian Jews which his Letter to the Galatians had recently provoked throughout the early Church. When he wrote Galatians, Paul was trying to keep his Gentile converts from adopting Jewish customs. In this attempt Paul treated such pillars of Judaism as the Mosaic Law and circumcision very negatively. Indeed, he even suggested that the Mosaic Law cursed Jesus (Gal. 3:13) and that circumcision was tantamount to castration (Gal. 5:12). Such rhetoric may have been successful in keeping Galatian Gentiles from adopting Jewish ways, but it must have deeply offended any Jewish Christians who subsequently heard about the letter. Although we cannot be certain, it appears that Paul wrote Romans shortly after writing Galatians, since Romans deals with many of the same themes but more fully and carefully. Hence, Paul needed to placate conservative Jewish Christians in the Church as a whole.

The proclamation that Jesus was Son of David and was installed Son of God at the resurrection coheres closely with Paul’s later contention in Romans that the gospel is for the Jews first and also for the Greeks (Rom. 1:16). By reminding the reader that Jesus was born a descendant of David, Paul suggests that Jesus was Jewish and, hence, Jews had a special relationship to him beginning with his birth. Nevertheless, by insisting that Jesus became ruler of the universe at the resurrection, Paul implies that the gospel is now for everyone.

In my opinion, there is no reason why Paul himself could not have composed the statement that Jesus was “was born from David’s lineage” and “installed Son of God in power at his resurrection.” Scholars have generally assumed that in this passage Paul is quoting an older Christian confession. The language is formal, and elsewhere Paul teaches that Jesus was divine before his birth (Rom. 8:3, 10:6, 2 Cor. 8:9, Gal. 4:4, Phil. 2:6). As we have seen, however, what Paul says about Jesus here serves his efforts to gain the support of Jews and Gentiles at Rome and elsewhere. Hence, there is no reason that Paul could not have composed the phrase himself and simply
used formal language. We may note in passing that even here Paul implies that Jesus was always God’s Son and merely obtained a new authority as a result of the resurrection. At the resurrection Jesus became “Son of God in power.”

Questions for reflection:

In Christian preaching should we tailor the message to appeal to different ethnic groups? What parts of the Christian message can be left out if the need arises? What additions to the gospel can be included to please specific groups? What is the indispensable core of Christianity that must not be compromised regardless of the cultural setting? Does that core include the proclamation that God’s Son existed before being born, voluntarily assumed a human life, died, rose from the dead, and now lives as Lord of the universe? Is there something in the Christian message that is inherently counter-cultural regardless of the social setting?

3. Romans 1:5–6

Through him [Jesus] we have received grace and a missionary commission to all the nations to make them for his sake to believe and obey. Among them are you who have been summoned to belong to Jesus Christ. (1:5–6)

Paul stresses that he has a larger mission from God that qualifies him to preach at Rome and suggests that the Roman Christians have a larger mission that makes it imperative that they listen to him. Paul can be a missionary to the Roman community only because he has a larger mission to all the nations. Similarly, the Romans have an obligation to listen to his message only because they have a larger obligation to obey Jesus Christ.
Both Paul's mission and that of the Roman Christians resulted from God's call. It is God who took the initiative in granting Paul his missionary commission; it is God who summoned his Roman readers to believe in Christ.

By mentioning his larger mission, Paul is already subtly preparing for his appeal later in the letter that the Roman church support his upcoming work. As we will see, the major purpose of Romans was practical. Paul needed the support of the Roman congregation for his impending missions to Jerusalem and Spain. Hence, in his opening remarks he reminds the Roman Christians that his mission to them is only a small part of a larger work that God had called him to do.

Paul's opening description of the people to whom he is writing is ambiguous. Paul describes his readers as being "among" the nations. In biblical Greek, the word "nations" also means "Gentiles," and, hence one could conclude that Paul is writing primarily to Gentile Christians, especially since his missionary commission was to Gentiles (e.g., Gal. 1:16). Nevertheless, Jews outside of Palestine lived "among" the nations, and, hence, it would be equally plausible to assume that Paul is writing to everyone, especially since there were Jewish Christians at Rome.

I believe that this ambiguity is deliberate and was an attempt not to sound presumptuous to Jewish Christian readers. Earlier in his missionary career, Paul had agreed to concentrate on converting Pagans rather than Jews (Gal. 2:7–9), and his radical stand that Gentiles could become Christians without becoming Jews had alienated many conservatives. Moreover, it was already aggressive for him to write a letter to the Roman church, since he had no previous relationship with it. Hence, he is very careful to avoid giving any initial impression that he plans to tell Jewish Christians what they are to do.

Questions for reflection:

Can we have a mission to any given individual or community without having a larger, more general mission from
God? Should we as Christians only obey a priest or pastor if that obedience is part of a larger obedience to Jesus Christ? Did our own relationship with God begin with something that we accomplished, or did God take the initiative by calling us?

4. Romans 1:7a

To all those who are in Rome, those loved by God and summoned to be holy. (1:7a)

In accordance with the conventions of the day, Paul now formally identifies the people to whom he is writing. In Greek letters of that time it was customary after naming the writer to designate the intended readers.

Paul’s brief description of the church of Rome previews important themes, which he will later explicate at length. Paul emphasizes that his greetings are for “all,” and, as we shall note later, the word “all” will play an important role in the rest of the letter. Paul writes that the Roman Christians are already loved by God and are now summoned to be holy. Here to be “holy” means to exercise the goodness that comes from having a special relationship with God. Later in the letter Paul will insist that the Christian faith begins with the awareness that while we were sinners God showed his love for us through the death of Jesus. Once we accept that love, we in turn allow it to transform our lives and make us “holy.”

Of course, by emphasizing that the Romans are already beloved by God and summoned to be holy, Paul is suggesting that they are ready to hear the gospel. Just as Paul has a commission from God to preach, so too the Romans have an invitation from God to listen. In a moment Paul will imply that the Romans are already mature enough in their relationship to God to be spiritually helpful to Paul himself.
By stressing that he is writing to all, Paul hints that he intends to address Jewish Christians as well as Gentiles. Even though his missionary commission is primarily to Gentiles, this letter is for everyone in the Roman church.

Questions for reflection:

Is it always clear in our congregation that the Christian message is for “all”? If we had to describe our church in two or three words, what adjectives would we use? Is the most significant thing about any Christian community that we are loved by God and called to be holy?

5. Romans 1:7b

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (1:7b)

Paul now gives an opening salutation that combines Greek and Jewish elements. In Greek letters of that time, it was customary after the name of the writer and the name of the recipients to supply the word “greeting.” In Greek the sound of this word is close to that of the word for “grace” or gift. Paul uses the word “grace” to recall a central idea in his theology: God’s unmerited gift of salvation for those who believe in Jesus. Paul then adds the traditional Hebrew greeting of “peace.” Here peace is that total psychological and social harmony which comes from knowing and obeying God. Paul believed that the only road to peace was through accepting grace.

Although Paul opens his other letters with a similar combination of greetings, the combination seems especially appropriate for this epistle. As we shall see, Paul in Romans stresses the unity of Jews and Greeks in Christ, and, accordingly, it is
particularly apt that near the opening of Romans, he links together traditional greetings from both cultures.

In Greek the words "from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" are ambiguous, and I believe that Paul wished them to be since the ambiguity summarizes much of his theology. Thus, the words could mean that the grace and peace of which Paul is speaking come both from God and from Jesus. But the words also could mean that God is the father both of Jesus and of us. Of course, Paul believed that each of these claims was true. Thanks to his resurrection, Jesus now reigns with God in heaven and like God is himself a source of grace and peace. Nevertheless, Jesus remains God's Son, and because he became a human being, we can become God's sons and daughters through him. We now share in Jesus' divine sonship. Perhaps because the words "from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" expressed so much of Paul's thought, this pregnant phrase occurs in the opening of many of Paul's letters (1 Cor. 1:3, 2 Cor. 1:2, etc.).

Questions for reflection:

Is the essence of the Christian message that human beings must begin by receiving God's grace and end by being at peace? Would combining different cultural expressions of the gospel in our worship make the inclusiveness of Christianity more evident?

6. Romans 1:8–15

To begin with, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is the talk of the whole world. As God is my witness—the God whom I serve with my spirit in proclaiming the good news about his Son—I constantly make mention of you in my prayers, always asking that somehow, now at last, I
I long to see you in order that I may share some spiritual gift with you so that you may be strengthened, or rather, that while I am among you, we may be mutually encouraged by the faith in one another, both your faith and mine. I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that although I have been kept from doing so until now, I often planned to come to you so that I might have some fruit among you, just as I do among other peoples. I am under obligation both to Greeks and Barbarians, both to the learned and the ignorant. Hence, my eagerness to preach the good news also to you in Rome. (1:8–15)

In accordance with the custom of his day, Paul says a prayer on behalf of his readers and then adds a word of flattery. In polite first-century letters it was normal after the opening greeting to say a brief prayer. The prayer would either ask for the welfare of the readers or give thanks. Here Paul does both. He thanks God for his readers and tells them that they are constantly in his petitions to God. It was also customary near the beginning of a letter to attempt to win the readers’ good will by complimenting them. Significantly, in a letter whose theme will concern the importance of faith, Paul chooses to compliment the Roman Christians on their faith, which Paul claims, is world famous.

Paul then cautiously announces that he is coming to Rome but says nothing definite about his other plans. In accordance with his desire for many years, Paul will visit Rome. Paul does not, however, mention that he will also be visiting Jerusalem and Spain and needs the support of the Roman congregation for these other missions. He will request this support only at the end of the letter after he has presented his theology and persuaded his readers that his views are sound. Nevertheless, the fact that Paul mentions that he is under obligation to “Barbarians” probably does point forward to his later request for assistance in his upcoming work in Spain. From the perspective of cultivated Romans who could speak Greek, Spaniards were Barbarians.
Paul stresses that while he is at Rome he and his readers will learn about the gospel from one another—especially from one another’s trust in God. Of course, as a missionary, Paul intends to use his gifts to strengthen their faith, and he announces that intention. Then, however, he quickly adds—lest he seem arrogant—that he too will find encouragement through their trust in God.

Because Paul’s missionary commission was only to Gentiles, he still does not explicitly say that he will be preaching to Jews at Rome. As the Roman church probably knew, Paul had earlier made a deal with Peter and others that Paul would concentrate on converting Pagans, whereas Peter and his associates would convert their Jewish compatriots (Gal. 2:7–9). Moreover, as we shall see, Paul fears that conservative Jewish Christians at Rome view him with suspicion. Of course, Paul also had to reckon with the likelihood that Jewish Christians outside of Rome would hear about this letter. Such Christians were especially anxious to hold Paul to his agreement only to convert Gentiles, because Paul’s message that the Mosaic Law was no longer necessary might encourage Jewish Christians to abandon their religious heritage. Hence, Paul continues to be diplomatic and does not clearly state that he will be trying to influence any Jews. Nevertheless, since, by definition, “Greeks and Barbarians [i.e., people who do not speak Greek]” means everyone, Paul again hints that his preaching will be to all.

Questions for reflection:

Can we be good missionaries if we are not willing to learn about God from the people to whom we preach? What message about faith can a Christian missionary preach to a Christian audience? What can a missionary expect to learn about faith from a Christian audience? Do we sometimes have to be cautious before presuming to preach to certain groups whether Christian or not?
7. Romans 1:16–17

I will not be put to shame by the good news, since it is the power of God to save everyone who has faith, both the Jew first and the Greek. In it the righteousness of God is revealed by faith for faith, just as it is written, “Those who are set right through faith will live” [Hab. 2:4]. (1:16–17)

Here Paul announces the basic theme of his letter: The Christian good news is equally for all, both Jews and Gentiles, because there is only one way to true life—by faith. The theme that the gospel is for the Jews first and also for the Gentiles provides an outline for the entire letter. In the first half of the letter Paul will stress—especially to his Jewish readers—that the Gentiles have equal status in the church. Hence, Christian Jews should in no way despise their Gentile brothers and sisters. By contrast, in the second half of the letter Paul will remind the Gentiles that the Jews as God’s chosen people nevertheless have some sort of priority in God’s plan. The gospel is for them first. Hence, the Gentiles should not despise them.

Of course, as this outline suggests, the letter as a whole is a plea for both groups in the Roman church to live together in unity and to support Paul’s efforts to make Christian converts from both Pagans and Jews. As we will see, a major problem within the Roman congregation was a dispute between conservative Jewish Christians and liberal Gentile ones (and their liberal Jewish supporters). In chapters 14–15 Paul will attempt to defuse this dispute. Paul will also insist that his mission to convert the Gentiles will paradoxically lead to the conversion of the Jews. Hence, both Jewish and Gentile Christians should enthusiastically support his work.

In addition, by stressing that the gospel is for the Jews first, Paul is trying to overcome the hostility of Jewish Christians toward him whether at Rome or elsewhere. The Letter to the Galatians which Paul probably had written very recently had emphasized that Christian Gentiles who proceeded to become Jews were in effect abandoning Jesus (Gal.
5:1–4). Naturally, any Jewish Christians who had heard about that letter were deeply offended and probably wondered whether Paul thought that the gospel was for Jews at all. Hence, by stressing that the gospel is for the Jews first, Paul is placating his Jewish Christian critics.

According to Paul, Christian Jews and Gentiles can live together in harmony because both share a common “faith” which leads to a common righteousness. Here Paul simply announces the theme that “faith” produces “righteousness.” Much of the remainder of the letter will spell out in detail how faith leads to goodness and the unity of Jew and Greek.

Unfortunately, the word “faith” in popular usage fails to capture the complexity and richness of the concept that underlies this term in Paul’s writings. For many modern Christians, “faith” is primarily belief in Christian doctrine. Moreover, it often seems that faith originates from our free choice. Preachers exhort their congregations to have faith.

For Paul, as indeed for the Bible generally, “faith” is first and foremost the quality that God has: God himself is supremely “faithful.” He is utterly trustworthy, and he has shown that trustworthiness in his many saving acts down through history and continues to show it. Of course, for Paul the supreme demonstration of God’s faithfulness is the coming of Christ, and particularly his death on the cross followed by his mighty resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Such saving acts are part of God’s “righteousness,” that is his saving mercy.

The “faith” that we are called to have as Christians is trust in God, and it is primarily a response to what God has already done. Our faith is not so much the assent to certain doctrines. Instead, it is an unconditional trust based on the grateful acknowledgment of everything that God has already done for us, especially through Jesus. Consequently, here Paul can write that the “righteousness of God is revealed by faith for faith,” in other words, God revealed his own righteousness by being faithful so that we in response could have faith in him. Because Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection demonstrate God’s reliability so
completely, Paul confidently asserts that he will never be put to shame by the trust that the Christian good news inspires.

Such trust necessarily leads us to obedience, and, hence, to righteousness on our part. If we trust God, we believe that what he asks us to do will turn out to be best for us, and, consequently, we will obey him. By contrast, if we disobey God then, almost by definition, we do not trust him. Hence, Paul can simply assume here that faith leads to righteousness, namely the loyalty to God and goodness towards others that God expects of us. Such righteousness in turn leads to life.

Nevertheless, for Paul faith does necessarily include the affirmation of what we would call “Christian doctrines.” Christian trust is never blind trust. It is a response to what God has done in the past, is doing in the present, and will do in the future. In the past God sent his Son to save us; in the present the Holy Spirit is transforming our lives; in the future God will raise the dead and give to the righteous eternal life in his presence. Hence, for Paul Christian faith most assuredly includes many doctrinal assertions, such as Christ died to save us from our sins.

An important reason that Paul must insist on faith is that in the religion he preached God was more hidden. In the Pagan religions of the Greco-Roman world, the gods and goddesses were closely identified with natural phenomena. Thus, there was a sky god and an earth goddess and a goddess of love and a god of death. Such gods and goddesses were immediately visible in the cosmos, and it was also customary to use statues or paintings to portray them. Hence, faith was less necessary. In first-century Judaism, of course, God was more hidden. Although he created the universe, he in principle transcended it; indeed, he created it out of nothing (2 Macc. 7:28). Moreover, it was sacrilege to try to capture this deity with a statue or a painting. Nevertheless, even in first-century Judaism, God was still relatively visible. In some sense he dwelt in the temple at Jerusalem, and there one could offer him burnt sacrifices whose smoke ascended to his throne in heaven. By contrast, the temple and its sacrifices played no role in Paul’s proclamation. The God he
preached was primarily visible in Jesus, and Jesus now dwelt in heaven. Hence, faith was essential.

Questions for reflection:
In our own lives is faith primarily a response to what God has done? Does our “faith” lead to obedience, or do we merely affirm certain ideas to be true without really living as if we trusted God? Are the things for which most people live visible and tangible? Do we then as Christians need to have a faith that the world does not require?

8. Romans 1:18–32

God’s judgment is being revealed from heaven against all irreverence and wrongdoing by people who suppress the truth with wrongdoing, because what can be known about God is plain to them for God has made it plain. Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible attributes, both his eternal power and divinity, have been perceived, since they are apprehended in what he has made. Consequently, they have no excuse, because even though they knew God, they did not glorify him as God or thank him but thought about trivialities, and God darkened their stupid mind. As they claimed to be intelligent, God made them fools, and they exchanged the glory of the imperishable God for a copy of a perishable image of humankind and birds and quadrupeds and reptiles. (1:18–23)

Therefore, God gave them up through the lusts in their hearts to filth, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, they who exchanged God’s truth for a lie and worshipped and served the creature instead of the creator, who is to be blessed for ever, amen. For this reason, God gave them up to disgraceful passions. Their females exchanged natural relations for the unnatural, and, similarly, the males also abandoned the
natural relationship with the female and became inflamed in their desire for one another, males acting indecently with males and in return receiving in their own selves the necessary consequences of their deviation. (1:24–27)

And, just as they did not see fit to keep God in mind, God gave them up to an unfit mind. They do what is improper and are full of all wrongdoing, wickedness, greed, vice; persuaded with jealousy, murder, quarreling, treachery, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, God haters, insolent and arrogant fellows, braggarts, contrivers of evil, disobedient to parents, stupid, disloyal, unloving, merciless. (1:28–31)

Even though they recognize God's just decree that those who do such things deserve to die, they not only do them but also encourage those who commit them. (1:32)

To bolster his contention that both Jews and Gentiles are saved by a common faith in Christ, Paul first shows that both groups are utterly lost without the gospel. If the gospel reveals “the righteousness of God” (1:17), it is the remedy to “God’s judgment” (1:18) which is falling on the sinful. Paul begins by demonstrating in this section that the Gentiles are utterly lost without Christ. Then in the following section he will contend that the Jews are no better off.

Of course, by showing that both Jews and Gentiles are lost without the gospel, Paul avoids antagonizing either faction in the Roman congregation or the early Church as a whole and helps both sides appreciate the other. If Paul had merely indicted Jews or Gentiles, Christians who belonged to the ethnic group in question would naturally have felt abused and taken exception to his message. In addition, the other side might have become smug.

As we attempt to understand Paul's argument, we must keep in mind that Paul thinks of “Jews” and “Gentiles” corporately. In contemporary American culture we are individualists. We instinctively think that the individual is the primary unit, and, hence, for us a group is a collection of individuals. Consequently, we are wary of generalizations about communities. We
balk at statements such as “Americans are materialistic,” because we immediately realize that not every American is this way. By contrast, Paul thought corporately. For him the primary unit was the community. An individual was first and foremost a member of a group. Hence, Paul does not hesitate to make generalizations about groups. If someone’s group is materialistic, then from Paul’s perspective, each member must be as well, because each member participates in the sinfulness of the community that defines who he or she is.

To show that Gentiles are utterly sinful without the gospel, Paul first argues that they are morally accountable. Of course, if they had no knowledge of God or the ethics God requires, violating his law would be excusable. Later in the letter Paul will himself note that if there is no law there cannot be any violation of it either (4:15). Hence, Paul states here that even though Gentiles do not have access to what the Bible says about God, they nevertheless do know something about God through observing the universe he created. Certainly, Paul would have insisted that the Old Testament revelation gives the Jews a greater understanding of God than the Pagans have. Nevertheless, here he makes the contrasting claim that God’s eternal power and deity are in principle visible to everyone, because they can be perceived in the creation. The natural world is full of God’s power and glory and provides ample evidence of the One who made it.

Paul then says that even though the Pagans had some real knowledge of God, they suppressed the truth out of pride. They did not wish to give their lives to the service of God, to praise and obey him. Consequently, they ignored the truth and engaged in idle speculation about ultimate reality.

As a result, they lost their awareness of the true God and began to worship idols. Paul holds that we cannot continue to know who God is if we are unwilling to center our lives on him. Hence, when the Pagans refused to follow God and used intellectual gymnastics to rationalize this rebellion, they inevitably forgot who God was and ended up in polytheistic idolatry. They worshipped many different gods and goddesses, and
represented these deities with images of things in the natural world, such as human beings and animals.

From Paul’s perspective, such worship was inherently degrading. According to the Bible, human beings were made in the image of the One God (Gen. 1:26). Consequently, when Pagans worshipped something else, they revered what was beneath them and denied their own spiritual dignity. Hence, Paul’s horror over “exchanging” the glory of God for an idolatrous image of an animal!

Inevitably, sins of the flesh followed. Paul does not assume that individual sins lead to our separation from God. Instead, it is our separation from God that leads to individual sins. When we are cut off from God and deny our own spiritual dignity by worshipping something that is beneath us, our desires become perverse; and these perverse desires in turn drive us to specific acts of immorality and crime. Indeed, in some sense our immorality and crime are themselves a punishment for the previous sin of forsaking God.

As they wallow in evil, sinners instinctively realize that what they are doing will result in catastrophe and try to insulate themselves from this knowledge by egging each other on. Of course, encouraging others to sin is itself an especially grievous failing. Paul insists that even though the Gentiles have lost most knowledge of who God is, they nevertheless retain some ethical awareness. He will return to this topic later. Precisely because the Gentiles still can distinguish right from wrong, they know that what they are doing is morally outrageous and must inevitably lead to death. Nevertheless, they encourage each other to sin. Presumably this solidarity acts as an anesthetic to shield them from the full awareness of the grim consequences of transgression.

In part, Paul’s discussion of the origin and nature of Pagan sinfulness reflects traditional Jewish polemics against idolatry and “perverse” sexual activity. First century Jewish culture was stridently monotheistic and excoriated idolatry and homosexuality. Such polemics not only affirmed the Old Testament belief that there was One God who was ethical and transcen-
dent. In addition, these polemics reinforced the Jewish sense of superiority toward the surrounding cultures, which were on the whole polytheistic and did use images to represent the gods and, especially in the case of Greco-Roman culture, were more tolerant of homosexuality. In another Jewish writing, the Wisdom of Solomon (especially, chapters 12–14), which was written sometime before Romans, we see much of Paul’s argumentation. The Wisdom of Solomon also holds that the Pagans could have learned about God from creation. Instead, however, they foolishly created idols. The worship of idols led to other sins that God will certainly punish. Among these sins was every form of fornication.

Today we may be especially cautious in adopting Paul’s views about the origin and nature of homosexuality. Certainly, in light of our present knowledge, we may be sure homosexuality does not derive from idolatry! The reason Paul thought it did was that he assumed that it would be appropriate for God to punish idolatry with homosexuality. Like other Jews of his day, Paul believed that God punished people through the very thing by which they sinned (Wisdom of Solomon 11:16). Thus, for example, in this passage Paul reasons that because the Pagans did not “see fit to keep God in mind, God gave them up to an unfit mind.” Idolatry from Paul’s perspective was an abuse of nature, since it involved worshipping part of the natural world. Hence, it was especially appropriate for God to respond by turning human beings over to what is “unnatural,” namely homosexuality.

Paul places special emphasis on homosexuality in this section of the letter, because here he is focusing on Pagan practice. Ancient Pagans unlike ancient Jews were relatively tolerant of homosexuality. Paul will focus on the special sins of Jews in the next section.

If we look at Romans as a whole, it is by no means clear that the letter demands that we today condemn all same-sex relationships. In 14:14, Paul will make the observation that for Christians nothing is inherently unclean, and in 13:8–10 he will insist that whatever expresses genuine love is in accordance with
Christian ethics. Hence, if on the basis of our own experience we conclude that a particular homosexual relationship is genuinely loving, we should hesitate before claiming that Paul's theology necessarily condemns it.

Despite its limitations, Paul's presentation on the origin and evolution of sin is, as nearly as I can tell, both original and profound. In the Wisdom of Solomon idolatry arises as mere foolishness. Long ago people were seduced by the beauty of the sky and stupidly assumed that the heavenly bodies were divine (Wisdom of Solomon 13:1–9) or were seduced by a beautiful statue of a distant king and ignorantly assumed that it represented a god (Wisdom of Solomon 14:17–20). Idolatry in turn produced more sin because it inspired depraved liturgies and led to frivolous oaths in the name of the deity (Wisdom of Solomon 14:22–29). By contrast, Paul has a much deeper understanding of the relationship between God, false worship, and sin. Paul does not appeal to the accidents of historical development to explain false religion and its frightening consequences. Instead, Paul appeals both to the unchanging nature of God himself and to the fundamental nature of humans as beings who are made in God's image.

As an ardent monotheist, Paul implicitly assumes that all things function constructively only if they are in the proper relationship to God. God made all that exists, and, hence, everything reflects his nature and points to him. Consequently, in principle all things are good. Nevertheless, they remain good only if they remain obedient to the creator. Once things lose their proper relationship to God, they also lose their proper relationship with the rest of creation and even with themselves.

Especially in the case of humans, being centered in God naturally leads to conduct that is righteous and life giving. Human beings have a basic affinity to God and a basic dependence on him—or to use biblical language we were made in God's image and likeness (Gen. 1:26). Hence, when we remain centered in God we manifest the goodness of the creator himself. As Paul will explain later in Romans, if we are truly devoted to God, his Spirit dwells in us and God's love controls
us. We respond by loving others from the heart, and this love produces every virtue.

Praise and thanksgiving help center us in God. Praise and thanksgiving by their very nature take us out of ourselves and direct us to the one we are honoring. Hence, when we praise and thank God, we focus on him. This concentration on God in turn allows divine love and power to flow into us and leads us to do God’s will.

Nevertheless, as human beings, we have an impulse toward self-centeredness and tend to withhold the praise and thanksgiving God is due. In making the claim that human beings did not glorify or thank God, Paul is probably thinking especially of Adam and Eve. The third chapter of Genesis tells us that the first human couple did not trust God but instead disobeyed God and tried to become divine themselves. Later in this letter Paul will emphasize that all human sin in some sense originated in this primordial misdeed. Paul, however, seems to have an even more pervasive human failing in mind. Apparently, he believes that in general people tend to resist acknowledging God and centering their lives on him. Consequently, Gentiles who do not have the biblical revelation instinctively rebel against praising and thanking their creator.

To justify their self-centeredness, human beings come up with perverse understandings of who God is and how we should relate to him. Paul holds that when the Gentiles refuse to praise and thank God, they indulge in idle speculation. The implication seems to be that human beings often use philosophy to avoid having to face the truth and obey God. People shield themselves from God’s call to worship and obey him by thinking about God. Such thought allows us to question God’s call and to distance ourselves from him.

As a result, we lose contact with him and begin worshipping something else. Paul believes that we must obey something. If we are not God’s servants, we will be servants of sin. If we do not worship God, we will worship something else.

Inevitably, what we end up worshipping will be greatly inferior to the one true God. Of course, Paul is specifically
thinking of the Pagan religion in his own day. Pagan religion tended to identify the various gods and goddesses with the inherent forces of the universe, such as the sun and moon, or love and wine. From a Jewish perspective, one especially offensive symbol of this identification was the making of physical representations of the deities, which the Jews dismissed as "idols." Because of the identification of the deities with the visible forces of the universe, the gods combined virtues with vices. The natural order produces both blessings and catastrophes, and the gods who personified it did likewise. Thus, the gods of the Greco-Roman world not only upheld justice and truth but could also be arbitrary, lustful, and even criminal. Indeed, there was a god of thieves! Nevertheless, it seems to me that Paul's logic continues to apply to human existence in the modern secular world. If we refuse to make serving God the focus of our lives, we will end up trying to find fulfillment by serving something else, and whatever we try to use as a substitute for God will be our idol. Accordingly, many people today worship sex or alcohol, and such modern "worship" obviously must have something in common with the ancient worship of the goddess of sensual love or the god of wine.

All such worship is inherently degrading. It denies that we were created to find fulfillment in God himself, and instead implies that we are lesser beings who can find complete satisfaction in created things. Hence, to live for sex or alcohol is to deny the best part of our own humanity.

This degrading worship in turn distorts our desires; and our distorted desires produce concrete acts of sinfulness. Since, as we will see, Paul was writing at Corinth, he may have been thinking especially of the worship of Aphrodite who had a temple there. Aphrodite was the goddess of sensual love, and one of the activities that took place at her temple at Corinth was sacred prostitution. Apparently, the worshippers of Aphrodite experienced her divine power by having sex with prostitutes who worked at the shrine. Today in secular society false worship also leads to concrete acts of wickedness. When we try to use something as a substitute for God, we will inevitably become obsessed
with it because we will be seeking through it the joy and fulfillment that can only come from knowing and serving God himself. Such obsession will lead us to try to get more out of what we are substituting for God than it can give. This effort will in turn lead to abuse. Thus, people who are trying to find ultimate fulfillment and meaning through sex will fall into lust and be constantly trying to get more out of sexual experience than can possibly be had. This effort will lead to the abuse of sex. Lust will produce promiscuity. Similarly, people who worship money will fall prey to greed and then to dishonesty.

Despite our attempts to avoid facing the truth about our sinfulness, we nevertheless know that what we are doing is wrong and will lead to judgment. Paul does not believe that Gentiles are innocently unaware of the truth. On the contrary, their ignorance is willful and, therefore, culpable. On some level they know that what they are doing is sinful and merits severe punishment. To insulate themselves from this knowledge, they produce communities in which the members praise each other’s sinfulness. Of course, the formation of such communities is itself an additional sin and certainly will not protect their members from condemnation at the last judgment. So too today, people who are promiscuous or who abuse alcohol somehow know that what they are doing is destructive. To avoid facing this truth, they build elaborate psychological defenses. To bolster these defenses such people gravitate to communities that condone the vices in question.

Questions for Reflection:

Do secular people today (even atheists) know something about God? Do they (we?) tend to resist worshipping and obeying God, and to justify this resistance, do they engage in theological speculation? Do people you have met worship such things as sex and money? What is the result of this devotion? Do such people gravitate toward communities that condone their destructive behavior? Is a community primarily a set of individuals, or are individuals inevitably defined by the communities to which they belong?