

SECULARIZATION

ROMANS 1:21-28

by D.B. KNOX

THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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Romans chapter 1 is an important passage describing the human predicament. Two sentences pinpoint the trouble. St. Paul writes of men that "knowing God they glorified Him not as God nor were they thankful ..... as they refused to have God in their knowledge so God gave them up to a cockeyed mind". (Romans 1:21-28). This is man's situation. We cannot think straight with regard to our relationships with God or with our fellow men.

We have just witnessed an obvious example of futile and cock-eyed relationships in the Middle East War. After three weeks of fighting nothing has been gained. Soldiers and civilians have been killed but nothing has been gained. Human history is a catalogue of this futility, and if we look around us in our private life we will see the same.

Another example of man's predicament is the fact that there are 4,000 different languages in the world - a good illustration of the broken relationship between men, for a language only comes into existence if you are not talking to the people who live nearby, if you are keeping yourself separate so that they learn to speak their language and you yours. This separation, of course, is due to fear, frightened that you will be killed unless you keep to yourself and to your own group.

St. Paul says that the cause of all this is the refusal to have God in the control of our life; that although we know of God's existence by the created world around us (and, in fact, almost everybody is willing to believe in God) yet we do not glorify Him nor adore Him, nor recognise our obligation of obedience nor are we thankful to Him, but we simply assume that everything we have is ours by right. As a consequence of this turning away from straightforward thinking and from our plain obligation towards God, or as St. Paul put it, as men refused to have God in their knowledge, so God gave them up to a futile, cockeyed way of looking at things. We know God, we accept His existence and His power and we approve His moral standards but we do not honour Him as our creator nor give Him the thanks due to Him as the source of what we enjoy; we do not accept His will for our lives (though as our creator He has absolute right for this) nor follow His moral standards when they are inconvenient, but we go our own way and just simply "tip our cap" to Him occasionally.

Such an attitude is plainly wrong and indefensible, yet it characterises the human race. No wonder we are not able to get along with one another for we do not get along with God. The problem goes back to the beginning of human history. Adam broke relationship with God by disobedience. He believed the creature and what it said rather than the word of the Creator, and he exchanged the truth of God for a lie. The break of relationship with God led immediately to a break of relationship between man and man. The first area that this breach found expression was in the area of sex, because human sex is the expression of relationship. You will remember the story, how Adam and Eve no sooner had they disobeyed God than they protected themselves with fig leaves, that is, they protected themselves from each other. Before they had broken their relationship with God they saw no threat in each other's presence, but now they felt the need of covering, and they soon fell to blaming one another, accusing one another, as the story goes on to relate.

The last step in man's estrangement from his fellows was the crime of murder, a step that followed very soon when Cain killed his brother Abel. St. Paul may well have had this biblical instance in mind as he described the society of his own time in the first chapter of Romans. Men of his time had refused to have the true God in their knowledge and they ousted Him with an idol; God gave them up to this absurdity, this cockeyed way of seeing reality for they worshipped these idols as God and were unable to see the obvious absurdity of it, as though a carved image of a man or an animal or a bird could be God the Creator and Controller of life. Yet they worshipped these idols and offered them sacrifices in this belief. Idolatry is absurd, yet idolatry is characteristic of humanity. Every tribe and civilization outside the influence of the religion of the Bible has worshipped idols and still worship them no matter how advanced the civilization might be. Truly God has given us up to a cockeyed mind.

The second consequence of refusing the true God, as St. Paul saw it in his society, was sexual depravity. Women yielded themselves to promiscuity and harlotry, as related in Genesis 6, and men to Sodom, as in Genesis 19. So too, St. Paul's contemporaries dishonoured their bodies with the unnaturalness of harlotry



and homosexuality. The body is the expression of the personality and we are created to be other-person centred, just as God is, and to express this through our bodies, first in the area of the relationship of fidelity in sex and then in every other area through what we do. The body is the instrument of expression of the personality and we are to be other-person centred, faithful and honest, in all relationships, whether in marriage or in business. We are to find our centre firstly in the person of God our Creator and now our Redeemer; and then we are to find our centre in other people just as God does in us. As St. Paul says, "the body is for the Lord and the Lord for the body", we are to glorify God in our bodies for through our bodies we express our personality and our relationships. Faithfulness is the cement of all relationships and when we break our relationship with God we break our relationship with other people and this expresses itself, as St. Paul recognised, in sexual immorality and then in all forms of injustice which flow on consequently, and he lists many of them in this first chapter. This is logical. Reject God and there follows the false relationships of false religion, immorality, injustice. It was true in Adam, it was true in St. Paul's society and it is true today.

Our society has begun for the first time to consciously reject God, to consciously form itself on a secular basis. It is refusing to have God in its mind, and God is giving us up to a cockeyed way of thinking and of relating to each other. It is true that we do not worship idols today, but we have put God right out of our thoughts and we have substituted for the true God, the Creator, Controller and Judge of life, not an idol, as in the old days, but a theory which makes everything happen by chance, by non-personal, non-purposeful action. This modern theory of mechanical origination and chance as the cause of bringing this wonderful world around us into being is as equally absurd as is an idol. Idols cannot create the world or control it, nor can mechanical chance, lucky mutations, have brought into being this complicated and beautiful world where everything is integrated together so wonderfully. Only think of the intricacy of the human frame and personality. How could mechanical chance have brought such a wonder into being? Yet the great mass of society believes this theory; that the world originated by blind chance, by fortuitous arrangement of matter, of atoms and molecules, by lucky mutations by the struggle for existence. The evidence is against it, yet modern science believes

It and teaches it to the children in schools, because it is the only alternative left to avoid believing in the true God.

The ancient world refused to have God in its knowledge and believed in idols - absurd though this is. The modern world refuses to have God in its knowledge and believes in mechanical, impersonal chance as the cause of all - equally absurd - and because we will not acknowledge God truly and give Him thanks, God has given us up to a cockeyed way of seeing things. After idolatry comes sexual immorality and we are now well into that stage, with our secular society accepting sexual permissiveness and the dishonouring of our bodies with all sorts of sexual aberrations. The Federal Parliament has just endorsed for the first time in a thousand years the legitimacy of this way of behaviour.

The next step will come quickly - injustice in every area of life - bribery, corruption, unfairness and all the other forms of injustice which St. Paul lists as characteristic of his own society, and woe to us when this injustice floods over our society.

The steps are inevitable, God has ordained these links. If we refuse to have God in our mind, if we refuse to honour Him and thank Him, then He gives us up to this false way of seeing things, this unreal concept of reality, this self-centred basis for our relationships, of using our bodies for self instead of relating to others, of self-seeking and injustice in all our affairs in society. War is simply the outward expression of this failure to relate to one another, and it is due to a failure to know God in our minds.

The Scripture calls us back to honour God in our mind, to hallow His name. This is the first petition in the Lord's prayer, and the last command that Jesus gave before His death was that we should remember Him. For He indeed is God, and if we are to have God in our mind we must centre our thoughts on Jesus; submit our lives to His way of life. We are to set our minds on things above where He is, and we are to look for His coming.

We are to remember Him in His death for our sins, He obeyed God where we disobey, and His death and obedience covers our



disobedience so that we may be restored to a relationship with God through Him.

We are to remember Him in His resurrection. He is Lord and will come to establish and make plain His rule, for He is sovereign and He reigns; all authority is His. He will be our Judge.

Man's characteristic failure is to refuse to have God in his mind which flows on into failure to use his body aright in relationships whether in sex or in ordering actions in society. But God calls us back and we are to hallow His name, to set our minds on things above where Jesus is; and to remember His love for us expressed through the cross. We are to love Him and to live in faithful fellowship with Him as we look for the inheritance.

Remember Jesus in your own life - make Him Lord of your life.

Remember Him in your home. See that the time arrangements in your house honour Him.

Remember him in your social life and in your work.

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