General Revelation and Presuppositional Apologetics:
The Knowledge of God as the Starting Point
by Bruce A. Baker[*]

The anthropologist S. H. Kellogg notes that human beings should be considered unlike the rest of the animal kingdom because man alone is a "religious animal."[1] In fact, not only is mankind universally religious, but according to Kellogg, the religions of all people hold certain tenants in common. These common doctrines are fascinating when considering the relationship between general revelation and apologetics because they show "both the theistic consciousness and its distortions in pantheistic worship of the creation."[2]

First,[3] every religious system assumes the existence of a Higher Power (or powers) upon which a person is dependent and which can influence his personal destiny. While the nature of this Power or powers differs with each religion, man instinctively feels that he is born into this relationship and is powerless to free himself from it. Second, due to a person's relationship with this Power or powers, certain actions are required and others must be avoided or suffering will result. Third, between mankind and this Power or powers something is wrong.[4] In Kellogg's words, "All religions more or less distinctly express or appeal to man's sense of sin."[5] Fourth, all

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[1] S. H. Kellogg, *A Handbook of Comparative Religions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 6. According to Kellogg, defining man as a "rational animal" is not sufficiently narrow since some of the higher animals exhibit "not merely the operation of instinct, but also a process of true reasoning. But no one has ventured soberly to maintain that some animals are also religious. To speak of the religion of a monkey, a dog, or a horse, were only to excite a smile."

[2] Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology,* vol. 1, *Knowing Ultimate Reality, The Living God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 79.

[3] The following discussion is taken from Kellogg, *Handbook of Comparative Religions,* 7–10.

[4] Evidently, this common aspect of religion has been widely recognized for some time in conservative Christianity. "There are no natural atheists.…In regions of darkest paganism there are traces of two innate convictions; namely, a Divine birth and a sinful alienation." David James Burrell, "The Knowledge of God," in *The Fundamentals, A Testimony to the Truth,* R. A. Torrey, A. C. Dixon ed. (Los Angeles: Bible Institute of Los Angeles, 1917; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 4:30–31.

[5] Kellogg, *Handbook of Comparative Religions,* 8.

religions assume that there is a state of existence after death that is affected by the actions taken by a person in this life.

It should be noted that Kellogg considers these tenets true for all religions whether monotheistic, polytheistic,[6] pantheistic, panentheistic, non-theistic, or animistic. Regardless of the nature of the religion, all religions hold these truths in common.

Two questions immediately arise. First, why are human beings universally religious[7] with a common set of doctrines? Second, how should the Christian apologist respond to this basic universal religious system? In response to the first question, only two answers are possible. Either the truths within this belief system are self-evident or Kellogg is wrong. The answer to the second question depends entirely upon how one answers the first. For if these truths really are self-evident, then the Christian apologist can confidently appeal to truths already known to the unbeliever. Specifically, if all people already know that there is a God, there is no necessity to prove his existence through the use of evidence and reason. If, on the other hand, the truth of God's existence is not self-evident, then this truth must be proved through evidence and reason.

For those who believe in a verbally inspired and inerrant Scripture,[8] the answer to these questions must be sought in the Bible. This paper will argue that the Bible clearly teaches that the presuppositionalist's assumption of a *sensus divinitatus* is indeed correct.

The Need for Exegesis

The very nature of presuppositional apologetics is based upon two assumptions. First, that the Bible is true and without error in all of its parts, and second, that all people at all times

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[6] "It is however important to observe that in most, if not all, cases where men worship gods many, there is discoverable in the background of the religious consciousness the dim outline of one sole Power, of which the many who are worshiped are either different manifestations, or to which they hold a position strictly subordinate." Kellogg, *Handbook of Comparative Religions,* 7–8.

[7] Kellogg points out that atheism is not a natural condition. "In the case of man, religion, is some form or other, often no doubt very vague and ill-defined, is universal. It is yet to be proved that any tribe has ever been found so degraded as to be utterly destitute of religious ideas." Kellogg, *Handbook of Comparative Religions,* 6. Of course, this fact, by itself, does not speak to the veracity of atheism as a system. Many truths must be learned. But it does address what is most common to all of mankind, namely, the belief in a universal power higher than ourselves.

[8] Hermeneutical issues confronted in this paper will be considered from this viewpoint. For an excellent discussion of these hermeneutical issues see: *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible,* Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus, ed. (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1984).

possess a knowledge of God derived from the evidence of creation.[9] Van Til, the father of

presuppositional apologetics, arrived at these conclusions primarily as an outworking of his own

Reformed faith, causing him to defend his conclusions from a position that was "assertive and

dogmatizing, rather than exegetical."[10] As a result, Turner notes that, "He is usually content

merely to quote from English versions without attention to the original languages."[11] Van Til

concedes as much in his reply to Berkouwer.

> I agree that my little book on *The Sovereignty of Grace* should have had much more
> exegesis in it than it has. This is a defect. The lack of detailed scriptural exegesis is a lack
> in all of my writings. I have no excuse for this.…Perhaps the readers will be able to do this
> for themselves. I hope so.[12]

This lack of scriptural exegesis has not been lost on Van Til's students. As Smith points

out, "It behooves the followers of Van Til to establish more surely the foundation of his

apologetic upon the bedrock of the biblical text and to hold ourselves vigorously accountable to

that standard, rather than relying primarily (or merely) upon the dogmatic traditions of Reformed

theology."[13]

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[9] "To begin with then I take what the Bible says about God and his relation to the universe as unquestionably true on its own authority. The Bible requires men to believe that he exists apart from and above the world and that he by his plan controls whatever takes place in the world. Everything in the created universe therefore displays the fact that it is controlled by God, that it is what it is by virtue of the place that it occupies in the plan of God. The objective evidence for the existence of God and of the comprehensive governance of the world by God is therefore so plain that he who runs may read. Men cannot get away from this evidence. They see it round about them. They see it within them. Their own constitution so clearly evinces the facts of God's creation of them and control over them that there is no man who can possibly escape observing it. If he is self-conscious at all he is also God-conscious. No matter how men may try they cannot hide from themselves the fact of their own createdness. Whether men engage in inductive study with respect to the facts of nature about them or engage in analysis of their own self-consciousness they are always face to face with God their maker." Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith,* 3d rev. ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967), 195.

[10] Richard B. Gaffin, "Some Epistemological Reflections on 1 Corinthians 2:6–16," *Westminster Theological Journal* 57 (1995): 103.

[11] David L. Turner, "Cornelius Van Til and Romans 1:18–21, A Study in the Epistemology of Presuppositional Apologetics," *Grace Theological Journal* 2.1 (1981): 47.

[12] Cornelius Van Til, "Response by C. Van Til (to G. C. Berkouwer, "The Authority of Scripture, A Responsible Confession")" in *Jerusalem and Athens, Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til,* ed. E. R. Geehan (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 203.

[13] Richard L. Smith, "The Supremacy of God in Apologetics: Romans 1:19-21 and the Transcendental Method of Cornelius Van Til" (Ph.D. diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1996), 6.

Since the scope of this paper does not allow for an exhaustive review of all the pertinent Biblical data, it will focus on one text that deals specifically with the second assumption mentioned above. Hughes is correct when he states, "As with all biblical doctrines, there are certain passages which bring a subject into a sharply defined focus and which therefore merit careful and detailed consideration."[14] One such passage is Romans 1:18–21.

"Nowhere is the gravity of the human predicament more incisively described than in this passage written by the Apostle Paul."[15] It is in this passage that Paul condemns the entirety of the human race[16] for their failure to acknowledge God as God and return to him the glory and thanksgiving that he alone is due. Yet, for the purpose of apologetic method, the question isn't whether or not mankind is condemned, but on what basis are we condemned. In other words, are we condemned for suppression of an actual knowledge of God that all possess, or are we condemned because we haven't availed ourselves of the potential knowledge of God that is available in creation? The answer to this question determines whether or not the believer may assume the knowledge of God (the presuppositional approach) or whether he must prove through rational argument, based on the evidence that surrounds us, the existence of God (the evidentialist approach).

Exegesis of Romans 1:18–21

Romans 1:18

A correct understanding of this verse depends upon the proper definition of the participle κατεχόντων. According to the standard Greek lexicon, the verb κατέχω carries two primary

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[14] Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, "Crucial Biblical Passages for Christian Apologetics," in *Jerusalem and Athens,* 131.

[15] Ibid., 134.

[16] Paul's argument moves from the general to the specific culminating with the whole of humanity condemned in Rom. 3:9–20. Paul begins his discussion with the focus on the Gentiles, moving to the Jews as the implied audience beginning with 2:1 and specifically addressing them beginning with 2:17. While different communities are in the spotlight as Paul's analysis of humanity progresses, his intent is to show that all of mankind is equally condemned. Thus, even though the Jews have additional light from the Law, the charge against the Gentiles still applies to them. The entire world is guilty of the moral suppression stated in 1:18 and described in 1:19–21. See Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) for a more complete discussion.

meanings. The first meaning is to hold back or to prevent from going away as in Luke 4:42. The second meaning is "hold down, or suppress τὶ something,"[17] which is the meaning *BAGD* assigns to Roman 1:18. Louw and Nida also define this word as used in Romans 1:18 as, "to prevent someone from doing something by restraining or hindering."[18]

In addition to these lexicons, most exegetical commentators favor the second option.[19] For example, Godet contends that the verb cannot express the idea of holding the truth captive since that would move the indictment from the verb to the phrase ἐν ἀδικίᾳ. "But the sequel proves, on the contrary, that the Gentiles had not *kept* the deposit of truth which had been confided to them; and the simple clause: *in unrighteousness,* would not suffice to characterize the sin charged against them and which is the reason of the divine wrath."[20] Moo agrees stating, "the qualification ἐν ἀδικίᾳ favors the meaning 'suppress' or 'hinder.'"[21] A. T. Robertson also considers the participle to communicate the idea of suppression and uses the following word picture to express the action of this verb: "Truth is out in the open, but wicked men, so to speak, put it in a box and sit on the lid and 'hold it down in unrighteousness.'"[22]

Still, Turner's observation concerning the correct definition of this word should be noted. He writes, "The two possibilities are complementary, not contradictory. If the unsaved possess the truth in an unrighteous state, they are actually suppressing it. Likewise, the suppression of

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[17] William F. Bauer, *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature,* tran. William F. Arndt and F. Wilber Gingrich, 2nd ed. rev. and aug. Wilber Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 442.

[18] Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida ed., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains,* 2d ed., vol. 1, *Introduction & Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), §13.150.

[19] Turner, "Cornelius Van Til and Romans 1:18–21," 52 n 20.

[20] F. Godet, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans,* trans. Rev. A. Cusin, rev. and ed. with an introduction and appendix Talbot W. Chambers (np: Funk and Wagnall, 1883; repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956), 100.

[21] Moo, *Romans,* 103 n 52. Moo takes the entire phrase τῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἐν ἀδικίᾳ κατεχόντων epexegetically showing who are guilty of the ungodliness and unrighteousness that is under God's wrath.

[22] Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament,* vol. 4, *The Epistles of Paul* (Nashville: Broadman, 1931), 328.

the truth in an unrighteous state, they are actually suppressing it. Likewise, the suppression of truth seems to presuppose the possession of it."[23]

Romans 1:19

τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ θεου

Much of Paul's argument in this chapter rests upon the phrase τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ.[24] For it is the content of this expression that explains what truth is being suppressed and acquits God from the charge of condemning the innocent.

As above, two explanations are possible. One can argue that the genitive phrase implies that the natural man really knows God, that is, the truth of his existence and some measure of his nature. Or, one could contend that the natural man merely has the ability to know God, that is, that man has suppressed the evidence for what may potentially be known of God.[25] The NASB expresses the first option while both the KJV and NIV express the second. Of the fifteen New Testament occurrences[26] of the adjective γνωστὸς, this is the only reference that can possibly refer to knowability or potential knowledge.

Yet predictably, scholars are divided on this subject. Bultmann wavers between taking the phase as a partitive genitive, "what may be known of God," or as potential knowledge, "God in His knowability."[27] It is unclear whether he considers the partitive option to be actual or potential knowledge. In contrast, Schmitz clearly takes this phrase to refer to actual knowledge.

Paul, however, considered that the knowledge of God necessarily included proper glorification and gratitude. Hence, the heathen who rejected God reduced this knowledge to

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[23] Turner, "Cornelius Van Til and Romans 1:18–21," 52.

[24] "In a number of languages the phrase 'can be known,' expressing a capacity relating to a passive state, must be restructured in an active form. This may often be done by rendering Ro. 1:19 as 'because what people can know about God is clearly evident to these persons' or 'they can clearly comprehend what they can know about God' or 'because they can clearly see what people can know about God.'" Louw and Nida, *Introduction & Domains,* §28.57.

[25] Smith, "The Supremacy of God in Apologetics," 14.

[26] Luke 2:44, 23:49; John 18:15, 16; Acts 1:19; 2:14; 4:10, 16; 9:42; 13:38; 15:18; 19:17; 28:22, 28; Romans 1:19.

[27] Rudolf Bultmann, "γινώσκω κτλ." in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,* ed. Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 1:719.

mere intellectual activity, and what they considered wisdom was in fact nothing but folly (Rom. 1:22 f.). The very fact that, though the heathen undoubtedly knew God, they refused him due recognition, is the measure of their lack of excuse (Rom. 1:19f)."[28]

One reason there may be so much confusion concerning this phrase is that the phrase, *taken by itself,* is ambiguous. An example of an ambiguous phrase is the statement, "I fought with Bob." This sentence is ambiguous because it has at least two possible interpretations. The sentence could be rewritten, "I fought alongside Bob," or "I fought against Bob," with only the larger context determining which is appropriate.[29]

Silva notes that ambiguity is an important part of language, allowing us to keep our vocabulary within manageable proportions. In addition, "Ambiguity arises more frequently when we read literature distant in time and culture from us, since we are less familiar with the whole context in which the writing originated."[30] Ambiguity also seems most likely to appear in common expressions. This is because the more meanings assigned to a word or phrase, the more readily it will fit into different and varied contexts, thus increasing its frequency. Thus, the more common the construction, the greater likelihood of ambiguity. The question that naturally arises, then, is how common is the phrase τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ θεου?

In order to express an abstract idea, it was common to use an articular substantival adjective followed by a genitive. Turner writes, "Indeed, so rich is Paul's compression of language with genitives that the attempt to define too narrowly the various types of genitive is vain; they all denote a relationship which is amplified by the context."[31] Thus Turner allows "knowledge concerning God…what is known (or can be known) about God…or God in his

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[28] E. D. Schmitz, "γινώσκω κτλ." in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology,* ed. Colin Brown, trans. and rev. Lothar Coenen, Erich Beyreuther and Hans Bietenhard (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 2:400.

[29] It is this quality of ambiguity that has been the substance of jokes for years. "My uncle fought with the 1st Marines, the 2nd Marines, and the 5th Cavalry. He couldn't get along with anybody!"

[30] Moisés Silva, *God, Language and Scripture, Reading the Bible in the light of General Linguistics,* Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation, ed. Moisés Silva, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 94.

[31] Nigel Turner, *Syntax,* vol. 3 of *A Grammar of New Testament Greek,* James Hope Moulton (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963; repr., Norwich: Page Bros., 1988), 212.

knowableness,"[32] as legitimate options. Robertson, noting several examples he labels ambiguous, states that the neuter singular with the article is a very common idiom for expressing such abstract concepts. In particular he notes, "One need not be troubled over τὸ γνωστόν (Ro. 1:19) any more than over the other neuter adjectives."[33]

The fact that this common expression is ambiguous, then, should be somewhat expected. But the mere fact of an ambiguous phrase does not preclude an accurate interpretation of this verse. As Silva notes, "The reason ambiguity is seldom a problem in communication is that the context almost always excludes irrelevant meanings.[34] In other words, the proper meaning for this phrase should be taken from the range of options available so that it best fits the context.

φανερόν

While the subject of the sentence might be ambiguous, the direct object is relatively straight forward.[35] Louw and Nida define this word as "pertaining to being widely and well known."[36] Concerning this word group in general (which includes the aorist indicative ἐφανέρωσεν at the end of this verse), Louw and Nida add, "All of these meanings involve a shift from the sensory domain of seeing, causing to see, or giving light to, to the cognitive domain of making something fully known, evident, and clear."[37] Bultmann and Lührmann evidently agree, commenting, "In the NT φανερός always has the original sense and is not a

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[32] Ibid., *Syntax,* 14.

[33] A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in Light of Historical Research,* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934), 654.

[34] Silva, *God, Language and Scripture,* 94.

[35] Contra Cranfield who takes a firm stand on the meaning of τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ θεου — "The phrase as a whole must mean 'that which is knowable (to man) of God'"— and yet only devotes one sentence to φανερόν ἐστιν. C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans,* The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, J. A. Emerton and C. E. B. Cranfield, gen. ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 1:113.

[36] Louw and Nida, *Introduction & Domains,* §28.28.

[37] Ibid., §28.36, n 9.

theological term even though found in important theological connections. The primary reference is to what is visible to sensory perception."[38] Commenting on how this word is often linked with εἰμί (as in this passage), they add, "In such cases the reference is still to what can be perceived by the senses but in such a way that the perception involves understanding."[39]

As is typical with most words, this word has a range of applications. Smith's survey of this word determines that there are three primary applications for this word, but notes a recurring pattern for each application: (what is) invisible – (is made) visible – (resulting in) knowledge – (with representative) conduct. Thus he defines φανερόν as "the cognitive process whereby the visible points to the invisible, the material yields to the immaterial, and the immanent infers or presupposes the transcendent."[40]

The reason why this knowledge is so clear is supplied by the remainder of the verse: ὁ θεὸς γὰρ αὐτοῖς ἐφανέρωσεν. God himself is the active agent pressing home the knowledge of his existence. In other words, there is no chance that people can miss God's revelation of himself because he is the active agent making his revelation "fully known, evident, and clear."

The implication of this verse, then, is that the content of τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ is clearly known and understood through sensory perception. Thus, what is known about God is understood, or the potential for knowing God is understood. In either case, the necessary assumption for either of these translations is that the people in question understand that there is a God to be known.[41]

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[38] Rudolf Bultmann and Dieter Lührmann, "φαίνω κτλ." in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,* 9:2.

[39] Ibid., 9:3.

[40] Smith, "The Supremacy of God in Apologetics," 25.

[41] This knowledge of God's existence is ἐν αὐτοῖς. Whether this phrase is translated "in them," "among them," or "to them," makes little difference. The fact is that this knowledge is "fully known, evident, and clear."

Romans 1:20

τὰ γὰρ ἀόρατα αὐτου

In this sentence the postpositive γὰρ functions as an explanatory conjunction indicating that "additional information is being given about what is being described."[42] Thus, the phrase τὰ ἀόρατα αὐτοῦ stands in apposition to τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ (what may be known about God—1:19) and ἀλήθειαν (truth—1:18).[43]

In Paul's explanation of these general terms, he uses vocabulary common to Greek philosophy. The idea of an invisible realm that cannot be experienced through sensory perception was a well known Stoic idea. The Stoics taught that this invisible realm was only knowable through the reasoning faculties of the mind.[44] It was through Philo that this Greek concept entered Jewish thought. In fact, Philo used ἀόρατος over 100 times.[45] Thus, both the Gentile and the Jewish believers at Rome would have had similar philosophical concepts associated with Paul's vocabulary in this section. The philosophical foundation that is associated with these words is important in that the average reader of this epistle would have assumed this context, that there is an invisible realm that is nevertheless knowable through the rational powers of the mind. As Dunn warns, "That this is no longer a widely acceptable world-view, should not, of course, influence our exegesis of Paul."[46]

What, then, is the content of these invisible qualities? Paul answers this question by employing another appositional phrase filled with Hellenistic Jewish vocabulary.

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[42] Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics, An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 673. See also Moo, *Romans,* 104.

[43] Smith, "The Supremacy of God in Apologetics," 26.

[44] James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8,* Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 38A (Dallas: Word, 1988), 58.

[45] Wilhelm Michaelis, "ὁρατός κτλ." in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,* 5:368. This is possibly one reason why Moo attributes the vocabulary in this section to Hellenistic Jewish tradition and Dunn states that Paul "is clearly and deliberately following Hellenistic Judaism in using this kind of language as an apologetic bridge to non-Jewish religious philosophy." See Moo, *Romans,* 104, n 63; Dunn, *Romans,* 58.

[46] Dunn, *Romans,* 58.

ἥ τε ἀΐδιος αὐτοῦ δύναμις

Smith argues that the phrase ἀΐδιος αὐτοῦ δύναμις teaches that at least three attributes of God are immediately self-evident. The invisible God is personal, eternal, and dynamic.[47] The term ἀΐδιος[48] shows the eternality of God.[49] That God is powerful is found in the word δύναμις.[50] Finally that God is personal is seen through the use of the pronoun αὐτου here and in the preceding phrase. The fact that God is eternal and powerful was common to Judaism and Greek philosophy. But the idea of a personal God, while natural to Judaism, would have been foreign to Greek philosophy which sought a non-personal origin of the universe.[51]

θειότης

The standard Greek lexicon translates this word simply as "divinity, divine nature."[52] Moulton and Milligan state that this word was used with reference to the priestly duties in the temple, and translate it "divine majesty."[53] Louw and Nida define this word as "the nature or state of being God," adding, "The expression 'divine nature' may be rendered in a number of languages as 'just what God is like' or 'how God is' or 'what God is.' In Ro 1.20 'deity' may sometimes be expressed as 'the fact that he is God' or '…is truly God.'"[54] While these might be

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[47] Smith, "The Supremacy of God in Apologetics," 27.

[48] Bauer, *Lexicon of the New Testament,* 22.

[49] "The term *aidios* appears often in secular literature from the earliest times, but it was rarely used in the Bible. It does occur, however, in the writings of Hellenistic Judaism, particularly in Philo, who sought to refute anthropomorphism in the conception of God and to assert divine transcendence." Smith, "The Supremacy of God in Apologetics," 28.

[50] Bauer, *Lexicon of the New Testament,* 207.

[51] J. Schneider, "θεός κτλ." in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology,* 2:66.

[52] Bauer, *Lexicon of the New Testament,* 354.

[53] "Everything is performed with reverence in a manner worthy of the divine majesty." James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek new Testament* (London: Hodder, 1930; repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 286.

[54] Louw and Nida, *Introduction & Domains,* §12.13.

accurate glosses, it must be remembered that θειότης is an old word which is a *hapax legomena*[55] and rare in secular Greek .

Martin Joos, addressing the problem of *hapax legomena*, postulated the rule of maximal redundancy which states that "the best meaning is the least meaning."[56] In other words, a *hapax legomena* should be defined so "to make it contribute least to the total message derivable from the passage where it is at home."[57] This leads to the principle that the overall meaning of a passage should not be dependent *solely* upon a single word, but should be derived from the entire passage.[58] In this respect, rare words should be handled similarly to ambiguous phrases, namely, that the best meaning is supplied by the context.

In this particular case, the least meaning would merely state "the fact that he is God." Thus, if one were to summarize Paul's argument concerning what mankind knows about God up to this point, it would read as follows: the truth (vs. 18), that is, what is or may be known about God

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[55] This is true provided that one distinguishes between θειότης (Rom. 1:20) and θεότητος (Col. 2:9) as does Bauer, *Lexicon of the New Testament,* 354 & 358; contra Louw and Nida, *Introduction & Domains,* §12.13.

[56] Martin Joos, "Semantic Axiom Number One," *Language* 48 (1972): 257–65, quoted in Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning, An Introduction to Lexical Semantics,* rev. and expanded ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 153–54. This concept was originally presented by Joos in a paper delivered in 1953, "Towards a First Theorem in Semantics." This paper was never published.

[57] Ibid. Since some amount of distortion is inherent in all forms of communication, language must be redundant for communication to take place at all. If language were one hundred percent efficient, then the slightest distortion would render communication impossible. If one part of the sentence was lost, the entire meaning would be unintelligible. Language *must*, therefore, be redundant for communication to take place. Silva writes, "Missing a complete word seldom bothers us because the sentence as a whole normally discloses that word. Even if we fail to hear a complete sentence when listening to a speech, we are unlikely to miss anything that is not automatically deducible from the rest of the speech." Ibid., 220.

[58] Since the principle of redundancy is used to ensure clarity in communication, it follows that the more important the need for clarity, the more redundant will be the language. In other words, the more often something is stated, the greater emphasis the author places upon that particular idea. One of the first characteristics of this passage that strikes the exegete is the number of different times the Apostle Paul states that people possess a knowledge of God. No less than five times he repeats this claim. He states in verse 19 that "what may be known about God is plain," because "God has made it plain." Verse 20 asserts that "God's invisible qualities…have been clearly seen," and are "understood." Finally, verse 21 adds that people are guilty because "they knew God." Assuming that Paul isn't merely involved in an extended tautology, what is one to make of this repetition? The answer is found in the principle of maximal redundancy. Thus, for the passage under consideration in this paper, Paul's repetition of the main idea is a not so subtle indicator of its importance. God does not condemn innocent people. Humanity is condemned because they suppress their inherent knowledge of God.

(vs. 19), that is, his invisible qualities (vs. 20), namely that he is and that he is personal, eternal, and powerful, are "fully known, evident, and clear," because God is the active agent making it clear.

ἀπὸ κτίσεως κόσμου τοῖς ποιήμασιν νοούμενα καθορᾶται

The first part of this phrase, ἀπὸ κτίσεως κόσμου is ambiguous.The preposition ἀπὸ[59] could be legitimately translated to show temporal origin (from the beginning of creation), or could be used to indicate source (from the source of creation). The context, in this particular case, is of little help. Both options fit nicely into the flow of thought and are equally true. If forced to choose, one might decide on temporality since the concept of source can be found in the phrase τοῖς ποιήμασιν.[60] "The temporal view avoids a tautology."[61]

The more important question, at least for the purposes of this paper, is the relationship of νοούμενα to καθορᾶται. The finite verb καθορᾶται, found only here in the NT, appears four times in the LXX, but is more common in extra-biblical sources.[62] While Bauer renders this phrase "perceived with the eye of reason,"[63] Moo notes that this word more often denotes physical seeing as opposed to perception.[64] Dahn combines these two concepts stating that, "it refers to the invisible, which is perceived in the external and visible."[65]

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[59] Bauer, *Lexicon of the New Testament,* 86–88.

[60] This is Godet's solution. "For the invisible perfections of God, his eternal power and his divinity are spiritually contemplated, since the creation of the world, in his works, that they might be without excuse." See Godet, *Romans,* 102. The instrumental dative is preferred by Turner, *Syntax,* 240.

[61] Turner, "Cornelius Van Til and Romans 1:18–21," 54.

[62] Moo, *Romans,* 105 n 65.

[63] Bauer, *Lexicon of the New Testament,* 391.

[64] Moo, *Romans,* 105 n 65.

[65] K. Dahn, "ὁράω κτλ." in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology,* 3:515.

In contrast to the physical act of seeing, the participle νοούμενα means "to comprehend something on the basis of careful thought and consideration."[66] Although Smith observes that this verb "never denotes the notion of physical seeing,"[67] it does denote thoughtful reflection upon what is seen. As Harder notes,

> The invisible is perceived, but not in a mystic vision: rather the visible expression of the invisible is thought through, in a kind of process of reflexion (sic) leading from the creation to the Creator.…The invisible is seen as something recognized. Knowledge of the infinite God is reached through the finite order.[68]

The combination of these two verbs, then, suggest the action of seeing with the eye and understanding with the mind. Thus, the KJV, NASB, and NIV translate this phrase "clearly seen, being understood."[69]

Taking into consideration the Hellenistic backdrop for Paul's argument in this section, it becomes clear why Paul chose both words to express this thought. If he had only used καθορᾶται, the phrase would have been ambiguous. One could argue that the reality and nature of God may be seen with the eye but not understood with the mind. On the other hand, if Paul had only written νοούμενα, he would have left the interpretive door open to the Hellenistic notion that revelation is merely internal or mystical. The use of both terms, however, avoids both ambiguity and philosophical confusion. As Smith writes, "By allowing the meaning of the verb to be determined by the participle, Paul clearly affirmed the epistemological truism that knowledge (even of God) occurs through the conjunction of reflection and sensation."[70] Dunn

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[66] Louw and Nida, *Introduction & Domains,* §32.2.

[67] Smith, "The Supremacy of God in Apologetics," 30.

[68] G. Harder, "νοῦς κτλ."in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology,* 3:128. Harder considers this verse to be similar to Wisdom 13:4. He writes, "Similarly, Wis. 13:4 calls on men to reflect on the beauty and power of nature: 'But if men were amazed at their power and working let them perceive from them how more powerful is he who formed them.'" For an alternate viewpoint see Wilhelm Michaelis, "ὁράω κτλ." in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,* 5:380.

[69] These two verbs can be translated so as to show a single concept. Thus the RSV translates, "clearly perceived," and Moffatt translates, "quite perceptible." James Moffatt, *The New Testament, A New Translation,* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950), 222.

[70] Smith, "The Supremacy of God in Apologetics," 31–32.

agrees, stating, "However precisely the phrase νοούμενα καθορᾶται should be rendered ("clearly perceived" [RSV]; "visible to the eye of reason" [NEB]), it is scarcely possible that Paul did not intend his readers to think in terms of some kind of rational perception of the fuller reality in and behind the created cosmos."[71]

The clarity of this expression is also indirectly attested by the phrase εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτοὺς ἀναπολογήτους (so that they are without excuse). For it is on the basis of knowledge that is clearly seen and understood that God considers every person morally culpable. The critic's charge that God condemns the innocent when he punishes those who have not heard would indeed be true if God found guilty those who had no knowledge of his existence. But the Judge of all the earth indeed does what is right. He reveals himself in nature, being an active agent to ensure the clarity of the revelation. It is only on the basis of mankind's rejection of that revelation that God condemns humanity.

Romans 1:21

The aorist verb in the phrase γνόντες τὸν θεὸν links the previous argument concerning mankind's rejection of God with the resulting list of judgments that follow. While many commentators agree that the verb γνόντες is concessive, indicating "although" or "even though,"[72] the question as to why Paul shifts tense from the present to the aorist leaves commentators divided. In fact, this verb is the first in a string of five aorist verbs after a section dominated by the present tense.

One of the more common explanations is that the aorist verbs express temporality. Moo states that "the verb is in the aorist because 'knowing God' precedes the refusal to revere God that is stated in the main clause."[73] Johnson agrees that the aorist verbs express temporality, but finds a different temporal reference. He writes,

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[71] Dunn, *Romans,* 58.

[72] Smith, "The Supremacy of God in Apologetics," 45; see also Moo, Romans, 106 n 68;. The KJV, NASB, and NIV also translate this verb as concessive.

[73] Moo, *Romans,* 106 n 68.

The tenses of the verbs in this verse, all aorists referring to the past in contrast to the preponderance of presents up to this point in the paragraph, suggest that the apostle is writing of historical events and interpreting the story of man after the fall. The result is that the words provide the reader with an interesting insight into the biblical interpretation of the spiritual history of man.[74]

In contrast, Porter denies any temporal reference to the Greek tense system.[75] Instead, his theory of verbal aspect places greater or lesser semantic significance on a verb depending on the tense employed as compared to the choices available. Thus, the use of one tense instead of another shows the author's choice as to whether or not to emphasize the action described by the verb.[76]

Additionally, the choice of tense determines how much semantic significance is placed upon the verb. "In Greek the Aorist is the background tense which carries the discourse and the Imperfect/Present is the figure or foreground tense."[77] Based upon this system, it is Porter's conclusion that this section is filled with timeless statements,[78] with the present tense verbs setting the stage and providing the conclusion, while the aorist verbs specify the details.[79]

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[74] S. Lewis Johnson, "Paul and the Knowledge of God," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 129 (1972): 72–73.

[75] Porter allows an exception for the future tense. See Stanley E. Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament, with Reference to Tense and Mood,* vol. 1, *Studies in Biblical Greek,* gen. ed. D. A. Carson (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 75–109 for a full discussion. For differing approaches to the subject of verbal aspect see Buist M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); K. L. McKay, *A New Syntax of the Verb in New Testament Greek, An Aspectual Approach,* vol. 5, *Studies in Biblical Greek,* gen. ed. D. A. Carson (New York: Peter Lang, 1994).

[76] Since the verb in question is a participle, it should be noted that Porter doesn't limit verbal aspect to the indicative mood alone. "In order to understand fully the use of the participle, it must be emphasized that verbal aspect and not time is the major semantic component of its verbal status. Therefore, the verbal aspect grammaticalized by the tense-form must be understood as a major semantic feature, regardless of whether this is brought forward in translation." Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament,* 2d. ed. (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 181. For further discussion of Porter's theory as it relates to the participle see Bruce A. Baker, "Aspect of Attributive Participles in New Testament Narrative: An Analysis of Porter's Theory of Verbal Aspect" (M.Div. thesis, Calvary Theological Seminary, 1997).

[77] The perfect provides "a narrower range of the characteristic features of the figure tense: it is discrete, well-defined and contoured, apparently much more so than the Present/Imperfect and certainly the Aorist tenses." Ibid., 92.

[78] A timeless event is an event that "has no apparent temporal reference," that is, it states a fact without reference to time. Ibid., 78–79.

[79] Ibid., 236.

While this explanation is adequate for the finite verbs that follow, special care needs to be taken with the participle γνόντες. Erickson, concerned with the supposed classical distinction between οἶδα and γινώσκω, concludes that the perfect and present forms of γινώσκω are both used to show stative aspect.[80] The corresponding lack of the imperfective aspect is significant to the aorist form, "particularly in the non-indicative moods like participle, infinitive, and subjunctive moods."[81] He concludes that "since the usually imperfective present stem is already used for the perfective aspect,[82] the otherwise neutral aorist stem is pressed into this service instead."[83]

While it might be unwise to press this conclusion too far, the imperfective action does fit the context nicely. Fallen man knows what he knows about God from the witness of creation.[84] Since creation is constantly proclaiming the glory of God, this knowledge is constantly confronting man who is constantly suppressing this knowledge.[85]

Conclusion

Lewis and Demarest conclude that Paul "makes four principal assertions concerning revelation and the knowability of God."[86] First, all people everywhere acquire a rudimentary knowledge of God as Creator. Second, knowledge of God as Creator is acquired by rational

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[80] Richard J. Erickson, "*Oida* and *Ginōskō* and Verbal Aspect in Pauline Usage," *Westminster Theological Journal* 44, no. 1 (Spr 1982): 115. For a fuller treatment of this subject see Richard J. Ericson, "Biblical Semantics, Semantic Structure, and Biblical Lexicology: A Study of Methods, with Special Reference to the Pauline Lexical Field of 'Cognition'" (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1980).

[81] Erickson, "*Oida* and *Ginōskō* and Verbal Aspect in Pauline Usage," 117.

[82] Erickson uses the term "perfective" to refer to aspect expressed by the perfect tense. Porter's uses "stative" aspect for the perfect tense and "perfective" for the aorist tense. Unfortunately, there is no standardized terms for discussing verbal aspect.

[83] Ibid., 120.

[84] τοῖς ποιήμασιν, Romans 1:19. The instrumental dative shows origin.

[85] κατεχόντων, Romans 1:18. The present participle shows imperfective aspect.

[86] Lewis and Demarest, *Knowing Ultimate Reality,* 70.

reflection on created effects. Third, the sinful heart consistently suppresses the knowledge, derived from nature, of God as Creator. Fourth, humanity's deliberate repudiation of the light of the knowledge of God establishes human guiltworthiness before the bar of divine justice.[87]

In addition to this general summary, some specific conclusions are helpful. First, even though the phrase τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ is ambiguous by itself, the context has several other phrases standing in apposition so that the precise meaning is clear. Mankind is continually suppressing the truth (ἀλήθειαν) = what is known about God (τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ) = his invisible qualities (τὰ ... ἀόρατα αὐτοῦ) = the fact that he is and that he is eternally powerful (ἥ τε ἀΐδιος αὐτοῦ δύναμις καὶ θειότης).

Second, the fact that God is and that he is eternally powerful is understood through what has been made. People see with the eye (καθορᾶται) the invisible qualities of God through his visible creation and rationally process the information to arrive at an understanding (νοούμενα) that God ensures is clear to them (ὁ θεὸς γὰρ αὐτοῖς ἐφανέρωσεν).

Third, mankind is not a neutral observer to God's revelation. Although people really do know God (γνόντες τὸν θεὸν), they suppress this truth (κατεχόντων) in an unrighteous manner (ἐν ἀδικίᾳ) so that they are defenseless (ἀναπολογήτους) before the bar of God's justice.

Some claim that the knowledge of God is lost through constant suppression. For example Sproul, Gerstner and Lindsley write, "Because of sin the capacity to recognize the signs of divinity in nature has been lost. The evidence for God's existence and majesty are available in nature but unbelievers are totally blind to it. The evidence is objectively adequate but not subjectively appropriated."[88]

Two factors argue against this position, one linguistic, one logical. First, due to the imperfective aspect of the aorist participle in Romans 1:21, Paul presents the knowledge of God as constant action. This explains the need for the imperfective action of suppression mentioned

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[87] Ibid.

[88] R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics, A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 199-200.

in Romans 1:18. Second, the question must be asked at exactly what point does one "lose" the knowledge of God? Since Romans 1:20 claims that such knowledge is poured out through the created order, we are constantly being bombarded with evidences for God's existence, his power, and his eternality. It is true that since we are conceived in sin, our rejection of this knowledge must begin at the moment of birth. But the knowledge of God is constantly being pressed home from the world around us while the unbeliever is just as consistently involved in the active suppression of that knowledge. The very fact of the sinner's moral culpability implies that at some point there is actual knowledge. Yet where in this continuous cycle can one say "here there is knowledge" and "here there is not?" If the knowledge of God is "clearly seen" and "understood" then it must be "clearly seen" and "understood" throughout one's lifetime.

Application to Apologetics

Mullins typifies the traditional approach to the question of the existence of God. While he demurs with regard to whether the apologist should start with a hypothesis and test its validity or whether he should present the facts without a hypothesis, he is very clear regarding one central point. He writes, "We are not to assume forthwith that God exists and that he is a Person."[89] This, of course, does not imply that Mullins does not personally believe in God, but merely states his view that the unbeliever should not be asked to accept the truth of God's existence without proper evidence. Thus, the traditional apologist will walk the unbeliever through various proofs of God's existence in order to show the rationality of such a belief.

In contrast, the presuppositional argument can be reduced to "two basic assertions: (1) that human beings are obligated to presuppose God in all of their thinking, and (2) that unbelievers resist this obligation in every aspect of thought and life."[90] In other words, the unbeliever already knows of the existence, not just of a god, but of the Christian God. Evidence is used, therefore, not to prove the reality of God but merely to bring to the consciousness what the unbeliever already knows to be true.

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[89] E. Y. Mullins, *Why is Christianity True?,* vol 3 of *The Advanced Christian Culture Courses* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1905), 72.

[90] John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til, An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995), 404.

What really separates these disparate viewpoints is the question of the rationality of belief in God apart from evidence. The classical apologist[91] argues that the theistic proofs are necessary to avoid fideism. In fact, according to the evidentialist, "it is very difficult, if not logically impossible, to avoid fideism without them."[92] As Beckwith summarizes this position, "Unless a proposition is either fundamental to knowledge or based on evidence, one is not rationally justified in believing the truth of that proposition."[93]

Yet even if one assumes a foundationalist/evidentialist verification system, the presuppositionalist approach to apologetics avoids the pitfalls of fideism. Restating an argument originally formulated by Plantinga, Beckwith defines as "foundational to knowledge" those truths which are self-evident and incorrigible.[94] An example of a self-evident proposition is, "A circle is round." An incorrigible truth is one that cannot be corrected, such as the statement, "I am in pain." Since no one but the person speaking can testify to the reality of the pain, the statement cannot be doubted even though it isn't logically necessary.[95]

When the Biblical data concerning the universal knowledge of God is examined it becomes clear that the Scriptures consider the statement, "The eternally-powerful Christian God exists," to be foundational to knowledge and should therefore be rationally accepted without evidence. Fideism relies totally on non-verifiable faith apart from evidence. In contrast, presuppositionalists embrace the evidence that God's creation provides. The fact that every person clearly understands God's revelation of himself in nature is confirmation that the

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[91] The terms "traditional" and "classical" are used synonymously in this section.

[92] Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics*, 35.

[93] Francis J. Beckwith, "Philosophy and Belief in God: The Resurgence of Theism in Philosophical Circles," *The Masters Seminary Journal* 2:1 (Spring 1991). [Online] Available <http://www.mastersem.edu/journal/j2bec1.htm>, November 13, 1997.

[94] Ibid. Beckwith employs the phrases "fundamental to knowledge" and "foundational to knowledge" interchangeably. His definition of this phrase actually includes an additional step. Foundational to knowledge are those propositions that are properly basic. Properly basic propositions are those which are self-evident and incorrigible.

[95] It should be pointed out that Plantinga considers this definition "no more than a bit of intellectual imperialism," arguing that this definition is stated without evidence and is itself neither self-evident nor incorrigible. Still, this definition is one that most classical apologists will accept.

knowledge of God is self-evident. In fact, Sproul, Gerstner and Lindsley, hardly

presuppositionalists, cannot help but agree. They write that God's self revelation in nature

> is so manifest and so clear that it does not necessitate a complex theoretical reasoning process that could be achieved only by a group of geniuses. If God's general revelation is in fact "general," in that it is plain enough for all to see clearly without complicated cosmological argumentation, then it may even be said to be self-evident."[96]

Likewise, this knowledge is understood internally within each individual. Thus it can

properly be considered incorrigible since this internal knowledge cannot be completely

extinguished, despite the best efforts of the unbeliever.

Hebrews 11:6 confirms the necessity of faith. "Without faith it is impossible to please God,

because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who

earnestly seek him." Yet the faith required is not apart from evidence. Instead, it is a faith that

halts the constant suppression of truth and bows the will to the God that is known to all.

Conclusion

This investigation began by asking two questions. First, why are human beings universally

religious with a common set of doctrines? This paper has argued that people are universally

religious because people universally recognize the truth of God's existence. The fact that he is

and that he is eternally powerful is, in fact, foundational to knowledge.

Second, how should the Christian apologist respond to this basic universal religious

system? Perhaps it is best to let Van Til answer that question in his own words.

> The natural man at bottom knows that he is the creature of God. He knows also that he is responsible to God. He knows that he should live to the glory of God. He knows that in all that he does he should stress that the field of reality which he investigates has the stamp of God's ownership upon it. But he suppresses his knowledge of himself as he truly is. He is the man with the iron mask. A true method of apologetics must seek to tear off that iron mask.[97]

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[96] Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics,* 46. In fact, they insist that "natural theology, which is derived from general revelation, stands as a polar opposite to fideism in matters of philosophy and theology. Where natural theology asserts that people can and do gain valid knowledge of God by means of natural reason reflecting upon natural revelation, fideism asserts that God can be known only by faith. Fideism as an ism does not merely assert that faith is crucial to Christianity. The *ism* of fideism negates a knowledge of God via natural theology. It denies man's ability to know God except by faith." Ibid., 27.

[97] Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith,* 101.

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