

*Romans 1:18-21*

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# The Knowledge of God

The starting point for  
apologetics

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# Original Presentation

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- ❖ This information was originally presented at the 1997 annual meeting of the *Evangelical Theological Society* in Santa Clara, CA.
- ❖ Originally published:
  - ❖ “Romans 1:18-21 and Presuppositional Apologetics.” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155, no. 619 (1998): 280-298.

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# Disclaimer

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- ❖ Not everything in this presentation has been properly footnoted.
- ❖ This is why I have included with this presentation the original paper that I presented at *ETS*.
- ❖ You will find all the proper footnotes along with a bibliography in that paper.



# The Paradox of Choice

Why	0
More	0
Is	0
Less	21

"Today's world offers us more choices but, ironically, less satisfaction. This provocative and riveting book shows us steps we can take toward a more rewarding life."  
 — David G. Myers, author of *Intuition: Its Powers and Perils*

**Barry Schwartz**

# S. H. Kellogg<sup>1</sup> on Religion

<sup>1</sup> This discussion has been taken from S. H. Kellogg, *A Handbook of Comparative Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1899), 6-10.

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# Mankind “Universally Religious”

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- ❖ Man should be defined as a “religious animal” not merely as a “rational” one.

“Man only is religious; and in the case of man, religion, in 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. The assertions to the contrary which have often been made, have repeatedly by further investigation been shown to be erroneous.”

—*S. H. Kellogg*

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# Universal Religious Beliefs

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- ❖ Every religious system assumes the existence of a Higher Power (or powers) upon which a person is dependent in which can influence his personal destiny.



“As to the nature of the Power assumed, religions differ. Some regard the Power as one and only; others assume a plurality of such powers.”

“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.”

—*S. H. Kellogg*

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# Universal Religious Beliefs

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- ❖ Due to a person's relationship with this Power (or powers), certain actions are required and others must be avoided or suffering will result.

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# Universal Religious Beliefs

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- ❖ Between mankind and this Power (or powers) something is wrong.
- ❖ Put another way, all religions more or less distinctly express or appeal to man's sense of sin.

“This is clear from various familiar facts; but it is especially evidenced from the wide prevalence of religious offerings and sacrifices, designed to propitiate or conciliate the goodwill of the Being worshiped, to whom the offerer feels himself subordinate, and who’s favor he believes to be necessary to his well-being.”

—*S. H. Kellogg*

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# Universal Religious Beliefs

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

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# Kellogg's Conclusion

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- ❖ Kellogg considers these tenants true for all religions whether monotheistic, polytheistic, pantheistic, panentheistic, non-theistic, or animistic. Regardless of the nature of the religion, all religions hold these truths in common.

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# Kellogg's Conclusion

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- ❖ Therefore, Kellogg concludes that these beliefs must be:
  - ❖ Instinctual within man
  - ❖ Corresponding to the spiritual realities in the unseen world



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# Two Questions

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- ❖ Q: Why are human beings universally religious with a common set of doctrines?
- ❖ A: The truths within this belief system are self-evident
- ❖ A: Kellogg is wrong

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# Two Questions

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- ❖ Q: How should the Christian apologist respond to this basic universal religious system?
- ❖ The answer to this question depends on how one answers the first question.

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# Self-Evident or Not?

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- ❖ If these truths are really 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 the truth of God's existence is not self-evident, then this truth must be proved through evidence and reason.

Exegesis of  
Romans 1:18-21

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# Romans 1:18

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“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,”<sup>1</sup>

Key word: κατεχόντων (suppress)

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*.

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# Romans 1:18

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- ❖ Two possible definitions:
  - ❖ “hold back” or “prevent from going away.”
  - ❖ “hold down” or “suppress something.”

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# Romans 1:18

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- ❖ So either the Gentiles *had not kept* the deposit of truth given to them, that is, they had allowed the deposit of truth to slip away so they no longer possess it, or
- ❖ The Gentiles *hold down* the deposit of truth given to them, so that they still possess it but it cannot come to the surface.
- ❖ The major lexicons and most exegetical commentators favor the 2nd option.

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# Louw & Nida

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- ❖ “to prevent someone from doing something by restraining or hindering.”



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# A. T. Robertson

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- ❖ “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.’”

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# Romans 1:19

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“since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.”

Key phrase: τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ (what may be known about God)

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# Romans 1:19

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- ❖ Two possible definitions based upon the meaning of the genitive phrase:
  - ❖ The natural man *really knows God*, that is, the truth of his existence and some measure of his nature, or
  - ❖ 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.

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# Romans 1:19

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- ❖ Unlike vs 18, commentaries and translations are divided as to which option is correct. (Lexicons are of no help since this is a point of grammar, not definition.)

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# Romans 1:19

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(NASB95) — because that *which is known* about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.

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(NIV) — since *what may be known* about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.

(KJV 1900) — Because that *which may be known* of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them.

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# Ambiguity

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- ❖ This phrase, *taken by itself*, is ambiguous.
  - ❖ Example of an ambiguous phrase: “I fought with Bob.”
    - ❖ “I fought against Bob.”
    - ❖ “I fought alongside Bob.”
- ❖ Only the larger context may determine which is appropriate.

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# The Importance of Ambiguity

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- ❖ Ambiguity is an important part of language, allowing us to keep our vocabulary within manageable proportions.
- ❖ Ambiguity also seems most likely to appear in common expressions.
- ❖ Thus, the more common the construction, the greater likelihood of ambiguity.

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# How Common is this Construction?

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- ❖ How common was it to use an articular substantival adjective followed by a genitive?
- ❖ *Super Common!*
  - ❖ (Technical theological term meaning “it’s used a lot.”)



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# Interpreting Ambiguity

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- ❖ The mere fact of an ambiguous phrase does not preclude an accurate interpretation of a passage.
- ❖ Ambiguity is seldom a problem in communication because the context almost always excludes irrelevant meanings.
- ❖ IOW, the proper meaning for this phrase should be taken from the range of options available so that it best fits the context.

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# Range of Options

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- ❖ “Knowledge concerning God”
- ❖ “What is known (or can be known) about God”
- ❖ “God in his knowability”
- ❖ All are legitimate options.
- ❖ Of the 15 NT occurrences of the adjective γνωστός, this is the only reference that can possibly refer to knowability or potential knowledge.

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# The Rest of the Context

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- ❖ While the subject of the sentence might be ambiguous, the direct object is relatively straightforward.

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# The Direct Object

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- ❖ φανερός = “is plain” or “is evident” or “is manifest”
- ❖ The primary reference is to what is visible to sensory perception.
- ❖ When linked to εἰμί (“is” as in this passage) it refers to what can be perceived by the senses but in such a way that the perception involves understanding.

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# Louw & Nida

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- ❖ “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.”

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# The Activity of God

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- ❖ The reason why this knowledge of God is so clear is supplied by the rest of the verse: “because God has made it plain to them.”
- ❖ God himself is the active agent pressing home the knowledge of his existence.

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# The Activity of God

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- ❖ IOW, 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."

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# The Implication of vs 19

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- ❖ The implication of this verse, then, is that the content of τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ is “clearly known and understood through sensory perception.”



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# The Translation

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- ❖ Thus, vs 19 may be legitimately translated one of two ways:
  - ❖ 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.*

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# Romans 1:20

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“For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.”

Key phrase: τὰ γὰρ ἀόρατα αὐτοῦ (For...His invisible attributes)

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# Additional Information

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- ❖ In this sentence the word “for” (γὰρ) acts as a linking word indicating that additional information is being given about what is being described.
- ❖ So the phrase τὰ ἀόρατα αὐτοῦ (His invisible qualities) stands in apposition to τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ (what may be known about God—1:19) and ἀλήθειαν (truth—1:18).

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# Apposition?

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- ❖ “A relationship between two or more words or phrases in which the two units are grammatically parallel and have the same referent.”
- ❖ Example: “... the first president of the United States, George Washington.”

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# Huh?

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- ❖ What this means is...
  - ❖ “The truth” in 1:18
  - ❖ “that which is known about God” in 1:19
  - ❖ “His invisible attributes” in 1:20
  - ❖ *Are all speaking about the same thing!*

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# Greek Philosophy

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- ❖ 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.

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# Greek Philosophy

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- ❖ It was through Philo that this Greek concept entered Jewish thought.
- ❖ In fact, Philo used *λόγια* over 100 times.
- ❖ Thus, both the Gentile and the Jewish believers at Rome would have had similar philosophical concepts associated with Paul's vocabulary in this section.

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# Greek Philosophy

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- ❖ Put another way, the philosophical foundation that is associated with these words is important.
- ❖ The average reader of this epistle would have assumed this context.
- ❖ Namely, that there is an invisible realm that is nevertheless knowable through the rational powers of the mind.



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# So... What are we talking about?

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- ❖ What, then, is the content of these “invisible qualities?”
- ❖ Paul answers this question by employing another appositional phrase.
- ❖ IOW, Paul uses another phrase to define “truth” (1:18), “that which is known about God” (1:19), and “invisible attributes” (1:20).

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# Romans 1:20

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“For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.”

Key phrase: ἡ τε αἰδιος αὐτοῦ δύναμις καὶ θεϊότης  
(His eternal power and divine nature)

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# 4 Self-Evident Attributes

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- ❖ The phrase “his eternal power” (αἰδιος αὐτοῦ δύναμις) teaches that at least 3 attributes of God are immediately self-evident.
- ❖ The invisible God is personal, eternal, and powerful.
  - ❖ “his *eternal* power” shows his eternality
  - ❖ “his eternal *power*” shows his power
  - ❖ “*his* eternal power” shows his personality

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# 4 Self-Evident Attributes

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- ❖ The next self-evident truth refers to God's "divine nature" (θειότης).
- ❖ It is more difficult to define this word because it is a *hapax legomena*,<sup>2</sup> which means it is only used here in extant Greek mss.
- ❖ As a result, a variety of definitions has been proposed.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

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# 4 Self-Evident Attributes

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- ❖ Moulton and Milligan state that this word was used with reference to the priestly duties in the temple, and translate it “divine majesty.”
- ❖ Louw and Nida define this word as “the nature or state of being God...”

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# Proposed Definitions

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- ❖ “Just what God is like”
- ❖ “How God is” or “what God is”
- ❖ “the fact that he is God” or “... is truly God”

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# Rule of Maximal Redundancy

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- ❖ Martin Joos, addressing the problem of *hapax legomena*, postulated the rule of maximal redundancy which states that “the best meaning is the least meaning.”
- ❖ IOW, 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.”

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# Rule of Maximal Redundancy

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- ❖ This leads to the principle that the overall meaning of the passage should not depend *solely* upon a single word, but should be derived from the entire passage.
- ❖ In this particular case, the least meaning would merely state “the fact that he is God.”



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# Paul's argument to this point...

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- ❖ The truth (18), that is,
- ❖ what may or is known about God (19), that is,
- ❖ his invisible qualities (20), namely,
- ❖ that he exists and that he is personal, eternal, and powerful,
- ❖ are “fully known, evident, and clear,” because God is the active agent making it clear.

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# Romans 1:20

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“For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.”

Key phrase: ἀπο κτίσεως κόσμου τοῖς ποιήμασιν νοούμενα καθαοῶται (since the creation of the world... have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made)

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# More Ambiguity

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- ❖ The first part of this phrase (ἀπο κτίσεως κόσμου, “from the creation the world”) is ambiguous.
- ❖ It could legitimately be 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.

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# “Understood” vs “Clearly Seen”

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- ❖ What is the relationship of νοούμενα (“being understood”) to καθορᾶται (“clearly seen”)?
- ❖ The verb καθορᾶται is only found here in the NT but is more common in the LXX and extra-biblical sources.
- ❖ This word “refers to the invisible, which is perceived in the external and visible.”

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# “Understood” vs “Clearly Seen”

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- ❖ In contrast to the physical act of seeing, the participle *νοούμενα* means “to comprehend something on the basis of careful thought and consideration.”
- ❖ It has the idea of thoughtful reflection upon what is seen.

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# “Understood” vs “Clearly Seen”

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- ❖ The combination of these 2 verbs, then, suggests 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.”

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# Both Words Necessary

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- ❖ If Paul had only used καθορᾶται (“clearly seen”), 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.

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# Both Words Necessary

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- ❖ On the other hand, if Paul had only written νοούμενα (“being understood”), he would have left the interpretive door open to the Hellenistic notion that the revelation of God is merely internal or mystical.



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# Both Words Necessary

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- ❖ By combining these two verbs, Paul communicates a combination of these two ideas.
- ❖ Specifically, Paul teaches that the knowledge of God occurs through the combination of physical sensation and internal reflection.
- ❖ IOW, people see the evidence with the eye and understand that evidence with the heart.

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# Further Clarification

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- ❖ The clarity of this expression is also indirectly attested by the phrase εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτοὺς ἀναπολήτους (“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.

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# Further Clarification

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- ❖ The critics who charge that God condemns the innocent when he punishes those who have not heard would be correct if God found guilty those who had no knowledge of his existence.
- ❖ But God, being just, reveals himself in nature, being an active agent to ensure the clarity of that revelation.
- ❖ It is only on the basis of mankind's rejection of that revelation that God condemns humanity.

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# Romans 1:21

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“For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.”

Key phrase: διότι γνόντες τὸν θεὸν (For even though they knew God)

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# Linking Phrase

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- ❖ The phrase διότι γνόντες τὸν θεὸν (“For even though they knew God”) links the previous argument concerning man’s rejection of God with the resulting list of judgments that follow.

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# Summary of Rom 1:18-21

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- ❖ Paul makes four statements concerning the revelation and knowability of God.

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# Paul's 4 Statements

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- ❖ 1st, all people everywhere acquire a rudimentary knowledge of God as creator.
- ❖ 2nd, knowledge of God as creator is acquired by rational reflection on the created order.
- ❖ 3rd, the sinful heart consistently suppresses this knowledge, derived from nature.
- ❖ 4th, mankind's deliberate rejection of this revelation establishes his guilt before God.

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# Some Specific Conclusions

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- ❖ Mankind is continually suppressing
  - ❖ the truth =
  - ❖ what is known about God =
  - ❖ his invisible qualities =
  - ❖ the fact that he is and is eternally powerful.



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# Some Specific Conclusions

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- ❖ The fact that God is and that he is eternally powerful is understood through what has been made.
- ❖ People see with the eyes of the *invisible* qualities of God through his *visible* creation and rationally process the information to arrive at an understanding.
- ❖ God ensures that this information is clear to them.

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# Some Specific Conclusions

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- ❖ Mankind is not a neutral observer to God's revelation.
- ❖ Although people really do know God, they suppress this truth in an unrighteous manner so that they are defenseless before the bar of God's justice.

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# Some Specific Conclusions

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- ❖ Since the knowledge of God is constantly poured out through the created order, the evidences for God's existence, power, eternality, and personality are always present.
- ❖ Just as the knowledge of God is constantly poured out, man suppression of that knowledge is equally consistent.
- ❖ The sinner's moral culpability implies that this is an actual knowledge that is suppressed.

# Application to Apologetics

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# The Traditional Approach

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- ❖ By “traditional” I am referring to “evidentialist” and “experimentalist” approaches to apologetics.
- ❖ Mullins (experimentalist) typifies the traditional approach to the question of the existence of God.
- ❖ *“We are not to assume forthwith that God exists and that he is a Person.”<sup>3</sup>*

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

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# The Traditional Approach

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- ❖ The traditional approach believes 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.

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# The Presuppositional Approach

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- ❖ In contrast, the presuppositional argument can be reduced to 2 basic assertions:
  - ❖ Human beings are obligated to presuppose God in all their thinking.
  - ❖ Unbelievers resist this obligation in every aspect of thought and life.

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# The Presuppositional Approach

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- ❖ Put another way, the unbeliever already knows of the existence, not just of a god, but of the Christian God.
- ❖ Evidences are 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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# What's the Difference?

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- ❖ What separates these points of view (traditional vs presuppositional) is the question of the rationality of belief in God apart from evidence.

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# The Problem of Fideism

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- ❖ The traditional apologist argues that the theistic proofs are necessary to avoid fideism.
- ❖ Fideism is the idea that faith is independent of reason and superior to it.
- ❖ Fideism is belief without evidence.

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# Summary of this Position

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❖ “Unless a proposition is either fundamental to knowledge or based on evidence, one is not rationally justified in believing the truth of that proposition.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Francis J. Beckwith, “Philosophy and Belief in God: The Resurgence of Theism in Philosophical Circles,” *The Masters Seminary Journal* 2:1 (Spring 1991).

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# Presuppositionalism ≠ Fideism

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- ❖ Even by Beckwith's standards, presuppositionalism is not fideism.
- ❖ According to Beckwith, "fundamental to knowledge" are those propositions that are "properly basic."
- ❖ Properly basic propositions are those which are "self-evident and incorrigible."

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# Self-Evident/Incorrigible?

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- ❖ 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.

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# Self-Evident/Incorrigible?

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- ❖ 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 therefore should be rationally accepted without evidence.

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# Embracing the Evidence

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- ❖ Fideism relies totally on non-verifiable faith apart from evidence.
- ❖ In contrast, presuppositionalists embrace the evidence that God's creation provides.

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# Embracing the Evidence

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- ❖ The fact that every person clearly understands God's revelation of himself in nature is confirmation that the knowledge of God is *self-evident*.



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# Embracing the Evidence

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- ❖ Likewise, this knowledge is understood internally within each individual.
- ❖ Thus it can be properly considered *incorrigible* since this internal knowledge cannot be completely extinguished, despite the best efforts of the unbeliever.

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# The Importance of Faith

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- ❖ Heb 11:6 confirms the necessity of faith.
  - ❖ *And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.*
- ❖ Yet the faith required is not apart from evidence.
- ❖ Instead, it is the faith that halts the constant suppression of truth and bows the will to the God that is known by all.

# Conclusion

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# Two Questions

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- ❖ This investigation began by asking two questions:
  - ❖ Why are human beings universally religious with a common set of doctrines?
  - ❖ How should the Christian apologist respond to this basic universal religious system?

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# Answers

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- ❖ We have discovered that people are universally religious because people universally recognize the truth of God's existence.
- ❖ The fact that he is and that he is personal, and eternally powerful is, in fact, foundational to knowledge.

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# Answers

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- ❖ How should the Christian apologist respond to this basic universal religious system?
- ❖ Van Til's answer is best:

“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. ”

*Cornelius Van Til*

