
Engaging a Collapsing Culture

Romans 1:14-2:1¹

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Does anyone not believe that the culture and society around us has not changed drastically in the last 20 years? Are things generally getting better? Or have we seen what appears to be almost total moral collapse in certain segments of society? In certain cities? Among certain people groups?

As Christians, how do we understand what is going on? How do we engage it?

The Greco-Roman World of Pauli's Day

Let's take a look at the world of the Bible, the civilization and culture in which the Bible was written.

Politically

Rome had started as a Republic but was now ruled by an Emperor with a Senate.

Greece had begun as a democracy that descended into chaos and being conquered by Rome.

Economically

Vast trading, mercantilism, farming, roads made Rome effectively the business capital of the world, leading the world in construction technologies.

Huge financial commitment to social welfare and entertainment of the masses.

Socially

Abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia were all legal.

Slavery and oppression of non-Romans infested the empire.

Entertainment and sports consumed vast resources, time, and energy.

Horrible suppression and exploitation of women at all strata of society.

Morally

Grotesque hedonism especially among the rich

Rampant immorality, public fornication, sex shows and orgies.

Open, predatory homosexuality, lesbianism and transgenderism.

Religiously

Pluralism where all religions were accepted as equal as long as they recognized the Emperor as being supreme and eventually, as being himself a deity.

Idolatry, temples, false gods everywhere with no universal truth.

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Widespread demonism and witchcraft, some forms of which came with the slaves.

Intellectually

There were centers of learning, study and research alongside the most appalling ignorance.

Sound familiar? Them are us...

It is in this world and the capital city of this degenerate culture that the Gospel was preached, people were saved, and a church planted. To this church, Paul wrote a letter, Romans and on the wickedness of their culture, Chapter 1.

An Important Lens

Culture, civilization is nothing more than the sum of the individuals who make it up. The prevailing expressions of a society make up a part of a culture. The greater the influence of morality derived from the different means of God's revelation and God's common grace, the greater restraint on a societies' evil. Where that influence wanes under the providence of God or the intervention of God's wrath, then individual depravity will eventually corrupt the culture.

This is the point of Romans 1. It traces the ever-increasing corruption of a society, a culture, a civilization. This gives us an important lens to interpret where a society, a culture, a civilization is.

We will be focusing on engaging the cultures we live in here in America. Do not make the mistake of thinking of America as a monolithic culture. We are many cultures. Tribalism is now almost a defining way of thinking about our multi-culturalism. But the push, the trajectory, the overwhelming influences of depravity are now corrupting the general spirit of this age.

Central Assertion – The Gospel (v.14-18)

In the midst of a declining culture we absolutely must understand the centrality and necessity of the gospel.

The Preaching of the Gospel (v.14-15)

¹⁴I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. ¹⁵So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

Paul speaks first of his duty (v.14). This was a responsibility arising from his calling, his apostolic office. His calling from God places him in debt to those he has been sent to, whether they are considered culturally (Greek/Non-Greek) or intellectually (wise/ignorant). The gospel, with its truths and treasures must be preached into the world in which they live.

He is eager to carry out his responsibility (v.15). He is eager for the opportunity. "I have a responsibility and I am most certainly and emphatically eager, ready and willing to preach the gospel to you." This is the Biblical pattern for us. If we understand the gospel, its power, purpose and priority, then our obligations in it are carried out.

Even with all the evil and sin and cultural collapse, Paul stays focused on the gospel.

The Power of the Gospel (v.16)

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

The power for salvation to those who believe is embedded in the gospel. People are saved when the gospel is preached because the gospel is both the message of what God has done to provide salvation and the means/method by which God communicates that salvation.

Our engagement with culture begins and ends with the gospel. Yes, we can address the prevailing sins of the world around us. Yes, we can and ought to talk with sinners about their sins. But this is not about moralism. This is about making way for the gospel.

Background Environment

When we analyze and engage the culture around us, we do so understanding three important realities. These exist whether people acknowledge them or not. They are always present in every culture everywhere.

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So, they are without excuse.

God's Revelation

All people live within the environment of God's revelation. It is evident since creation. It is evident through the natural order of things. It is evident in ordered societies and cultures. It is evident in each person's culture. This is revelation is clear enough so that people are without excuse. It is not clear enough for salvation. Salvation is delivered by believing God's Word, not by believing God's general revelation.

Gods Existence

That there is a deity is known to all human beings. Just because they have twisted and even denied that knowledge does not mean that God is unknown. His power and deity are everywhere evident.

God's Wrath

God's wrath is revealed from heaven against sin and societal evil everywhere. God's wrath in this world in every age is meant to restrain depravity, halt the spread of degenerate societies and protect God's people. All men know that a deity's wrath needs to be appeased. All societies initially have some system to appease their deity. This because the wrath of God is universally known.

It is not that man is ignorant of God so that he has an excuse. Rather, man is actively resisting and rejecting what God has revealed. Since creation, God has shown Himself through what He has made. That revelation is clear and it is condemning. It is not sufficient to save, but is purposed to leave man without excuse. Creation declares the

glorious greatness of God and our lowly and accountable place before Him. This is a fact all through the Bible. No one is excused. No one is exempt. Everyone lives in the environment of God's self-disclosure. Just because someone has their eyes shut doesn't mean the sun isn't shining.

The Trajectory (v.18-28)

Paul helps us to interpret the downward trajectory...

They Suppress the Truth (v. 18-20)

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.

But people suppress the truth. They press it down. They push it aside. Their unrighteousness is their fingers in their ears and blinders on their eyes. The fact that people suppress the truth is part of their culpability, accountability and their guilt with the resulting condemnation.

They Substitute the Truth (v.21-25)

How does that work? How has the clear knowledge of God at creation become suppressed over time and history? How do people suppress the truth all around them?

²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

The most fundamental thing about us is that we are made to worship. All human beings are serving someone or something. So, idolatry in the heart is at the heart of man's sinful condition. That idolatry involves two fundamental exchanges, or trades.

There is an exchange of the glory of God for an image, trading the greatness of the Creator for the greatness of the creation. This comes not out of ignorance, but intentional turning the knowledge of God into futile and heart darkening myths while calling themselves wise.

The second exchange is in trading the truth of God for a lie. Having believed lies, God delivers them over to serve their lusts since they refuse to serve God. Thus, they worship and serve what is made, rather than the Creator. They mistake that which reveals God for that which is God.

Now, this is God's interpretation of history and people. Many have offered alternative explanations, some of which have become standard Christian teaching. They are wrong. They are false. History is the story of people and cultures taking what is clear

in general revelation and instead of worshipping the God revealed worship a god of their own making beginning with themselves.

They are Given over to Wickedness (v.26-32)

²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; ²⁷ and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

Sexual Depravity (v.26-27)

Because of their idolatry, God hands them over to being enslaved by their passions leading to degrading practices. Their prideful idolatry lands them in perverted immorality. Man is normally restrained by God's common grace so that he does not become as evil in his conduct as he is in his nature. This is for the common good. But God can and does withdraw that common grace, giving people over then to the pursuit of whatever their evil and wicked hearts can imagine.

It is evident from this text that lesbianism (v.26) and homosexuality (v.27) are evil, degrading passions and practices. They are not natural. They are an expression of rebellion against God and rejection of His order and design. Homosexuality then is a perversion of God's design and is sin. It is a great evil that signals the collapse of a culture and the impending wrath of God. Why? Because it shows that there is no recognition of God and no regard for God's design.

Social Depravity (v.28-32)

²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³² Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

This is actually the initial withdrawal of God's common grace. It follows on an unwillingness to acknowledge God as God. Here is the giving over to what is translated as "a depraved mind". Commentators have struggled with this. They tend to do so because we are not well taught that our practice of sin is the fruit of our thinking. But for those who understand that thinking is the root from which behaving grows, this makes all kinds of sense. God gives people over to a mind controlled by the sinful nature that yields in a conduct characterized by this laundry list of evil attitudes and actions.

Notice how this paragraph ends in verse 32. They know these things are wrong and have God's death sentence attached to them. Yet, they not only practice them with impunity, but give hearty encouragement to others who do as well. They move from refusing to acknowledge God to rejoicing in their evil to giving approval to others. If this does not describe our culture today, then

nothing does. Most of the cultures we see today are either in this process of decline or the product of it.

Thus, Paul's portrayal describes an individual and cultural progression. Humanity is not moving upward but is sliding downward. Some moral reversals happen in history as God's purposes and plans unfold for nations and societies. Generally, what God is doing in this age to position people groups for hearing the gospel (Acts 17:22-30)

The Answer (1 Corinthians 6:9-11)

But the good news that while these great sins and sad consequences of judgment was everywhere in the Roman empire, in the church at Corinth were those redeemed and rescued from the prevailing sins of their culture.

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

The Carnality of the Wicked (v.9-10)

Paul gives an illustrative list of sins, evils, unrighteous beliefs and behaviors. The satirical Web site, the Babylon Bee, had an article entitled, "Progressive Pastor Spends Entire Sermon Apologizing for What Bible Says." Brothers and sisters, we will not make any apology for what this text says. Notice the way this is written: the unrighteous equals those in this list none of whom will inherit the kingdom.

Are immorality, idolatry, adultery, greed, theft, reviling, swindling all sin? Are they wicked? Are they unrighteous? Yes, then so is the practice of homosexuality. No matter how our culture recasts, remolds, restates, rehabilitates these evils, the church (that is the people) must recognize in both form and function that people who practice these evils will not inherit, will not be a part of God's kingdom.

But this does not leave us without hope...

The Conversion of the Wicked (v.11)

What a great sentence this is, "But some of you used to be like this." Here is what God has done. He has washed, sanctified and justified sinners. He has transformed people. He has made them different. They are no longer unrighteous. They are no longer sinners. They have been washed meaning their guilt has been cleansed. They have been sanctified meaning they have been set apart from the kind of people they were to become a new kind of people. They have been justified, meaning they have been declared to righteous before God.

So, the deadness, darkness and depravity of the unrighteous has been transformed by the grace of God. No longer will they be what they were. No longer will they practice all these sins. And so the question then is, why is the church allowing and not dealing with these sins *in the church*?

Reflect and Respond

Humanity lives in the context of a clear, condemning but non-converting revelation since creation.

People and societies suppress that knowledge (v.18). They speculate about the means of that knowledge (v.21).

People and societies substitute worship of the Creator for the worship of the creature (v.25). They do so from hearts that believe lies (v.25) and are enslaved to lusts (v.26).

People and societies exchange the glory of God (v.23-24), the truth of God (v.25) and the design of God (v.26-27). At each step, this results in God giving them over to impurity (v.24), degradation (v.26) and depraved minds (v.28).

People and societies sin in the presence of light. Sinning against that light renders them without excuse. Both are subject to the wrath of God in life and history here. All will suffer the wrath of God in the Day of Wrath and throughout eternity.

We are not to be shaped by the world's values (Romans 12:2).

We are not to be practicing the sins of our culture and society.

We are to preach the gospel which includes telling of the righteous demands of God, the fact of their bad heart and their bad record and the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus to be their redeemer and ruler.

The church stand for holiness, love and mercy among its own as a means to condemn, challenge and bring people to Christ.

Cultural transformation takes place primarily through personal conversion.

What are you doing then to change your world?