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# **Mooroolbark Christian Fellowship**

## **Study Supplement No. 14**

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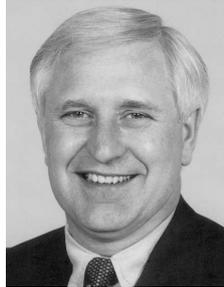
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# Window on the World

From Randal Dick, superintendent of missions



## Angola Report—

### Good News Bad News

Seven years ago, the WN gave a fair amount of coverage to the apparent rapid growth of the Worldwide Church of God in Angola. At one point it seemed that the WCG had 5,000 or more members in Angola. Unfortunately, for a number of reasons, not the least of which was a raging civil war, we were never able to fully establish those congregations and their leadership. Time passed.



About two years ago, James Henderson, regional director, (photo left) made his first visit to assess the situation. Much diffusion had taken place since our last contact. James met with a wide variety of people, gave them all the

help he could, left them material to read and study, and promised to return as soon as he was able.

#### **November visit**

James and I went to Angola in November 2002 to fulfil that commitment. It was one of the more profound, difficult, yet inspiring, experiences of my life. Below is the report on that visit, bringing you up to date regarding your brothers and sisters in one of the world's most difficult places.

James and I arrived in Luanda, the capital, about midday on the first Thursday in

November. I had passed through Luanda one other time during the Angolan civil war (but was not allowed to leave the aircraft).

Even upon landing I noticed that it was different this time. The surface to air missiles that had lined the runway were now just empty bunkers with the steel support column on which the missile pods had rested. Children had come over the fence surrounding the shacks that edged the airport and were playing on the edges of the airfield.

#### **Real nature of things**

We got our first taste of the real nature of things when, after one hour of waiting in the hot baggage claim area, people began to get restless. After two hours, the baggage still had not come even though only two or three planes were at the entire airport. Many Angolans began to get angry and shout at the occasional baggage claim employee who dared show his face.

Eventually a few police appeared and said something to the crowd. This caused angry shouting, and a mob pushed at the door to where the baggage would arrive. It turned out that some officials decided to go through everyone's luggage between the plane and the baggage claim area.

Judging from the growing number of people who, when they got their bags, began

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shouting angrily, it seemed clear that those officials had helped themselves to some of the contents of the bags before releasing them to their owners. Welcome to Africa. After three hours we got what was left of our luggage and went out the door into the steamy atmosphere of Luanda.

### Meeting with members

We were met by Nowa Tembe, WCG representative in Angola, and the driver of the car we had hired for the time we were in Angola. It was good to meet him after years of praying for him, but only knowing him on paper. We were taken from the airport through Luanda to the hotel Le Meridien, located on the harbour, just across from the entrance to the Port of Luanda.

It was obvious that Luanda had once been a much more prosperous city. We were told that things are already changing for the better in terms of people getting out on the streets and business beginning to increase. I could see the harbour from my upstairs window. Many ships were coming and going out of the harbour.

Shortly after our arrival at the hotel, a delegation of five or six Angolan members and leaders arrived to discuss the schedule for the next three days. There we began to hear details about smouldering strife that had broken out within the Angolan church. James and I quickly realized that this might be a difficult weekend.

We were told that part of the Angolan WCG had excommunicated another part of the WCG. All of this, of course, was without the consultation or permission of headquarters or its African representative. We were saddened to hear this, because we had planned to spend our time there in leadership and biblical training.

I learned something else about the environment in which our Angolan members live. As the afternoon shadows grew long, the men began to get more and more distracted. James Henderson whispered to me that we needed to end the meeting so that these men could get home before sundown. This wasn't for religious reasons — rather the roads, even around Luanda, become "owned" by bandits who rob those who would venture out. It was

an indication of just how dangerous everyday life can be.

### The first meeting

The first meeting between James Henderson and myself and the Angolan WCG leadership took place on Friday, Nov. 8. The meeting was cordial, with an underlying tension. Having to work through interpretation, James and I were careful not to make assumptions or conclusions. We listened and asked questions. They gave us a historical tour of the WCG in Angola, and several important things became clear to us as the story unfolded.

The people who came to be called the WCG in Angola had two distinct points of origin. One was a group of people who responded to the first visit of Jacques Brunet and John Halford in the early '90s. Subsequently, a much larger group approached us and asked to come under the umbrella of the WCG.

Both groups were Sabbatarian in background, but the second group was much more legalistic. They were a much larger group, numbering between 3,000 and 5,000, and had better organized leadership than the original, smaller group.

### Teaching and training

I think that the latter group had existed for some time as the Church of the Apostles of the Seventh Day. They approached Carlos Tavares, who had been sent by the WCG to establish, teach and bring leadership maturity to the WCG groups in Angola. They asked to be recognized as part of the WCG. Mr. Tavares asked headquarters to grant their request, which we agreed to do.

Also at Carlos' request, we agreed to recognize the ordination of the leader of this larger group, Raphael Ukukuakulu, and we agreed to appoint him legal representative of the WCG in Angola. The WCG, through an Angolan attorney, had also filed a request for the WCG to be legally registered in Angola.

Although a lot of people were involved, the number of members was impossible to verify because of the ravages of war, which made it dangerous to move between the government-held and UNITAS-held territories.

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The larger group, from the former Church of the Apostles of the Seventh Day, was already well organized. It was hierarchical in governance, had close tribal affiliation and came from a legalistic Sabbatarian background.

The group that had been writing to Pasadena for years, and that responded to the initial visit, though somewhat Sabbatarian had not been organized previously into congregations. Its members were also from a different tribal affiliation than the larger group. Tribal issues are almost always part of any strife equation in Africa.

### Residential Luanda

The second day, Saturday, Nov. 9, James and I were scheduled to attend the services of both groups. We left the hotel at 9 a.m. and began the drive to the larger group's location. It was fascinating to see the residential areas of Luanda along the way. As a first-time visitor, several things stood out to me. The houses, crammed closely together, were perched on high ground. Wherever the land dropped away, people had thrown their garbage.

Consequently whole communities looked like they had been built in and around garbage dumps. The sweet, rotting odour so prevalent at garbage dumps permeated the air throughout most of Luanda, and flies were everywhere. People had long since given up trying to keep flies off their food, and many people had flies sucking moisture out of the corner of their eyes. It was amazing, given the health hazards that abound, that there were so many beautiful, healthy-looking people. The Angolans are an impressive people, beautiful and dignified.

### Worship service

Our first stop was at the hall of the larger group. About 800 people were in attendance, all neatly lined up, sitting on rows of benches. It soon became evident that the leaders of this group were still legalistic and Sabbatarian in their view. Not only had they not been adequately informed of our doctrinal changes, they had been contacted and negatively influenced by dissident elements in the United States.

As the service progressed it became clear that although they had not studied our current doctrinal beliefs, they had already rejected the WCG in its current form. James and I both agreed that there was no reason to create dissension among the lay membership, who had no clue what was going on. We would take the matter up with the leadership the following day. Christ would have to be the one to create the desire among them to leave Mount Sinai and come to him.

We were way behind schedule, and the other group was awaiting our arrival. We both gave a brief word of welcome and best wishes. James added an announcement that the representative of the WCG in Angola was no longer their leader, Raphael Ukukuakulu, but was now Nowa Tembe, and that all communication and decisions from the denomination would be communicated through Nowa.

The elders looked angry, and the people looked confused. James did not elaborate further. After best wishes and farewells to the assembled congregation, we departed, leaving them to continue with the rest of their service.

### Visiting the other group

We drove as quickly as we could back through Luanda to the other side of the city. The hall that was being used by the smaller group (about 160 in number) was at the end of a dirt road in a suburb called Sambinzanga. We drove to the end of the street and walked the remainder of the distance along a railroad track. Below, a small river struggled through the city. The water in the river was black, and garbage carpeted the entire riverbank. Flies, as always, abounded. No one even tried to mitigate their activities.

We finally arrived, quite a bit behind schedule. But, as is often the case in Africa, the members did not seem to mind. They had waited in the oppressive heat patiently and were happy just to meet together.

Soon after we arrived, the worship began. It was extended and wholehearted. I was introduced first and gave the members a greeting from headquarters and a brief message.

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Next, James announced to them that Nowa Tembe was appointed the WCG's official representative in Angola, which was met with an incredible roar of approval, accompanied by thunderous applause. James and I were both astounded at the depth of feeling expressed by the group—another confirmation of the strife that had existed between the two groups over doctrine.

Next, we presented credentials to the other ordained elder in Angola, Pastor Oliveira Kitambala. He was one of the leaders who had been excluded by Pastor Raphael and his men. Again, the congregation expressed its approval at Pastor Oliveira's confirmation.

James gave a brief but effective sermon, followed by closing worship. It was obvious that these people had a kindred spirit. After some fellowship and photographs we were escorted with singing and rejoicing back down the railroad track to where our car was waiting.

We were exhausted. We had left the hotel at 9 that morning. It was now getting close to dark. Our clothes were so soaked with perspiration that we had begun to think that wet clothes were normal. The ever-present red dust now tinted every item of clothing.

Over dinner and multiple large bottles of water, James and I discussed the reality that the actual WCG in Angola was not 5,000 to 7,000, as we had once believed. We actually had about three congregations or groups totalling between 180 and 300 people. We had planned a leadership training session for the next day, but now we did not know whether many would attend. As best as we could discern, a maximum of six young leaders would come on Sunday for the leadership training session.

### **Leadership training**

On Sunday morning at the appointed time, Nowa, Oliveira and a few young men began to arrive at the conference room we were using in the hotel. James and I set aside our prepared material and decided to try to help the leaders who were assembled to cope with the situation they faced, and to edify the members.

To our surprise and delight, young men continued to arrive until nearly 20 were in the group. We answered questions and gave the men some basic principles of pastoral leadership. It was delightful. After a time of prayer, we said our farewells and told them we would try to return as soon as possible. It was again late in the day, and they had to get to their homes before it became too dangerous.

### **Saying good-bye**

James and I left Luanda on Monday morning, Nov. 11, after saying good-bye to Nowa and Oliveira, who saw us off at the airport. We left heavy-hearted, yet with certain optimism about the future of the church in Angola. The small group we left behind is so dynamic and outgoing that there is no question that they will actively share God's love with others.

They are a group of people who have some catching up to do, yet are enthusiastic and very much a part of the WCG family.

This leads to the question, "What can we do to help the Angolans?" James is committed (as am I) to do whatever possible to bring them as much equipping as we can. We will keep in communication and are committed to see the scattered members become cohesive congregations. The small but dynamic church in Portugal has committed to translate literature into Portuguese, and thereby make available to the Angolan members some key literature that is currently unavailable.

The Angolan leaders did not ask for money. They did ask for more tools to enable them to more effectively teach the gospel. I had several ask me to help them get a Bible and a concordance.

One leader who made it in from an outlying area brought a collection of pages to show us. It was what was left of a Bible. He said that their congregation had three Bibles between all of them, and this was the remains of one. He wondered if they could have help getting a few more Bibles for the congregation to share. They had obviously taped, pasted and patched that old Bible until it refused to be repaired again. I told him we would help them get Bibles and some basic study materials.

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Please pray for them. They are aware of us, and pray for their brethren in the United States on a regular basis. They get bits of news from the occasional letter, and from Pastor General

Joseph Tkach's update. It is one of our blessings to have them as our brothers and sisters. Let's be a blessing to them as well.

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# Lessons from the Bible

## Introduction to: The Gospel of Mark

The Gospel of Mark is traditionally attributed to John Mark, the man who accompanied Barnabas and Paul on their first missionary journey (Acts 13). John Mark abandoned that mission early, which greatly disappointed Paul, who refused to take him on a later journey (Acts 15:36-38).

Barnabas was willing to give the young man another chance, and took him on a mission to Cyprus. Mark made good and was later reconciled with Paul, who subsequently wrote that he was a useful helper (2 Timothy 4:11).

We do not know for certain when Mark wrote, or to whom. However, there is evidence that he wrote in Rome to encourage Gentile Christians, and to prove that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

If Mark had lived today, he could have worked for CNN. He brings you the action as Jesus' ministry unfolds. His Gospel reads like an eyewitness report of key events in Jesus' life. You are there as he is baptised, performs miracles, chooses his disciples, heals, upsets the establishment, is arrested, tried and crucified. Verbs like run, shout and amaze abound in this book. Mark's favourite adverb is *euthus*, meaning "immediately" or "at once," which occurs 10 times in chapter 1 alone.

Mark "presents a rapid succession of vivid pictures of Jesus in action — his true identity revealed by what he does, not by what he says (18 miracles are described, and only four parables). It is Jesus on the move" (*Life Application Bible*, p. 1676).

The evangelist often interrupts one story to begin another, going back to the first later. Chronology is reckoned in days and, in the account of Jesus' trial and crucifixion, hours.

Mark concentrates on miracles and the revolutionary nature of Jesus' teaching (1:22) to emphasize his authority. Dramatic signs at crucial events also reveal Jesus to be the supreme Servant of God, performing the Father's will with authority and power.

At Jesus' baptism, heaven itself is unveiled (1:10); at his death, the temple curtain is torn in two from top to bottom, opening the way into the "holy of holies" (15:38). Mark shows how, in Jesus, God has uniquely entered into human history as one of us for our sakes. Jesus urgently proclaims: "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (1:15).

Mark may have been an eyewitness to some of this. It is also possible that he got many of the details from Peter, the flamboyant disciple who was one of Jesus' intimate friends. Mark's Gospel is therefore an excellent introduction to Jesus Christ, who he was and what he stands for.

### Hidden identity

Mark's Gospel shows that Jesus tried to keep his identity hidden until the end of his ministry. He knew he would be misunderstood. The Jews were expecting a Messiah who would deliver them from the Romans by force of power. But Jesus had come to deliver them from sin by his atoning death and resurrection.

He silenced the demons who acknowledged him as God's Servant and Son (1:23-25, 34; 3:11-12). When he healed people, he asked them to keep quiet about it (1:43-45; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26). Jesus even forbade his disciples from making public his Messiah-ship (8:30; 9:9) until the time was right.

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### Son of God

But after Jesus had accomplished his mission, there was no need for secrecy. Everyone needed to know the good news. So Mark wastes no time in getting down to business. He opens with "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1). He tells us that when Jesus was baptised, a heavenly voice proclaimed: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (1:11).

Mark tells us that Jesus had the authority to forgive sin, a prerogative of God alone (2:5-12). Evil spirits recognized Jesus as the Holy One of God (1:24), the Son of God (3:11) and Son of the Most High God (5:7-8). The supernatural world acknowledged Jesus' true identity as the Son of God.

However, Mark also shows that no one in the human realm fully understood. Even Peter, who professed Jesus to be the Christ, failed to realize Jesus' purpose: to die, and after three days to rise again (8:31-32). In Mark's Gospel, the first human acknowledgement that Jesus is the Son of God comes, astonishingly, from a Roman centurion who sees Jesus on the cross (15:39).

### Down to earth

Mark shows us that Jesus was a servant. He helped people, and he commands us to do likewise: "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:43-45).

Mark does not portray the disciples as spiritual giants. Rather, he emphasizes their lack of understanding. Even though they forsook everything to follow Jesus, they needed to be reminded about the importance of unselfish

service: "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all" (9:35). The original disciples had serious failings. But Jesus loved them, and persisted with them. That should be encouraging to us as we struggle to follow our Lord and Saviour.

Ironically, it is the "minor" characters in Mark who display the trait of unselfish service, giving us a rich legacy to learn from: "The poor widow gives out of her need, her whole living" (12:41-44). An unnamed woman uses expensive ointment to anoint Jesus ahead of time for his burial (14:3-9). Joseph of Arimathea takes courage and approaches Pilate for the right to bury Jesus (15:43). Women go to anoint Jesus' body at the grave (16:1-3) ("Losing Life for Others in the Face of Death: Mark's Standards of Judgment," *Interpretation*, October 1993, pp. 361-362).

Jesus tells us to deny ourselves in order to serve him and to further the gospel: "Whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it" (8:35). Jesus is the ultimate example of service, and he died on our behalf. This, indeed, is the great paradox of the gospel: By giving up our lives in service to our Lord and Master, we gain eternal life through him.

### Downward mobility

The Gospel of Mark is an antidote for a secular society bent on "upward mobility" at all costs. Mark teaches us that only as our lives reflect the "downward mobility" of the cross will we experience the true joy of life. As you read Mark, ask God to show you how you can put your trust in his Son who "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:44-45).

**Jim Herst**

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### Lessons from the Bible

#### The Gospel of Mark

##### Lesson 1: Mark 1:1-8

#### A Lesson in Humility

Who would you say was the greatest man ever born? If you are a Christian, you might say, "Why, Jesus Christ, of course!" Suppose Jesus himself were asked the question. What do you suppose he would say?

You might be surprised to know that Jesus did once attribute that distinction of greatness to a certain man. He told his disciples, "I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he" (Luke 7:28).

#### Major celebrity

John the Baptist was an amazingly popular figure. Everybody in Jerusalem and people from all over the Judean countryside went out to listen to him preach. But they didn't just listen — they responded; they confessed their sins and were baptised! Not only was John popular, he was also successful.

For all his popularity and success, though, John was strikingly different from the average man. Many people respond to great popularity and success with a certain degree of pride and swagger. But from the beginning, John the Baptist was different.

#### 'Not about me'

Perhaps you have seen the slogan, "It's not about me".

That was the root of John's message. He preached about someone else, someone who would come after him whose sandal thongs John did not consider himself even worthy to tie.

John wasn't interested in the limelight. He wasn't interested in the praise or admiration of others. He was interested in preparing the way for someone else, and he didn't let personal ambition get in the way of doing his job well.

#### Baptism

John was a baptiser. Among the preparations he made for the coming of Christ was the task

of preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It was into this kind of baptism that the people listening to him entered.

Baptism was not an invention of John, nor was it unique to the Israelites. From ancient times, baptism was a well-known symbol, an outward sign, of a new spiritual birth, of entering into a new form of life.

For those whom John baptised, it marked their confession that they were sinners. When we admit we are sinners, we are laying aside our human pride and confessing the truth of what we really are. But we are not making that confession blindly. We are making it in the light of the revealed knowledge that God loves us immeasurably, and that he has made atonement for us in Jesus Christ.

In other words, because God has revealed to us that he is *for* us, we are *free* in Christ both to fearlessly acknowledge our sinfulness before God, and *free* to accept God's gift of atonement and his new creation of us in Jesus Christ.

Because we have met with the grace of God in Jesus Christ, we can entrust ourselves to him fully and without reservation. Safe in his love, we can give over to him even the crushing burdens of our darkest sins and fears.

#### New creation

Within that confession of our sinfulness is our recognition that we need God's forgiveness. We admit that we are rebels who have betrayed God's love, and we place ourselves at his mercy, having now renounced our rebellion and pledged faithful obedience.

But actually becoming that new person, entering that new life, turning over that new leaf, is another question entirely. When we try to do that, we find ourselves failing--fighting our old ways, but losing so often we can easily fall into despair.

That is, *unless we trust God to be who he really is for us in Jesus Christ!*

In Christ, we are a new creation (see 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Galatians 6:15). And we are set free (Galatians 5:1)! God has freed us

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to be the new, redeemed, healed and complete persons he has made us to be in Christ. We can use that gift of freedom to hear and obey our heavenly Father, or we can reject it and continue to live as though God had not made us his covenant partner, as though he had not made us the beloved recipients of his overflowing grace in Christ (verse 13).

No longer must we live in spiritual bondage, struggling in vain to grasp here and there a little respect, dignity, security and love in this heartless world. No longer must everything in life be about our anxieties and us and not getting all the things we think we want. No longer must we live in opposition to God, our neighbor and ourselves.

The Holy Spirit both gives us ears to hear God's command and provides us our new life in Christ. In that new life provided by the Holy Spirit, we are free to choose to be the person in Christ God has already chosen us to be. To do otherwise is not freedom, but a return to bondage.

### In Christ

All this repenting, believing and passing through the waters of baptism have meaning *only because God gives them meaning*. Only because the Son of God took the indescribable action of becoming one of us--living sinlessly as one of us, dying on the cross as one of us, being resurrected as one of us, ascending to and being received by the Father as one of us, does any of it make any sense at all.

It makes sense because God, *in his divine freedom to be who he wants to be for our sakes*, makes it make sense. We are saved by God's grace--his love, his utter faithfulness to his redemptive purpose for the humanity he loves so much that in Christ he took humanity itself into himself.

### A lesson in humility

God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in Jesus Christ, and through Christ to reconcile to himself all things in heaven and

earth through Christ's death (see Colossians 1:19-20).

That is the way God chose to make us into a new creation. The Son of God took humanity into himself, and in his perfect obedient sacrifice of love, he reconciled humanity to God. It is to this God, the God who in immeasurable love humbled himself to take all our burdens upon himself, including our ugliest sins, and turn us into a new and beautiful creation in his Son, that we owe complete allegiance and obedience.

John's ministry was a ministry of humility. Baptism is an expression of humility. The Son of God humbled himself to become one of us for our sakes. And the new life in Christ that is given to us by our Creator and Redeemer is a life of humility.

It's not about me. If it were about me, what would I do? How can I heal my own past, my present and future? How can I redeem my own faults, sins, betrayals and rebellion? How can I secure my future or the future of those I care about?

No, thank God, it's not about me. It's all about Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate (in the flesh) for our sakes. He is the one who heals our personal history, redeems our every dark sin, secures our future and gives us deep peace and rest.

Praise be to God that we can drop all our airs of superiority and pride, and humble ourselves before the mighty hand of God, because he is truly our all in all.

*J. Michael Feazell*

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### For reflection:

- How did Mark describe the gospel (v. 1)?
- What prophecy did John fulfil (vs. 2-3)?
- How are repentance and humility related?
- Why can we confess our sins without fear?

For further reading:

***Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis**

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### Bible Study

## God's anger against sin

A study of Romans 1:18-32



By Michael Morrison

Paul introduces his letter to the Romans as a letter about the gospel, and he describes the gospel as “the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.” In the gospel, he says, righteousness from God is revealed. The good news is that we can be beneficiaries of God’s righteousness. We can be in a right relationship with him, if we accept the gospel (for a study of Rom. 1:1-17, see the February WN).

After that specific purpose statement, Paul explains the gospel in more detail, starting with our need for the gospel. Why do we need to be put into a right relationship with God? Without the gospel, we would be in a wrong relationship. Paul explains that we were not just going our separate ways—we were enemies of God. There is an important barrier to be overcome.

### **The wrath of God**

Paul explains our need starting in verse 18: “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.” God is angry at sin—angry at the passive sin of ignoring God, and angry at active rebellion. This anger is being revealed, perhaps in nature, or by scriptures that say that sin will be punished.

However, wicked people suppress the truth, even though they have a chance to know. Verse 19 says: “Since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.”

How did he make it plain? Verse 20: “For [ever] since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and

divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.” Even though we cannot see God, we can see from his creation that he has eternal power and he is supernatural.

Even today, modern science tells us that the universe had a beginning. There was nothing, and after an incredibly long time of nothing, there was suddenly something—a big bang, creating and filling the universe. This colossal explosion had a cause, a cause that existed before time did, and a cause that was not part of the world the big bang created. Many scientists today conclude that the cause was God. They may have only a rudimentary understanding of what God is, but they realize that the origin of the universe implies the existence of an eternal supernatural power of some sort. Paul is saying that some attributes of God can be discerned from creation itself.

God could make himself even plainer if he wanted to. He could be a pillar of fire, or he could write messages in the sky. He could make his existence unavoidable, but he chooses not to. He allows people to ignore him and reject him. This means that we believe in God not because he doesn’t give us any other choice, but because we are willing to. We are not forced to cower in front of an overwhelming power, but our love is freely given. God gives us enough evidence to know that he is, if we really want to know. People might make excuses, but the bottom line is that there is no excuse. We can know God if we want to.

### **A bad trade**

However, many people reject the truth: “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened” (v. 21). Although people know about God, at least in the back of their minds, they ignore him. It is a sin to ignore God, and it is a sin to be unappreciative of what he does for us. We are not self-sufficient beings, and it is arrogant for us to act like we are. We should give credit where it is due, and thanks where they are due.

Because people ignore God, their thinking becomes futile—it doesn’t produce any fruit. If we keep God out of the picture and try to

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make sense out of life, we will never get the right answer. No matter how much thought we put into it, if we keep God out, we are going to waste our time. We will not have the right answers, because we would be building on the wrong foundation.

“Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles” (vv. 22-23). Most cultures claim to be wise, but if they think it is smart to reject truth and build on falsehood, then they are actually foolish. They are giving up something wonderful and ending up with lizards and fools to worship. All their gods are imitations, and can never be anything more than imitations.

### Letting them do what they want

Since people reject God and he is angry at their sin, what does he do? Verse 24: “Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.” If they ignore God, then he lets them reap the consequences of their foolish way of thinking. They miss out on the wisdom and guidance of God. They have to learn the hard way, because they don’t want to learn from God. So God lets them fall into sexual sin.

Paul repeats these thoughts in verses 25-26: “They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen. Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts.” The people traded away truth and decided to live as if God did not exist. So God lets them do what they want, and one of the biggest problems they encounter is sexual.

Paul says: “Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion” (vv. 26-27). Paul is not saying that God is going to punish them for their awful behaviour. No, his emphasis is different. Paul is saying that the people cut themselves off from God and he punishes them by letting them do these sexual sins. The unnatural

sexual desires are part of the punishment, not the reason for it.

When we cut ourselves off from God, the things we want are often bad for us, and if God lets us do what we want, then we end up doing things that are bad for us. Sexual sins are just one example; Paul could have just as easily used greed as a different example, or dishonesty, or violence. Different problems appeal to different people, and if we just do what we want, we end up hurting ourselves.

Verse 28 puts it like this: “Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done.” Just because we have an inclination to do something, doesn’t mean that it is good for us. Rather, our desire may be part of our problem.

### Many examples

Paul then gives a list of examples in verses 29-31: “They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless.”

These are the natural results of ignoring God. If we pretend like he doesn’t exist, he lets us reap the consequences of our foolish desires. Without God, we end up deeper and deeper in sin. People do not want to live in a world of greed and envy, murder and deceit. They don’t want a world of depravity, arrogance and slander, but without God, that is where they end up. They have thrown away the moral compass, thrown away the ethical guidelines, thrown away the purpose of life.

Paul is saying that God lets them do it. He knows where that kind of behaviour leads to – that’s why he tells us not to do it – but he lets us do it if we insist on going our own way. The problems we have in the world have their root cause in the fact that people do not like to retain God in their knowledge. They trade the truth for a lie, and God lets us reap the results. Verse 32: “Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue

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to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them." Maybe it seems harsh to say that the gossipier deserves to die, and that envious people deserve to die. Paul is saying that they deserve death. Those sins are symptoms of ignoring God, of keeping God out of the picture.

When we don't even thank God for the life we have, we don't deserve to keep it. So there is the need for the gospel: We are alienated from God, in moral confusion and deserving death. We desperately need some good news in this picture, and Paul is saying, Jesus is

what we need. The good news is that the problems Paul has been describing have been overcome. The gospel is the power of salvation, and the revelation of God's righteousness is the solution to humanity's mess.

People have gotten themselves into trouble by ignoring God, but God has acted to rescue them, to save them, to restore them to righteousness. As Paul will explain in later chapters, he has done it in Jesus Christ.

### Questions for application:

- In what way does creation inform me about God? (v. 20)
- Why doesn't God make himself more obvious?
- Are foolish desires a sin or a punishment? (v. 24)
- Which of the sins am I most likely to commit? (vv. 30-31)
- Is God's anger part of the gospel, or simply the setting in which the good news is revealed?

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**The Mooroolbark Christian Fellowship**

**Tel. (03) 9726 8898**