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**Series: Exposition of Romans**  
**Number: 130**  
**Text: Romans 8:7; 10:16, 17; Eph. 4:19; Jer. 17:9**  
**Date: September 14, 2008 (a.m.)**

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**“BELIEF & UNBELIEF” (Part II)**

**R**eligiophobia is quickly becoming one of the most common postmodern indicators of a society in a constant state of flux. Thomas Nagel, an outspoken atheist, wrote, “In speaking of the fear of religion, . . . I am talking about . . . the fear of religion itself. I speak from experience, being strongly subject to this fear myself. . . . I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn’t just that I don’t believe in God and, naturally, hope that I’m right in my belief. It’s that I hope there is no God! I don’t want there to be a God; I don’t want the universe to be like that. . . . My guess is that this cosmic authority problem is not a rare condition and that it is responsible for much of the scientism and reductionism of our time. One of the tendencies it supports is the ludicrous overuse of evolutionary biology to explain everything about life, including everything about the human mind.”<sup>1</sup> Albert Mohler has documented the “War on God” that has gathered world-wide attention. *The New York Times* reports on a recent conference the paper describes as a “free-for-all on science and religion.” The forum was held at the [Salk Institute for Biological Studies](#) in California. Evidently, the event was an opportunity to declare open warfare on belief in God. Take a look at these statements from the event, known as “Beyond Belief: Science, Religion, Reason and Survival.” “The world needs to wake up from its long nightmare of religious belief.” [Steven Weinberg, Nobel laureate in physics]. “Anything that we scientists can do to weaken the hold of religion should be done and may in the end be our greatest contribution to civilization.” [also Weinberg] “We should let the success of the religious formula guide us. Let’s teach our children from a very young age about the story of the universe and its incredible richness and beauty. It is already so much more glorious and awesome – and even comforting – than anything offered by any scripture or God concept I know.” [Carolyn Porco, Space Science Institute, Boulder, CO] “I am utterly fed up with the respect that we – all of us, including the secular among us – brainwashed into bestowing on religion . . . Children are systematically taught that there is a higher kind of knowledge which comes from faith, which comes from revelation, which comes from scripture, which comes from tradition, and that it is the equal if not the superior of knowledge that comes from real evidence.” [Richard Dawkins, Oxford University] Reporter George Johnson explains that Dr. Weinberg also described religion as “a crazy old aunt.” As he reports: “*She tells lies, and she stirs up all sorts of mischief and she’s getting on, and she may not have that much life left in her, but she was beautiful once,*” [Weinberg] lamented. “*When she’s gone, we may miss her.*” Dr. Dawkins wasn’t buying it. “*I won’t miss her at all,*” he said. “*Not a scrap. Not a smidgen.*” We are often scolded with the argument that it is Christianity that has declared war on secular science – not science that has declared war on Christianity. If nothing else, these statements show that argument to be profoundly false. *The New Scientist* described the meeting as an evangelistic rally for disbelief in God: *It had all the fervour of a revivalist meeting. True, there were no hallelujahs, gospel songs swooning, but there was plenty of preaching, mostly to the converted, and much spontaneous applause for exhortations to follow the path of righteousness. And right there at the forefront of everyone’s thoughts was God.*<sup>2</sup> This should not come as any big surprise. This kind of ‘in your face’ atheism has always been around. True, it is getting far more publicity than it did in the past (especially as it is endorsed and given prominence in the main stream media), but this is nothing new. What is new and far more disturbing is the way our “postmodern” sensitivities have been deceived into buying into this mindset. Increasingly, people claiming an

Evangelical identity fall prey to this way of thinking. One recent example is Bart Campolo, the son of noted Evangelical gadfly Tony Campolo, who boldly declared that the traditional doctrines of God's sovereignty, wrath, Hell, etc. were not only no longer appealing to him, but he finds them down right appalling. "Some might say I would be wise to swallow my misgivings about such stuff, remain orthodox, and thereby secure my place with God in eternity. But that is precisely my point: If those things are true, then God might as well send me to Hell. For better or worse, I simply am not interested in any God but a completely good, entirely loving, and perfectly forgiving One who is powerful enough to utterly triumph over evil. Such a God may not exist, but I will die seeking such a God, and I will pledge my allegiance to no other possibility because, quite frankly, anything less is not worthy of my worship...I am a free agent, after all, and I have standards for my God, the first of which is this: I will not worship any God who is not at least as compassionate as I am."<sup>3</sup> Campolo is not an isolated case. John MacArthur points out that there others, "My friend R. C. Sproul has said that "God's favorite doctrine is sovereignty, and if you were God, it would be yours too." A wonderful sentiment like that helps offset the sick feeling I get when I hear contemporary evangelicals attack the sovereignty of God. His elective purpose is salvation, because if God isn't saving people, they won't be saved. This is a hard truth that many prominent evangelicals deny, stealing glory from God and overestimating the ability of the spiritually dead! One very famous evangelical says: "To suggest that the merciful, long-suffering, gracious, and loving God of the Bible would invent a dreadful doctrine like election, which would have us believe it is an act of grace to select only certain people for heaven, comes close to blasphemy." In other words, the claim that God 's sovereignty saves people by His power is almost insulting to His character. (He doesn't suggest how else they might get saved.) Another writer, the head of a national ministry, insists, "The flawed theology of pre-selection is an attempt to eliminate man's capacity to exercise his free will, which reduces God's sovereign love to an act of a mere dictator." Another writer believes: "Election makes our heavenly Father look like the worst of despots." Another adds that the doctrine of election is "the most unreasonable, incongruous, self-contradictory, man-belittling, God-dishonoring scheme of theology that ever appeared in Christian thought. No one can accept its contradictory, mutually exclusive propositions without intellectual self-debasement. It holds up a self-centered, selfish, heartless, remorseless tyrant for God and bids us to worship Him." Still another says, "It makes God a monster who eternally tortures the innocent, removes the hope of consolation from the gospel, limits the atoning work of Christ, resists evangelism, stirs up argumentation and division, promotes a small, angry, judgmental God." Here's one of the scariest of all: "To say that God sovereignly chooses is the most twisted thing I have ever read, making God into a monster, no better than a pagan idol."<sup>4</sup> Sin not only makes man guilty before God, the Fall has entirely corrupted man. Thus when the Bible speaks of sin, it speaks of both the *guilt* of sin and the *pollution* of sin. "Guilt is liability to punishment for Adam's sin; pollution is the corruption which is extended over the whole man. Pollution flows from guilt."<sup>5</sup> We looked last week at Ps. 14:1 and noted two things:

- (1) A "fool" does not necessarily refer to a person of low intelligence, but rather to someone who ignores the folly of sin and scoffs at the notion of accountability to God.
- (2) As such, the "fool" declares "There is no Lawgiver!"

Atheism is the product of a darkened mind (Rom. 1:18-28). How does the Bible describe this?

## **I. THE IDOL OF THE HUMAN HEART**

The human condition in sin makes the heart "deceitful above all things" (Jer. 17:9); from the heart comes deceit (Mark 7:22); deceiving themselves (Gal. 6:3; Jas. 1:22); the pride of your hearts has deceived you (Jer. 49:16; Obad. 3); hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (Heb. 3:13); the deceitfulness of riches chokes the word (Matt. 13:22; Mark 4:19). This prompted Martin Luther to declare, "In reality the heathen make their own fictitious notions and dreams of God an idol and rely on what is altogether nothing. That is what all idolatry is. For it consists not merely in erecting an image and worshiping it. Its seat is the heart, which stupidly stares in other directions and seeks help and comfort from creatures, saints, or devils. It does not look to God, nor does it expect Him to be so good as to help; neither does it believe that whatever good it experiences comes from God. Besides this, there is a false worship, an extreme form of idolatry, which we have hitherto practiced and is still prevalent in the world. All ecclesiastical orders are based on it. This idolatry concerns only that conscience which seeks help, comfort, and salvation in its own

works, presumes to wrest heaven from God, and counts how many bequests it has made, how often it has fasted, celebrated Mass, etc. On this it relies and of this it boasts, as if it were unwilling to take anything from God as a gift but desired to earn or richly merit it, just as though He were our servant and our debtor, while we are His liege lords. What is this but turning God into an idol, yea, a pseudo god, and regarding and elevating ourselves as God?"<sup>6</sup>

## II. MISPLACED CONFIDENCE, MISPLACED TRUST

What Luther recognized is that the nature of Pelagianism distorts not only the Grace of God, but God Himself. The result being an idol. Pelagius was a 5<sup>th</sup> century British monk who insisted that human nature was not impaired or polluted by Adam's fall. He denied Original sin and hereditary corruption. All humanity possesses the innate ability to do all that God commands and as such drastically minimizes the need for God's grace other than as a secondary means of assisting us in our obedience. Sin can be avoided and given the right environment and role models, sinless perfection is achievable. All we must do is realize the full potential that we possess. This, coupled with a little help from God's grace enables us to achieve salvation. By this Pelagius did not mean that the Grace of God was absolutely indispensable, but only that our own efforts were the means by which grace was activated. In other words, grace is earned. Pelagianism and its close cousin, semi-pelagianism continues to plague the Church down to this very day.

## III. THE NOETIC EFFECTS OF SIN

The word *noetic* is derived from NOUS, mind, reason (it is the word Paul uses in Romans 12:2). It is equivalent to our word, cognitive. The noetic effects of sin refer to those effects which Adam's Fall wrought upon the reason and knowledge of man. "Unregenerate persons, as St. Paul told the Christians in Ephesus, are plagued by *the futility of their minds*, because, *alienated from the life of God, they are darkened in their understanding*. Consequently, there is a fundamental need for them to *be renewed in the spirit of their minds* and to *put on the new man, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness*. (Ephesians 4:17f., 23f.)"<sup>7</sup> Sin has had, not a partial effect on the man, but a *total* effect. The *whole* man, his mind, his conscience, his emotions (affections or Desires) and his will have all been *pervasively* affected by sin. Sin has so corrupted our faculties that what the older theologians called the *sensus divinitatis* has been badly impacted. Noted Reformed historian Richard Muller defines the term as, "The *sense of the divine*; viz., a basic, intuitive perception of the divine existence; it is generated in all men through their encounter with the providential ordering of the world. The *sensus divinitatis* is, therefore, the basis both of pagan religion and of natural theology. Because of the fall, the religion that arises out of this sense of the divine or seed of is idolatrous and incapable of saving or of producing true obedience before God. Man's *sensus divinitatis*, thus, is capable only of leaving him without excuse in his rejection of God's truth."<sup>8</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** A recent major survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life finds that most Americans have a non-dogmatic approach to faith. A strong majority of those who are affiliated with a religion, including majorities of nearly every religious tradition, do not believe their religion is the only way to salvation. And almost the same number believes that there is more than one true way to interpret the teachings of their religion. This openness to a range of religious viewpoints is in line with the great diversity of religious affiliation, belief and practice that exists in the United States, as documented in a survey of more than 35,000 Americans that comprehensively examines the country's religious landscape. In other words, the kind of God that appeals to a vast majority of those in this survey bears little, if any resemblance to the God of the Bible. The atheist denial of God in reality differs very little from the belief in a divine being who in the final analysis is a worthless idol. David Wells has again and again addressed this in his many writings. "The categories of true and false, right and wrong, therefore fall away and are replaced by a different kind of distinction: religion which is useful as opposed to that which is not. Given our cultural climate, religion which is useful is that which is therapeutically helpful. And the need to discern between what is true and what is false, we have come to think, is a bad habit which needs to be abandoned... When Wade Clark Roof

analyzed the spirituality of the Baby Boom Generation, he noted the fundamental cleavage which has been tracked in these pages: ‘*Spirit* is the inner, experiential aspect of religion,’ he wrote, and ‘*institution* is the outer, established form of religion.’ From this bifurcation arose the further distinction that Boomers are ‘believers’ in the sense that they give credence to their own interior perceptions and intuitions, but they are not ‘belongers’ in the sense that they give much credence to doctrine formulated by others, to traditions passed along through the Church, or to the corporate practice of faith. It is the ‘inwardness’ of direct experience within the self that is most persuasive. Indeed, 80% of Americans, across the generations, believe that people should arrive at their own beliefs independently of religious institutions such as churches and synagogues. And 60% take this view a step further. On the grounds that people have God ‘within them,’ churches and synagogues, they believe, are unnecessary. Clearly what Roof was seeing was a *cultural* habit and not, as his book suggests, a generational one. If there is a generational factor which is present it is found in the fact that those who are younger are more likely than those who are older to have been engulfed by ideas of their own autonomy, to be disenchanted with religious institutions (though this may be reversing itself), and to have been more deeply affected by the massive waves of change that have washed across American life in the last five decades in particular.”<sup>9</sup> In I John 5:21 we read, “My little children, keep yourselves from idols.” Wisely did Spurgeon say of this, “Beloved in the Lord, think not that this is an unnecessary warning even for you, for you may as easily set up an idol in your heart as other men may set up a false system of philosophy, or an idol god. Guard against setting up a rival trust to rob the Lord of even a small part of your confidence. ‘My soul, wait thou only upon God; for my expectation is from him.’ None but Jesus is the ground of salvation: none but the Eternal God is the disposer of providence. Trust thou wholly in him who loves to be trusted. Let us lean upon our God with all our weight, and lean nowhere else; for if we put our confidence elsewhere, our idolatry will come home to us, and we shall hear the voice of disappointment, wailing bitterly, ‘Bel boweth down, Nebo stoopeth: your carriages were heavy loaden; they are a burden to the weary beast. They stoop, they bow down together.’”<sup>10</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> T. Nagel, The Last Word (Oxford Univ. Press, 1997) p. 130.
  - <sup>2</sup> [www.albertmohler.com/blog](http://www.albertmohler.com/blog). (Nov. 21, 2006)
  - <sup>3</sup> B. Campolo, “The Limits of God’s Grace,” The Journal of Student Ministries. (Nov./Dec. 2006)
  - <sup>4</sup> J. MacArthur, Hard to Believe: The High Cost and Infinite Value of Following Jesus (Nelson, 2003) p. 34.
  - <sup>5</sup> G. H. Kersten, Reformed Dogmatics: A Systematic Treatment of Reformed Doctrine I (Netherlands Reformed Book & Publishing Co., 1980), p. 217.
  - <sup>6</sup> What Luther Says: An Anthology II (Concordia, 1959) p. 679.
  - <sup>7</sup> P. E. Hughes, The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ, (Eerdmans, 1989), p. 117.
  - <sup>8</sup> R. A. Muller, Dictionary of Latin and Greek Terms (Baker, 1983) p. 279.
  - <sup>9</sup> D. F. Wells, Above All Earthly Pow’rs: Christ in a Postmodern World (Eerdmans, 2005) p. 150. A classic example of this modern mentality is seen in Doug Pagitt, one of the leading voices in the Emergent Church. John MacArthur correctly diagnosed this in a recent interview, “Let me just cut to the chase on this one: [Doug] Pagitt is a Universalist. What he was saying is real simple. He was saying when you die your spirit goes to God and judgment means that whatever was not right about you, whatever was bad about you, whatever was substantially lacking about you, gets all resolved. It doesn’t matter whether you’re a Christian really; we’re all going to end up in this wonderful, warm and fuzzy relationship with God. That’s just classic universalism.” <http://www.crosswalk.com/pastors/11560481/>
  - <sup>10</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, “Man Made Idols Will Fall Down,” A sermon preached on Sept. 27, 1888 at The Metropolitan Tabernacle.