

Romans 1:18-25

For the invisible things of him are clearly seen

During the last year I became more and more aware that, in discussions, unbelieving people often bring up the argument: “For me, Christian faith is only one of many different ways to express your belief in a higher being.” Their concept is quite clear. Everybody has a choice to select the religion that fits their own needs, taste or intellectual preferences: just the way you would select the color of your ties or the brand of your coffee. They think that religion is a matter of taste. It’s like an “add-on module” in your life.

How is this possible? As Christians, we *know* there is only one way. And this way is completely different from all religions and different from all human-made ‘add-ons’ because it involves the one and only living God!

If you start to argue with them that the Bible tells you something different from what they claim, this is no problem for them, because, they say “The Bible says this, the Koran says that, and then there are the scriptures of Zarathustra or Confucius or others. How can you say that the Bible is an absolute standard?”

We experience and believe that our God is the one and only true God. We know that the Holy Spirit is with us to give us the right words at the right time, and nevertheless we are in trouble, because in so many cases we feel powerless when we try to convince the people with whom we talk of the Truth.

When I remembered what is written in the New Testament I realized that only very few situations are reported when the apostles argued with other men. For example, the apostles were before the high council of the Jews and on the Areopagus in Athens, and in these cases there was almost no fruit.

When Paul considered these encounters he came to a conclusion which he wrote to the Romans in the first chapter of his letter (verses 18-25):

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hinder the truth in unrighteousness; ¹⁹ because that which is known of God is manifest in them; for God manifested it unto them. ²⁰ For the invisible things of him are clearly seen since the creation of the world, being perceived through the things that are made, even his everlasting power and divinity; so that they may be without excuse: ²¹ because that, knowing God, they glorified him not as God, neither gave thanks; but became vain in their reasonings, and their senseless heart was darkened. ²² Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and changed the glory of the incorruptible God for the likeness of an image of corruptible man, and of birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things. ²⁴ Wherefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts unto uncleanness, that their bodies should be dishonored among themselves: ²⁵ for that they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen.

That describes very well the situation of the world we live in. I guess we all know many people who are not able or are no longer able to see God’s manifestations in this world, although *his everlasting power and divinity* is clearly visible. We talk to them and they don’t see. But, do we have to take this for granted?

Even, if the unbelievers live in darkness where they cannot see, we do not only see the light but are assigned to be the light! I think we are well equipped to help such people. But such help does not mean talking, but doing. A breakthrough will occur only when these unsuspecting people will meet our Lord, personally. God can be (or has to be) experienced by them, here and today. And God is willing to meet them.

A good friend of mine, an American missionary, was pastor of the Baptist church in Salzburg, Austria, for many years. In that time he spent once, together with the board of deacons, a retreat in one of the cabins up there in the Austrian Alps. At the same time a group of Dutch men stayed there, too. During the days they hiked and in the evenings, after supper, when Bill and his brothers were sitting in one corner of the

common room, talking, reading the Bible and praying, the Dutch enjoyed beer and brandy on the other side of the room. The last night one of the Dutch, slightly drunken, approached and tried to mock at them.

“You are not going to tell me that you really believe all that stuff, do you?” said the Dutchman. Bill looked into his face and asked him, “Don’t you believe in God?” “No, of course not!” he said. “Would you believe if I prove to you that there is a living God?” replied Bill. “O yes, but you really have to prove it,” answered the man. Bill said: “Okay, would you mind joining me outside for a few moments?”

The Dutchman was willing, and so they both went outside. It was a warm summer night, and Bill took a seat on a bench in the front yard of the cabin. The other joined him, and then Bill started, “Well, I will prove to you that our God exists and the only thing you have to do is to repeat two sentences. And these sentences are: ‘God, I don’t believe that you exist. Therefore, I challenge you to prove your existence.’ That’s all. It’s very easy. I will say these two sentences again, one after the other, and you just repeat them. You understand the scheme?” The man did not object, so Bill said the first sentence, looked at the man, nodded his head, and the Dutch guy repeated it.

Then Bill said the second sentence and looked at the man, but he remained silent. Bill repeated the sentence again, looked at the man and could see that he had a problem. “Come on, it can’t be so difficult to repeat this sentence,” said Bill. Eventually the Dutchman repeated it. Then there was a long silence. Finally, the man said, “I tried to make fun of you. I would never have believed that someone can prove the existence of God. But now I am completely sober and I know I was wrong.” He stood up, went inside and was not seen in the common room for the rest of the night. Bill never met this man again, so he does not know what became of him, but one thing is perfectly clear: he learned that night what Paul wrote in v. 19, *‘because that which is known of God is manifest in them; for God manifested it unto them.’*

I was once invited to speak about “What is pain?” in church. A friend of mine brought with him a neighbor, a mathematician and “confessing” atheist. After my presentation and the discussion, during the “social” part of the evening, we were brought together – absolutely “accidentally”, of course – and within the shortest time we were entangled in some discussion. He claimed “all religions are the same, and are useless” and “if there would be a need for a religion, becoming a Christian wouldn’t be my first choice,” and so on. I sensed that talking would not really advance the encounter. However, I remembered what I had learned and so I said, “You are a mathematician, aren’t you? You see, we Christians are hanging ourselves pretty far out of the window. We say, in contrast to believers of all other religions that our God is willing to communicate with every single man in the world. Therefore, as a mathematician it is very simple for you: In order to find out whether this statement is true, you only have to create a single case in contradiction to our claim – that would be your own, unquestionable case –, and if my assertion will not work, you have all reasons to reject Christianity once and for ever.”

I added, “Just speak out loud- ‘God, if it is true what this man says, then prove yourself, here and now!’” He pondered for a short moment and said, “Well, maybe later.” I looked into his eyes, laughed and said, “You are a coward! Or, do you know the truth already?” And I went away. Paul said (v. 22), *“Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools.”* I know this arrogant pseudo-wisdom of these people very well. I was the same kind of person before the Lord hit me with the proof of His existence. But this did also not happen in a discussion with believers. It happened when I was all alone. And it was an answer to a long-time intercession of Christians who knew me then and loved me.

We can only pray for people who have hardened their hearts, that the Lord may show them his mercy at his right time. But there are many others who are “only” ignorant. To them we are sent to bring, to explain and – never forget this one – to prove the gospel. As long as these people are “blind” for the manifestations of God in his creation, because they are ignorant, somebody has to tell them. But not only to tell them, because they have to feel, to experience the truth of the Gospel, and to get their eyes opened up. And that is *our* task, yours and mine to encourage them to take these experiential steps!

It seems to be difficult, but it isn’t. I’ll tell you why it seems so often to be such a hard task. God never has a problem with this job – it’s only a problem for me (and probably you)! Here is a personal example from an encounter I had with one of my recent graduate students. She was brought up in a genuinely

atheistic family. The only time in her life that she was in a church was when a friend of hers married. During the period while she worked in my lab I witnessed to her, I gave her a Good News Bible, a Michael W. Smith CD with music she liked, and I prayed for her. But there was not much progress.

Some time ago, she came into my office one morning and told me about an accident she had the night before that left her with a hurt leg. Before going to the bathroom, she had forgotten that there was a new chest near the door of the bathroom, and in the dark she hit the edge squarely with her thigh. She had an impressive bruise and it really hurt. (And now comes the interesting part). Before my mind had any chance to reason, I said out loud, "Oh, I am so sorry. The only thing I can do for you is to pray that Jesus would take care of it. Shall I pray?"

At that very moment my mind was in an uproar. "What? What did you say? Are you crazy? How do you think she will react to this? I am so embarrassed!" But Christine said, "Well, if it helps, why not?" I didn't lay hands on her, but I prayed, sitting in my chair. In a few, plain sentences I asked for fast healing. I did not fold hands and I did not close my eyes. I finished with, "Thank you, Lord, that I can come and ask you for all things. Amen." Then she went.

I had some more arguments in my mind, such as, "What, if Jesus will not intervene" and thoughts like that. I prayed, and then the Lord spoke to me, "Wait a minute! What are you talking about? About your honor or mine?" And that really hit the target. It was a kind of revelation for me!

At that very moment, I realized that the main hindrance for my willingness to give way to the signs that "*shall accompany them that believe* (Mark 16:17)" was (and sometimes still is) the fear that *I* might get the blame if the Lord chooses not to answer my prayers. I had to repent and to ask for his help to really overcome my self-centeredness.

By the way, the next day at the coffee break in the morning Christine came, clapped on her thigh and said, "Did I tell you? It's gone. It doesn't hurt anymore!" And a few weeks later she came again and said, "I need a new apartment, could you please activate again your good connections to Him, up there?" I replied, "I tell you what, why don't you ask Him yourself? He knows you already and he would love to help you. So, it's your turn." I do not know whether she did it; at least she didn't tell me. But Jesus loves her anyway, and she also found a new apartment.

It really is our turn to make the people around of us acquainted with Jesus. We need to show them how to do it and to give the Lord the opportunity to work his wonders when the people are alerted that he is going to act. Paul wrote that people are created in a way that they can clearly see it (v.20). Most of them, however, don't see it the first time by themselves, they need a little help, and that is where we come into play.

If they will not learn to see, there will be terrible consequences, Paul unfolded them all. I do not like to read again the details in v. 22-25. If you forgot these details, read these verses again for yourself. They are disgusting! But, they are not described to give us goosebumps like in a horror movie, when we sit in a comfortable armchair and watch the action. What is written there is the breathtaking reality around of us. They are given so that we able to realize this: It is our turn to become active and engaged and committed to prevent this from happening to the people we know!

So, what can we do? I would love to copy a check list or formula for each of you, which you could take and use by following the listed items. But, no chance! There are no recipes or standard procedures. When God deals with a man or woman there is always a very personal solution that breaths his love. And we have to be in close contact with the Lord to know our role in His work (and of course, to act accordingly).

The only statement which I dare to pass on today is the following. Try hard to make the works of God more clearly visible! Or, to be more precise: We, you and I, have to dedicate our lives more completely to our God and Creator, so that he can do and make visible his works in us, by us and around of us.

May the Lord bless you all abundantly in this calling. Amen.

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