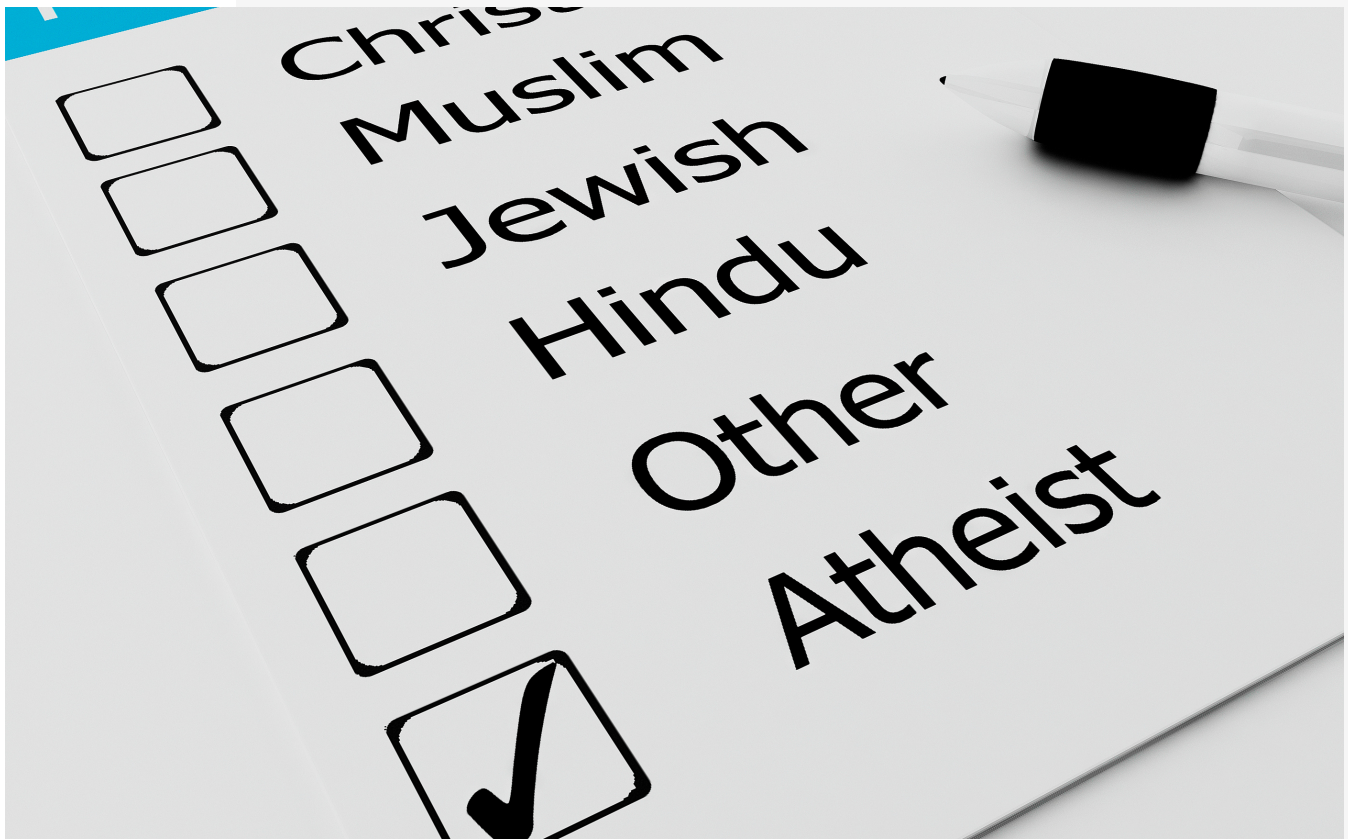


GRACE TO YOU

ROMANS 1:18-32

# DOES GOD BELIEVE IN ATHEISTS?



**FIRST BYRON CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH**

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# INTRODUCTION

We live in an ungodly and godless world don't we? We look around our culture and see ungodly words and actions coming from godless people. We conclude, "They are ungodly and godless." They do not believe in God, they have no awareness of God, and their conduct and character demonstrate that.

God looks at this same scene and agrees with our conclusion that we are living in an ungodly world. But he disagrees with our conclusion that people are godless. Romans 1:18-32 tells us that God does not believe in atheists. He sees their sinful character and conduct, yes, but he also sees they are not godless. They believe in God and are aware of God no matter what they say or what their lives say. If God does not believe in atheists, what should we believe about atheists? **How should we react and relate to atheists?**

## BACKGROUND

Paul has just declared that he is unashamed of the Gospel, implying that there was a temptation to be ashamed in Rome, probably because of the rampant confident atheism of Rome. What hope could these young Roman Christians have of convincing and converting any Roman citizen when they all denied the existence of the true God and instead worshipped their Emperor? Paul had a deeply encouraging message for these Roman believers, and for us, about our interactions with atheists.



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# 1. GOD SPEAKS TO ATHEISTS

Atheists do not read their Bibles, come to Church, or hear the Gospel. How then can atheists know anything about God. Isn't that like saying someone knows algebra without ever going to school? It sounds impossible. How can atheists know God without knowledge of God?

## They know God through creation

**For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 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 (19-20).**

God shows his invisible attributes to everyone through his visible world. The Creator shows himself to his creatures in the creation. Just as a handwritten note tells you there was a hand that wrote and even a little of the character of the writer, so the created things act as God's handwriting.

## They know God through conscience

**They know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die (32)**

Even though they have never heard or read the Ten Commandments, they have an inbuilt knowledge of God's Law in their hearts and know they are being disobedient to it and will be judged for that. As Calvin said, "The stupefaction of men is never so complete as to prevent them from being dragged occasionally before the judgment seat. The conviction that there is some deity still persists."

## CHANGING OUR STORIES WITH GOD'S STORY

**Christians**, you have two great assets when you bring God's Word to "atheists." They already have God's Word through creation and conscience. The perfect supernatural revelation of God in the Bible comes to those who have already received the natural revelation of God through their imperfect senses and imperfect consciences.

**Atheists**, whatever you say, I can say, on the authority of God's Word, that you know there is a God. Every time you are awed by creation, you are hearing God's voice. Every time you feel pain in your conscience, you are hearing God's voice. God is calling out to you in great mercy.

ATHEISTS BELIEVE IN GOD BUT  
GOD DOES NOT BELIEVE IN ATHEISTS



What do atheists know about God?  
Is it little or much?



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## 2. ATHEISTS HEAR GOD

If God communicates to atheists through the creation and through conscience, what's the content of his message and what do atheists know about God?

- **The Existence of God.** Atheists know that God is, that he exists. The reality of his existence is chiseled on their minds no matter how angrily they deny it. This is obviously implied in verses 18-32 but also made explicit in verse 21: "For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God..."
- **The Anger of God.** "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men" (18). Atheists know that God is justly angry with them for their sins (18).
- **The Eternity of God.** They know that God had no beginning and will have no end. "For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world" (20)
- **The Power of God.** As verse 20 above asserts, atheists also have an eerie sense of God's enormous and eternal power (20).
- **The Deity of God.** Verse 20 also teaches that they know God is a different being entirely to themselves. He has a divine nature and therefore is not simply slightly bigger and better than them, but wholly other, different, separate, transcendent.
- **The Judgment of God.** "...they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die" (32). Not only do they have a moral sense of right and wrong but they also know they will be judged by God's standard and condemned to death by it.
- Other verses in the Bible give us further information about what everyone knows about God. They know **God is good** (Acts 14:17) and **God is glorious** (Ps. 19:1-3).

### CHANGING OUR STORIES WITH GOD'S STORY

**Christian,** do you see how encouraging this is as you seek opportunities to witness. You are not starting with a blank sheet of paper. To use a computer analogy, everyone has gigabytes of theology already stored inside.

**Atheist,** what are you doing with this knowledge? General revelation through creation and conscience is a great gift of God that invites you to know God far deeper and savingly in his special revelation, his Word. You cannot know the salvation of God without the Word of God.

NO ONE IS AN ATHEIST  
EVERYONE'S A THEOLOGIAN



So why are there still so many atheists?  
What are they doing with all this knowledge of God?



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### 3. ATHEISTS REJECT GOD

We've learned what atheists know about God and how they know it. What then do they do with that knowledge? Through creation and conscience, God has given a clear, real, and large revelation of himself: "God has made it plain to them" (19). There has also been a clear, real, and large reception of that knowledge: his divine characteristics "have been clearly perceived" (20). God has communicated clearly and the message has been clearly received. The problem is not with the divine broadcast or with the human reception. The problem is what people do with that knowledge.

To use an illustration, it's like a TV broadcast that is clearly transmitted from the satellite, and clearly received by the aerial, but then the viewers do everything they can to not see or hear the program.

- **They suppress the signal:** "...by their unrighteousness [they] suppress the truth" (18). They try to turn down the volume and stifle the signal with their ungodly lives" (18)
- **They change the channel:** They "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things" (23). "They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (25). They know they were made by God to worship him, but they exchange the true worship of God with the false worship of what God made. They try to convince themselves that this is a fair and appropriate exchange.
- **They try to switch off the TV:** "And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God" (28). Literally translated, this is telling us that they decided not to retain God in their knowledge. They simply denied his signals existed. They deliberately pushed all thought of God out of their minds.
- **They try to drown out the volume.** When they failed to turn the volume of the signal down they tried to drown it out with immoral and sinful lives (29-31).

Yet, despite all these attempts, they still know, they really know the judgment of God is a major moral and spiritual problem (32).

#### CHANGING OUR STORIES WITH GOD'S STORY

**Christian,** do you see how much you need the Holy Spirit. You needed natural revelation and supernatural revelation to be saved, but you also needed the Holy Spirit to open your eyes and heart. Likewise, when you are witnessing, you need the Holy Spirit so much for anyone to stop rejecting the knowledge of God and start accepting it by faith.

**Atheists,** do you recognize yourself here. Do you see how evil it is to reject God's knowledge in this way. You have no excuse for your "atheism" (20), you are only adding to your judgment, and you know it (32).

THE PROBLEM IS NOT THE COMMUNICATOR  
THE PROBLEM IS THE VIEWER



If that's how "atheists" respond to God,  
how does God respond to "atheists"?



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## 4. GOD GIVES ATHEISTS OVER

We've learned how atheists know, what they know, and what they do with that knowledge. What then does God do with atheists who respond to his truth by rejecting and denying it in various ways?

**"Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves" (24).**

**"For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; 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." (26-27).**

**"God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness..." (28-29).**

- God judges people for rejecting the knowledge they have about him and creating their own gods (23, 25).
- God's judgment involves giving people over to sin, especially the sin of homosexual lust and practice (26-27).
- God's judgment is understood by the judged (32).
- God's judgment does not save them but rather hardens them not only to continue in sin but promote it (32).

NB. This is not an explanation for all homosexuality, all same-sex attraction. That can be part of our fallen nature and even continue to be a battle for Christians. It is describing the kind of militant, out and proud, homosexuality that we see so much of today.

### CHANGING OUR STORIES WITH GOD'S STORY

**Christian**, here's God's interpretation of our culture. It's not that God will judge our culture for its perversion of sex (he will), but he already has. His judgment is the widespread aggressive practice and promotion of perversion.

**Atheist**, do you see how dangerous your position is? God has given you so much knowledge of him, you have given it up, and therefore God threatens to give you up to your own choices in a sinful and perverse lifestyle. Do you see how foolish this is? Atheism is not sophisticated but stupid (21-22).

IF YOU GIVE GOD UP  
GOD MAY GIVE YOU OVER



Hear God's Story > Change your story > Tell the story > Change others' stories



## SUMMARY



## A NEW CHAPTER

**Gospel.** No matter how full and clear natural revelation is, people need supernatural revelation to be saved. Conscience and creation is insufficient to save. Only the cross saves.

**Witness.** If the Gospel is a plug, know that God has already made a socket for it in every heart, no matter how much people try to cover it up.

**Atheists.** God does not believe in you, neither do I, and neither do you. You are a theist, but you are taking a terrible risk in your professed rejection of your Creator and your love of sin. God may judge you by giving you exactly what you want.

**Prayer.** perfect Communicator, thank you for all you have made known about yourself in creation and conscience. Help me to know you and make you known through the cross.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What's been your experience of relating to atheists in the past?
2. How will this sermon change the way you relate to atheists in the future?
3. Can you identify with any of this sermon in your own personal experience of atheism?
4. How might atheists react to this message and how could you help them receive it?
5. What does Paul teach about the connection between atheism, idolatry, and homosexuality?
6. What atheist will you speak to about the Gospel this week?

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