

Sin and human cognition of God

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Abstract

In this article I argue that the effects of sin for our cognition of God primarily consist in a lack of knowledge by acquaintance of God and the relevant ensuing propositional knowledge. In the course of my argument, I make several conceptual distinctions and offer analyses of 1 Cor 13:9–12 and Rom 1:18–23. As it turns out, we have ample reason to think that sin has had and still has profound consequences for our cognition of God, but there is no reason to think that sin has taken away all knowledge of God or that sin has resulted in a loss of specific cognitive faculties which are orientated towards knowledge of God.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to state what we should consider as the consequences of sin for our cognition of God. In other words, the goal is to spell out what sin has done and currently does to our thinking, our beliefs, disbeliefs, withholdings, knowledge, lack of knowledge and so forth concerning the triune God or, in some cases, more specifically the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. There might be many more cognitive consequences of sin; perhaps sin also affects our cognition of good and evil,¹ that of ourselves, that of other human beings, that of concrete material entities and that of all sorts of abstract immaterial entities. Here, however, I will confine myself to the noetic effects of sin for our cognition of God, leaving the treatment of these other cognitive consequences for another occasion.

That sin has (had) effects for human knowledge of God is something widely acknowledged in the tradition of the church. We find this view both in the writings of well-known theologians, such as Thomas Aquinas,² and official church documents, such as the Canons of Dordrecht.³ An account of what these noetic effects precisely amount to, however, is hard to find. Given that knowing God is in some sense of the word the primary goal of

¹ For more on the effects of sin upon our moral cognition, see Rik Peels, 'The effects of Sin Upon Human Moral Cognition', *Journal of Reformed Theology* 4/1 (2010), pp. 42–69.

² See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, vol. 1 (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1948), pp. 58, 478 (Ia, Q.13, art.12, Q.94, art.1).

³ See *Canons of Dordrecht III/IV*, arts. 1, 4.

our lives, as pointed out by Jesus himself (John 17:3), this topic deserves serious theological and philosophical consideration.

Twentieth-century systematic theology has paid some attention to the question of what should be counted as the cognitive consequences of sin. During the last few decades, however, this topic seems to have dropped out of favour among systematic theologians.⁴ The only good reason for this that I can think of is that there may seem something suspicious about the fact that in discussing the consequences of sin we have to employ the very same cognitive faculties which might have been contaminated and corrupted by sin.

This article is organised as follows. First, I will argue that this worry does not count against the project as such. Second, I will offer some terminological clarification by providing brief accounts of what I mean by 'sin', 'consequences of sin', 'knowledge' and 'cognition'. Third, I will discuss what 1 Corinthians 13:9–12, the passage that is most often appealed to in this context, tells us about the effects of sin for our cognition of God. Fourth, I will have a closer look at Romans 1, which speaks of some kind of natural knowledge of God that even the gentiles have and the way man deals with this knowledge. Fifth, I will inspect what the Bible has to say on what sin does to human knowledge of the incarnate Christ, the second person of the Trinity and the person of the Holy Spirit. There are more passages in the Bible that say or imply something about the effects of sin for our cognition of God, but by my estimate they do not say anything significantly different from the texts that I treat below. In the seventh section, the reader will find some conclusions.

Methodology

Before turning to more substantial issues, let me say something about the methodology that I employ. First, I will assume that the canonical books of the Bible are divinely inspired and authoritative (cf. 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:21). I will take it that the Bible contains divine revelation of things that without it we would not know (cf. Acts 17:11; Rom 15:4). Thus, I will do some biblical exegesis in this article, but it will be a narrow exegesis in the sense that I do not offer a full-blown exegesis of the text, but rather focus

⁴ As rightly noticed by Stephen K. Moroney, *The Noetic Effects of Sin: A Historical and Contemporary Exploration of How Sin Affects our Thinking* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000), p. 27, and Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 20. In contradistinction to Plantinga's comments on the noetic effects of sin, Moroney's study is primarily of a historical nature. It does critically evaluate the positions of some theologians, but it fails to offer a substantive independent exegetical and philosophical analysis of the cognitive consequences of sin, on the basis of which he could properly criticise these various views.

on those parts of it which seem to provide an answer to the question of what we should consider as the effects of sin for our cognition of God. Also, I will not take any official church document or writings of theologians to be authoritative. Here, I will defend neither of these claims, since I do not have the space to satisfactorily deal with these profound and highly disputed issues. All this does not mean that those who believe that God reveals himself in the tradition of the church cannot agree with the conclusions I draw. Rather, it means that there may be additional theses about the noetic effects of sin that they will be willing to defend.

Second, as I have already noted, there is something peculiar about the topic of this article: in order to find out the truth about the effects of sin for our noetic lives and especially in what sense and to what extent sin has damaged or even obliterated (some of) our cognitive faculties, we will have to exert those very same faculties. Does it not follow from this that the project is somehow incoherent or unworkable?⁵ Here, the idea seems to be that no human person and no human cognitive mechanism is exempt from the consequences of sin. And if sin has affected us, including our cognitive faculties, there is no reason to think that we can find the truth about the noetic effects of sin by employing those very same faculties.⁶

This line of reasoning seems unconvincing to me for at least three reasons. First, if our cognitive faculties have not been affected by sin, this may very well be something that we can find out in using our cognitive faculties. But even if they are damaged by sin, it does not follow that they function insufficiently to use them in spelling out the cognitive consequences of sin. Second, we employ our reasoning faculties in all academic disciplines. We even use them frequently in our daily life in drawing conclusions, in comparing ideas, etc. If our cognitive faculties are damaged to such an extent that we cannot use them in investigating the cognitive effects of sin, then why should we trust them when it comes to other issues in theology, when it comes to practices in other academic fields and when it comes to our everyday reasoning? However, we *do* – quite rationally, I would say – trust our noetic faculties in these fields, so there is no reason not to do so, at least not *prima facie*, when we scrutinise the noetic effects of sin. Third and finally,

⁵ For an argument along these lines, see J. de Boer, 'Reformed Epistemology: Three Replies', *The Reformed Journal* 32 (1982), pp. 24–5.

⁶ The option of rejecting the use of our reasoning faculties in favour of listening to God's revelation in the Bible is incoherent, as Thomas Reid rightly points out (see Thomas Reid, *Lectures on Natural Theology* (1780), ed. Elmer H. Duncan (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981), pp. 1–2), for both in interpreting the Bible and systematising its data about the main elements of Christian faith, we necessarily use our reasoning faculties.

as Stephen Moroney rightly points out, ‘the Word of God serves as a mirror which brings correction by showing us our sinful ways’.⁷ Thus, where we go astray, the Bible can correct our thoughts. Closely related to this is the fact that there seems to be such a thing as *noetic sanctification*: God is willing to restore his image in us, so that the functioning of at least some of our noetic faculties is partly repaired. In this way we can, for instance, acquire knowledge of God which otherwise we would not have (cf. Matt 11:27; 2 Cor 4:6; Col 1:9). Hence, there seems nothing incoherent or unworkable about the project of attempting to spell out the cognitive consequences of sin by using both biblical texts and our reasoning faculties.

Terminology

Now, let me offer some terminological clarification by briefly explaining what I mean by respectively (a) ‘sin’, (b) ‘consequences of sin’ and (c) ‘cognition’ and ‘knowledge’.

Sin

The word ‘sin’ can refer to at least two things which are closely related to each other.⁸ On the one hand, there seem to be *specific sins*, such as sinful words, desires, emotions and deeds, whether overt or concealed, whether individual (those of some particular human being) or collective (those of, say, a family or a nation). I think this kind of sin can be characterised as follows. First, it is something evil, something contrary to the will or word or law⁹ of God,¹⁰ something which is not the way it is supposed – supposed by God – to be, a deviation from divine laws or norms (thus also 1 John 3:4 and 1 John 5:17). Second, specific sins have agents as their subjects. This means that a natural evil, such as a devastating earthquake killing several thousands of people, although obviously something evil, is not a sin.¹¹

⁷ Moroney, *Noetic Effects of Sin*, p. 81.

⁸ For the distinction that I make here – that between sin as act and sin as condition – see also Eberhard Jüngel, *Das Evangelium von der Rechtfertigung des Gottlosen als Zentrum des christlichen Glaubens: Eine theologische Studie in ökumenischer Absicht* (Tübingen: Siebeck, 1999), pp. 78, 97, and Marguerite Shuster, *The Fall and Sin: What we Have Become as Sinners* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 102–27.

⁹ Cf. Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, part 3 (Kampen: Kok, 1998), pp. 121–2.

¹⁰ There are some biblical passages which deal with sin against other human beings rather than sin directly against God (see e.g. 1 Sam 2:25, Amos 1 and Matt 18:21). I will take it that there are indeed such things as sins against one’s fellow creatures, but that these sins are always somehow contrary to the will (norms, laws) of God – which is why they are genuine sins – and, therefore, offensive to God.

¹¹ Here, I will not go into the vexing issue of whether someone’s doing something which she believes is objectively sinful makes doing that thing a sin, whether or not it

On the other hand, there seems to be the more general situation of being sinful, being in a sinful state: *sin as condition*. Even if at some time a human being does not perform atrocious sins, she might have a strong inclination to perform those sins and her heart and mind may very well be directed towards evil (cf. Gen 8:21; Prov 20:9; Jer 17:9) or towards her own desires, instead of being directed towards God's will and, thereby, towards the good. According to the Bible, this is not only possibly but actually the case: the very hearts of human beings are corrupted by sin. In this sense, even if one does not continuously perform sinful acts, sin can be ubiquitous in one's life.¹² People's minds have become sinful (Rom 8:7). The apostle Paul even personifies sin (usually ἁμαρτία) by depicting it as our master and as an enslaving power to whom we are subjected (Rom 5:21; 6:12, 17, 19; 7:14).

In this article, I will not take a stance on the highly controversial issues of whether there has been a historical fall (*lapsus*) and whether there is such a thing as original sin (*peccatum originale*). Rather, I will investigate what we should consider as the cognitive consequences of sin, whether they issue from a temporally first human sin or not.

Consequences of sin

By 'consequences of sin' I mean roughly those actualised states of affairs that would not have been actualised if there had not been such a thing as sin (where I take it that there are negative states of affairs, such as, say, our not knowing that God exists).

Now, it seems that we can distinguish three different kinds of consequences of sin. Rather than attempting to define these three categories, I will for each category provide some examples of what have been claimed to be consequences of sin. First, sin may be taken to have certain *existential* consequences, such as our separation from God, the loss of paradisiacal life, having a strong and inborn inclination to do evil, the loss of free will in spiritual affairs, the mortality of our bodies and eternal death. Second, sin may be thought to have *affective* consequences. Thus, we often envy our neighbours and friends, we are inclined to hate God, we love ourselves more than our brothers and sisters and we are sometimes proud, egocentric and arrogant. Third and finally, sin may have had *cognitive* consequences:

is in fact contrary to the will of God. For this issue, see Richard Swinburne, 'Original Sinfulness', *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 27 (1985), p. 238, and Cornelius Jr. Plantinga, *Not the Way it's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 20.

¹² Cf. Robin C. Cover and E. P. Sanders, 'Sin, Sinners', in David N. Freedman et al. (eds), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 32–3.

we do not know God in the same way as we used to know him, people's knowledge of good and evil often seems to be distorted and we usually rate our own accomplishments much higher than those of others.¹³ As to the latter category, again, I do not claim that sin has these cognitive effects. I only want to point out that these are the kinds of effects of sin that I dub 'cognitive consequences'.

These three kinds of consequences are related to and intertwined with each other in several ways and it is, therefore, hard, if not impossible, to make clear-cut distinctions between them. The destruction of or the damage to the image of God (*imago Dei*), in which human beings were created, for instance, involves elements from all three categories and it seems difficult to state precisely in which category each of these elements belongs. However, one should be careful not to conclude from this that really there are no distinctions between them. It does not seem possible to clearly define when day turns into night and vice versa, or where precisely on the colour spectrum blue turns into purple or the other way around, but it would be mistaken to conclude from this that there are no such things as day and night, or blue and purple.

Cognition and knowledge

Cognitive consequences, obviously, concern our cognition. But what do we mean by 'cognition'? I think we can roughly define this term as follows: human cognition is the entirety of human beings' states of mind vis-à-vis the world, both the world inside and the world outside of them. States of mind are such things as what are called the three doxastic attitudes – beliefs, disbeliefs and withholdings – but also wishes, hopes, knowledge, ignorance, suspicions, doubts, understanding, etc. Many of these, such as doubts and beliefs, are often accompanied by certain emotions and others, such as wishes and hopes, perhaps always. Again, it does not follow from these relations that no distinction can be made between cognitive and affective consequences.

Now, as it seems to me, sin can affect our cognition in at least three different ways. First, sin can have done something (including complete obliteration) to our *cognitive faculties*. By a 'cognitive faculty' I mean a mental mechanism which has a certain input – beliefs, visual perception, bodily sensation etc. – and a doxastic output, that is, certain beliefs, disbeliefs or withholdings of both belief and disbelief. Thus, cognitive faculties are such

¹³ The distinction between affective and cognitive consequences of sin is also made by, for instance, René van Woudenberg, 'Over de noëtische gevolgen van de zonde: Een filosofische beschouwing', *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 52 (1998), p. 224, and Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 205.

things as one's belief producing faculties which are based on perception, one's grasp of what good and evil amount to, one's ability to know what is sinful and what is not, etc. In this way we might have lost certain cognitive faculties or our cognitive faculties might be damaged, so that false beliefs or morally wrong hopes are produced by them. Second, sin might have removed and perhaps still removes *specific knowledge*, or disbeliefs or ignorance. In this way we might have lost the belief that God exists, acquired knowledge by acquaintance of good and evil and perhaps even lost beliefs of which we, in our current fallen state, cannot conceive. Third, it might be that, because of certain affective consequences of sin, our noetic faculties are *directed* towards things which they should not be directed towards, or not directed towards things which they should be directed towards. And this might have significant consequences for the scope of our beliefs.

Now, one of the crucial concepts with regard to our cognition is 'knowledge'. I would think that everyone has some intuitive grasp of what it means for someone to have knowledge, a grasp sufficient for present purposes. What is of more importance in this context than an epistemologically precise definition of 'knowledge' is the distinction between three kinds of knowledge. First, there is such a thing as *propositional knowledge*, i.e. knowledge that some proposition *p* is true. Knowing that one's wife is in her office and that 88 is not a prime number belong to this class of knowledge. Many an epistemologist, though, would agree that, in addition to this one, two other categories of knowledge can be distinguished. First, there seems to be such a thing as *procedural knowledge*, knowledge of how to do something, how to perform some task. Here are a few examples: knowing how to drive a car, knowing how to open a wine bottle and knowing how to genuinely love someone else. Second, it looks as if there is such a thing as *knowledge by acquaintance*: knowing a certain object, whether personal or impersonal. In this way, one can know the triune God, but also one's spouse and the taste of pomegranates. In discussing the cognitive consequences of sin, it is important to keep these different kinds of knowledge in mind.¹⁴

¹⁴ One may object that this distinction cannot properly be applied to the biblical concept of knowledge, since the biblical concept of knowledge is much more relational than our modern, purely mental concept of knowledge. I think this objection is mistaken: in the Bible, we clearly find instances of propositional knowledge (e.g. Deut 4:35; Ps 135:5; Luke 21:20; Rev 3:17), knowledge by acquaintance (e.g. Exod 1:8; Jer 15:14; John 4:10; 2 Cor 12:2) and procedural or practical knowledge (e.g. Gen 25:27, 1 Sam 16:18; Isa 29:1; Jer 1:6).

Knowing in part

The first biblical passage which seems relevant for understanding the consequences of sin for our cognition of God is 1 Corinthians 13:12. This verse, together with the three verses which precede it, runs as follows:

For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.¹⁵

This passage has often been understood as telling us something about our current knowledge of God which, due to sin, is incomplete and obscured, and about the future perfection of it. This seems basically correct to me. Let me explain why.

First, this text speaks of our current state. This state is characterised as something imperfect, something incomplete, something that is only part of a whole (τὸ ἐκ μέρους).¹⁶ As we will see below, this contemporary incomplete state is contrasted with the future eschaton, which provides us with a fullness of knowledge.

Second, in our current sinful state, our knowing (γινώσκωμεν) is only in part (also ἐκ μέρους). The latter expression is used analogously with ἀνὰ μέρος and κατὰ μέρος: 'to some extent', 'partial'. We see by means of a mirror (δι' ἔσόπτρου) in a puzzle, riddle, enigma (ἐν αἰνίγματι; *hapax legomenon*). The image of a mirror is clearly used negatively: there is something imperfect or deficient about our current knowledge.¹⁷ It has been contended that Paul uses the image of a mirror (ἔσοπτρον) here because in the ancient Middle East mirrors were made of polished metal and, therefore, defective and poor.¹⁸ This observation about the material that mirrors were made of is

¹⁵ All Bible quotations will be from the New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000).

¹⁶ For similar uses of μέρος, see e.g. Rom 11:25 (ἀπὸ μέρους), 1 Cor 11:18 (μέρος, 'partly', 'to some extent'), 12:27 (ἐκ μέρους) and 2 Cor 1:14 (ἐπέγνωτε (...) ἀπὸ μέρους).

¹⁷ Thus also David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), p. 624.

¹⁸ Thus e.g. Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1978), p. 298.

correct, but that does not seem to be the point of the text.¹⁹ Corinth was known for its production of high-quality bronze mirrors. Also, we may suppose that people frequently looked at their face in a mirror, apparently considering their mirrors to be of sufficient value (cf. Jas 1:23). Rather, Paul's point seems to be that our current knowledge is *mediate*, *indirect*, as one's image in a mirror is only a reflection of reality.²⁰ It may well be that here Paul alludes to Numbers 12:6–8a²¹ which reads:

When a prophet of the LORD is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD.

Here, 'in visions' (LXX: ἐν ὁράματι), 'in dreams' (LXX: ἐν ὕπνῳ) and 'in riddles' (LXX: δι' αἰνιγμάτων) on the one hand is contrasted with 'face to face' (LXX: ἀτόμα κατὰ) and 'clearly' (LXX: ἐν εἶδει) on the other. Our current knowledge is deficient, because we see a reflection of divine reality rather than divine reality itself.

Third, this text speaks of the future, perfect state after the parousia of Christ. According to verse 8, love never collapses nor falls apart (πίπτει). The latter word is synonymous with καταργηθήσεται in 13:8, 10, κατήργηκα in 13:11 and with παύσονται in 13:8. It finds its opposite in μένει in 13:13. In the first letter to the Corinthians, future tenses of the verb καταργεῖν are used in reference to the eschatological second coming of Jesus Christ (see also 2:6, 6:13 and especially 15:24, 26). Here, faith, hope and most importantly love, as gifts which will remain in the future perfect state, are contrasted with the spiritual gifts treated in chapter 12, such as prophecy, knowledge and speaking in tongues. The latter will pass away and will not get perfected; they will cease at the eschaton. When perfection (τέλειον)

¹⁹ As is noticed by Christophe Senft, *La première épître de Saint-Paul aux Corinthiens*, Commentaire du Nouveau Testament (Paris: Delachaux & Niestlé éditeurs, 1979), p. 171.

²⁰ This view is defended by Hans Conzelmann, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther*, Meyers Kritisch-Exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969), p. 269. As Schrage says, '[d]as menschliche ἐπιγινώσκειν wird dem göttlichen entsprechen, insofern es ein ganz von der Liebe geprägtes und nicht mehr durch Vermittlung gebrochenes Erkennen und Anerkennen sein wird' (Wolfgang Schrage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther*, vol. 3, Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament (Zürich: Benziger Verlag, 1999), p. 315).

²¹ Thus also e.g. Jacob Kremer, *Der Erste Brief an die Korinther*, Regensburger Neues Testament (Regensburg: Pustet, 1997), p. 290, Schrage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther*, p. 313, and Helmut Merklein and Marlis Gielen, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther. Kapitel 11,2–16,24*, Ökumenischer Taschenbuchkommentar zum Neuen Testament (Güthersloh: Güthersloher Verlagshaus, 2005), p. 159.

comes, the imperfect, that which is partial (τὸ ἐκ μέρους) will disappear. From the context we can conclude that τέλειον refers to the situation of Jesus' parousia in glory, the age to come, the consummation of all things.²² The word τέλειον indicates that our current state is not only incomplete, but also sinful, deficient (cf. the use of τέλειον in Rom 12:2; 1 Cor 2:6, 14:20; Eph 4:13; Phil 3:15; Col 1:28). Hence, the fact that we know only in part is not merely due to the finiteness of creation, but (also) to sin.

Fourth, in this future eschatological state – notice the repeated δέ contrasted with the situation as it is just now, ἄρτι – we will see face to face (πρόσωπον πρὸς πρόσωπον).²³ The Hebraistic expression πρόσωπον πρὸς πρόσωπον can also be found in, for instance, LXX Genesis 32:30 and Deuteronomy 34:10. All such texts testify to a personal, intimate relationship of some person (Jacob, Moses, etc.) with God. In the eschaton we will know fully (ἐπιγνώσομαι), in the same way as we, in our current state, are fully known (ἐπεγνώσθην) by God (for the use of ἐπιγινώσκειν, see also Rom 1:32, 8:29 and 2 Cor 6:9). But, what precisely is the object of this knowledge? I think there is good reason to think that the primary object of this knowledge is God.²⁴ First, elsewhere in the Pauline letters, there is also a strong relation between loving or knowing God and being loved and known – as *passivum divinum* – by God (cf. 1 Cor 8:3; Gal 4:9). Second, the expression πρόσωπον πρὸς πρόσωπον is always used in relation to some kind of interpersonal knowledge rather than knowledge of a non-personal object. Third, the full eschatological knowledge we will have is contrasted with our current deficient knowledge in the context of our current spiritual

²² Thus, for instance, F. J. Pop, *De eerste brief van Paulus aan de Corinthiërs*, De Prediking van het Nieuwe Testament (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1965), pp. 310–11; Conzelmann, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther*, p. 267; Robertson and Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*, p. 297; Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 1065; and Garland, *1 Corinthians*, pp. 622–3. On the basis of the use of ἐν τοῖς τελείοις in 2:6 and τέλειοι in 14:20, it has been argued that the perfect state is not some future eschatological state, but a state of having become mature in one's faith. The context, however, clearly excludes such a reading of vv. 9–12. It is not Paul's intention to say that the use of χαρίσματα is limited to an immature Christian life (for one, this would clearly contradict 12:31, where Paul urges his readers to desire certain of these gifts).

²³ Cf. Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, pp. 1069–70: 'The quasimechanical attempt to put together fragments or parts of knowledge derived indirectly from various sources and experiences stands in utter contrast to the perfection of uninterrupted personal intimacy with God (implied by the passive) which is πρόσωπον πρὸς πρόσωπον, face to face, following the continuous βλέπομεν, we are seeing'.

²⁴ This seems to be presupposed by Garland, *1 Corinthians*, p. 625.

gifts: knowledge, speaking in tongues and prophecy. All three of these gifts have primarily to do with (the will of) God.

Let me say a few things in conclusion with regard to 1 Corinthians 13:9–12. First, Paul does not reject our current cognition of God as false or without value, although, as he clearly acknowledges, it is cognition in a sinful and deficient state. Our knowledge is incomplete and fragmentary, but not inadequate or worthless.²⁵ This is also why knowledge can be considered to be a divine gift (see, for instance, 13:2). Second, as is indicated by the use of words such as τέλειον for the future eschatological perfection of our knowledge, our current lack of knowledge is due to our sinful state rather than our inherent cognitive limitations as creatures of an infinite God. As is suggested by phrasings such as πρόσωπον πρὸς πρόσωπον, the fact that our knowledge is seriously incomplete has to do with our separation from God, something which is widely considered as one of the main existential consequences of sin. Thus, sin causes some kind of gap in the range of our knowledge of God. More precisely, it seems to be not so much or not only a lack of propositional knowledge, but (rather) of knowledge by acquaintance: we are not directly acquainted with God.²⁶ All we know of him, we know by way of divine revelation via divine gifts (and, perhaps, scriptural revelation as well); it is merely mediate knowledge. This does not imply that our cognitive faculties have been distorted or that the direction of our thinking is seriously wanting or the contrary. Rather, our alienation from God means that we lack certain true beliefs about God and a familiarity with him. Finally, all this seems to be a consequence of our sinful state or condition rather than particular sinful acts: it is part and parcel of our current *condition humaine*.

Natural knowledge of God

Let us now turn to a crucial and highly debated passage in the letter of the apostle Paul to the Romans. After a few preliminary remarks on his longing

²⁵ As is rightly argued by C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Black's New Testament Commentaries (London: Black, 1968), pp. 306–7. According to Robertson and Plummer, Butler has shown that complete knowledge even of a 'part' of God is impossible, but it is not clear what this is supposed to mean and any serious substantiation of this claim is absent (cf. Robertson and Plummer, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the 1 Corinthians*, p. 297). Also, there is no good reason – at least not on the basis of what Paul says in 1 Cor 13:9–12 – to think that our incomplete knowledge is due to 'the distorting medium of human thought and human language, figures, types, symbols, etc' (ibid., p. 299). Rather, it is due to the effects of sin, especially the consequence of being separated from God, of not being able to talk with him face to face.

²⁶ This is rightly noticed by Van Woudenberg, 'Over de noëtische gevolgen van de zonde', p. 231.

to visit Rome and the introduction of the main theme of the letter, namely God's plan of salvation and righteousness for all humankind, he says the following (1:18–23):

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For 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. 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. 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.²⁷

In these verses Paul commences by saying that God's wrath (ὀργή θεοῦ) has been revealed (ἀποκαλύπτεται) to men (ἄνθρωπων). As Schreiner convincingly argues, the object of Paul's polemic in verses 18–32 is the gentiles.²⁸ The wrath of God is a common theme in the letters of Paul, especially in his letter to the Romans, and indicates God's righteous anger about and punishment of the trespasses (here: godlessness and wickedness) of wrongdoers, in a phrase God's judging righteousness.²⁹ This divine wrath is made known to humans as a response to the fact that they suppress the truth (τὴν ἀλήθειαν κατεχόντων) that God has made plain (has shown, has brought to light, has made manifest; ἐφανερώσεν),³⁰ to them (ἐνανυτοῖς). As will turn out in verses 24–32, God's wrath is manifested in their very moral degradation and wickedness itself.

Next, Paul explains what this truth (ἀλήθεια) amounts to and how this truth has been made plain to humankind. The truth is who God really is:³¹ a

²⁷ A similar thought can be found in v. 25: 'They exchanged the truth of God (τὴν ἀλήθειαν τοῦ θεοῦ) for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is forever praised. Amen.'

²⁸ This is especially suggested by the mention of an overt form of idolatry and perverted homosexual relations. Cf. Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), p. 81.

²⁹ Thus also Schreiner, *Romans*, p. 78. The same concept of ὀργή θεοῦ can be found elsewhere in the same letter: 2:5, 8, 3:5, 4:15, 5:9, 9:22, 12:19, 13:4, 5.

³⁰ φανερώω has a strong meaning: it indicates that there is some kind of obviousness, of clear demonstration, almost of proof (cf. for instance, the use of φανερώω in 1 Cor 4:5, 2 Cor 5:11, Eph 5:13 and 2 Tim 1:10).

³¹ Thus also Robert Jewett, *Romans*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), p. 153.

transcendent being with invisible qualities (ἀόρατα), such as eternal power (ἀίδιος αὐτοῦ δύναμις), a divine nature (θειότης) and immortality (τοῦ ἀφθάρτου θεοῦ; v. 23), properties clearly opposite to those of the human-like or animal-like gods named in verse 23.³² It belongs to this truth that this being ought to be honoured and worshipped (cf. v. 25). This truth is known by way of those things that have been made (τοῖς ποιήμασιν) by God, that is, the created order,³³ from the very creation of the cosmos (ἀπὸ κτίσεως κόσμου). This truth, however, is not just known, but clearly seen (καθορᾶται) and understood (νοούμενα). καθοράω is a *hapax legomenon*, but νοέω occurs elsewhere in the Pauline writings, with the following shades of meaning: ‘to grasp’ or ‘to understand’ (Eph 3:4), ‘to know’ (1 Tim 1:7) and ‘to reflect’ (2 Tim 2:7).³⁴ In this context, one should realise that νοῦς is not merely an intellectual faculty, but man’s deep, inner self-consciousness.³⁵ Hence, it is clear from what Paul says that the pagans have, or at least had, a fair amount of knowledge of God and that, as a result of sin, this knowledge has been suppressed.

This is why humans cannot excuse themselves: it is against their best judgement that they do not glorify and give thanks to God, for they know God (γνόντες τὸν θεόν). We should not ignore the expression γινώσκειν τὸν θεόν³⁶: it simply says that pagans know, or at least knew, God.³⁷ This,

³² It is remarkable that Paul speaks of τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ. The genitive τοῦ θεοῦ has sometimes been interpreted as a *genitivus partitivus*, intimating that not everything of God can be known by human beings. For the widely shared interpretation of τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ as ‘God in his knowability’, see Ulrich Wilckens, *Der Brief an die Römer*, vol. 1, *Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament* (Cologne: Benziger Verlag, 1987), pp. 105–6; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1988), p. 56, and Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, *The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), p. 279.

³³ Contrary to what Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Römer*, *Meyers Kritisch-Exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), pp. 99, 100, contends, expressions such as τοῖς ποιήμασιν and καθοράω suggest that the knowledge of God is obtained on the basis of nature, as in Ps 8:6 and 102:25, rather than God’s creative acts or God’s salutary deeds in history (cf. Herman Ridderbos, *Aan de Romeinen*, *Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament* (Kampen: Kok, 1959), pp. 43–4, and Schlier, *Der Römerbrief*, p. 52). See also αὐτοῦ γὰρ ἔσμεν ποιήμα in Eph 2:10.

³⁴ By ‘Pauline letters’ I mean letters in which the authorship is ascribed to Paul. It might be that the pastoral letters are pseudepigraphic. Even if they have not been written by Paul, however, it is clear that the language used in the letters which have genuinely been written by Paul has a strong affinity with that in the pastoral letters.

³⁵ Cf. Ridderbos, *Aan de Romeinen*, pp. 42–3.

³⁶ As is rightly noticed by Michel, *Der Brief an die Römer*, p. 101.

³⁷ Cf. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, p. 273 (see also p. 274, where he expounds on natural theology), and Jakob van Bruggen, *Romeinen: Christenen tussen stad en synagoge*, *Commentaar op het*

however, raises the question of how this verse relates to other verses in the Pauline letters, in which he denies that the heathens know God, passages such as Galatians 4:8, 9, Ephesians 4:18 and 1 Thessalonians 4:5.³⁸ My reply is that Paul uses the verb equivocally. In the latter instances, he employs *γινώσκειν* in the strong sense of having a personal, intimate relationship with God, having experiential knowledge or knowledge by acquaintance of God and living in thankful response to God. In Rom 1:21, *γινώσκειν* is used synonymously with *ἐν ἐπιγνώσει ἔχειν* in 1:28. Both expressions are used in a weak sense: knowing that God exists, or, if you want, merely having propositional knowledge that there is such a being as God and that he exemplifies certain properties, such as his being divine and powerful.³⁹

Instead of using this knowledge to honour God and get to know him better, the gentiles have honoured manmade gods (cf. Ps 106:20 and Jer 2:11). The reason for all this, so Paul seems to contend, is sin or, more precisely, the foundational sins of godlessness (*ἀσέβειαν*; v. 18) and injustice, lawlessness, wickedness (*ἀδικίαν, ἀδικίᾳ*; v. 18). This not giving due honour to God is accompanied by their foolish hearts being darkened.⁴⁰ Someone's heart (*καρδιά*) is the source of one's thoughts and considerations (cf. Matt 15:19; Mark 7:21; Luke 2:19, 35, 5:22; 1 Cor 4:5), one's desires and longings (Matt 6:21; Rom 10:1), one's character (Matt 11:29; Luke 1:51) and one's emotions (Matt 15:8; John 16:6; Acts 7:54; 2 Cor 7:3). It is the centre of one's life, especially *coram Deo* (Matt 5:8; Mark 8:17; Acts 4:32; 16:14; 1 Cor 14:25; Rev 17:17).⁴¹ Paul goes on to say that the gentiles

Nieuwe Testament (Kampen: Kok, 2006), pp. 252–3. Dieter Zeller, *Der Brief an die Römer*, Regensburger Neues Testament (Regensburg: Pustet, 1985), p. 56, does not do full justice to this fact.

³⁸ For a discussion of this issue, see A. F. N. Lekkerkerker, *De Brief van Paulus aan de Romeinen I*, *De Prediking van het Nieuwe Testament* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1962), pp. 67–70. He may be right that *γινόντες τὸν θεὸν* refers to an indissoluble relation between a creature and its Creator, but, obviously, this cannot be the whole story: the wording implies that the creature in question somehow *has knowledge* of her Creator.

³⁹ The same idea is expressed by Fitzmyer, *Romans*, p. 281: 'What is denied in these passages (Rom 1 and Eph 1; author) is the real, affective knowledge of God that includes love, praise, reverence, and thanksgiving. In this quasi-philosophical discussion the word *gnontes* connotes an inceptive, theoretical sort of information about God, which Paul thinks that pagans could not help but have.'

⁴⁰ The moral consequences of rejecting God in the form of the moral desolation of human society is sketched in vv. 23–4.

⁴¹ Cf. Schlier, *Der Römerbrief*, p. 56, and William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, *The International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1980), pp. 44–5. The human heart is an open book to God (cf. Rom 8:27 and 1 Thes 2:4).

have become futile in their thoughts or reasonings (ἐματαιώθησαν ἐν τοῖς διαλογισμοῖς) and that they have become fools (ἐμωφάνθησαν),⁴² although they profess to be wise (φάσκοντες εἶναι σοφοί). They have become futile in their thoughts in the sense that their thinking adulterates and distorts their perception of divine reality.⁴³

The same ideas can be found in verse 28: 'Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God (τὸν θεὸν ἔχειν ἐν ἐπιγνώσει), he gave them over to a depraved mind (ἄδόκιμον νοῦν), to do what ought not to be done.' That ἐπιγνώσις means 'recognition' or 'full knowledge'⁴⁴ is clear from passages elsewhere in the New Testament (Rom 3:20, 10:2; Eph 1:17, 4:13; Phil 1:9; Col 1:9, 3:10; 1 Tim 2:4; Phlm 6; 2 Pet 1:2, 3, 8, 2:20). Their mind is ἄδόκιμος ('disqualified': 1 Cor 9:27; Heb 6:8; 'to have failed the test': 2 Cor 13:5), the opposite of δόκιμος ('to have stood the test': 2 Cor 13:7, Jas 1:12; 'approved': Rom 14:18, 16:10, 1 Cor 11:19, 2 Cor 10:18, 13:7, 2 Tim 2:15). For ἄδόκιμος, see also 2 Timothy 3:8: 'Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these men oppose the truth – men of depraved minds (κατεφθαρμένοι τὸν νοῦν), who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected (ἄδόκιμοι)' and Titus 1:16: 'They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit (ἄδόκιμοι) for doing anything good'. As we saw, the word νοῦς refers to someone's inner self-consciousness; it is by one's νοῦς that humans can know God.⁴⁵

Now, there has been a prolonged debate in history about the nature of the knowledge of God that human beings can obtain on the basis of general revelation.⁴⁶ Here, I will not dive into these deep and murky waters. The only thing we should notice is that Paul says that sinful human beings, on the basis of nature, acquire knowledge of God, not that they acquire knowledge of God's love and mercy (nor that they do not).⁴⁷ Hence, Paul does not assert that this knowledge is or can be salvific, nor that it is not or cannot be.

⁴² It is interesting that apart from 'to become foolish' or 'to make foolish' (see also 1 Cor 1:20), μωραίνω can mean 'to lose what is characteristic for something', e.g. in the case of salt's losing its saltiness (cf. Matt 5:13 and Luke 14:34). The Hellenistic claim to wisdom and its being foolishness in the eyes of God is a recurring theme in Paul's preaching.

⁴³ In LXX μάταιος is often the translation of the Hebrew מָהֵן (for instance in MT Ps 94:11, LXX: Ps 93:11).

⁴⁴ Cf. Sanday and Headlam, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Romans*, p. 46.

⁴⁵ Cf. Ridderbos, *Aan de Romeinen*, pp. 42–3.

⁴⁶ See, for instance, Heinrich Heppe, *Die Dogmatik der evangelisch-reformierten Kirche*, ed. Ernst Bizer (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1958), pp. 1, 38, 44, 259.

⁴⁷ Thus also Schreiner, *Romans*, p. 86.

Another and closely related debate has been on the question of whether this knowledge of God is obtained by means of a complex process of reasoning or, rather, by instinctive recognition upon observing the world.⁴⁸ The text does not explicitly mention one of these options, but the latter reading seems to me to be the most plausible one. However, nothing of what I say hinges on one of these two issues.

As I see it, we can draw at least two conclusions from this passage. First, human beings can acquire knowledge of the one true God and certain of his properties, such as his being immortal, on the basis of God's general revelation in nature. Even stronger: they do have or have had this knowledge (cf. φανερόν in Rom 1:19). Paul's wording suggests that this is the case ever since the beginning of the world, that is, the creation of the cosmos. And there is no reason to think that this is the case merely because of a presumed divine grace which restores the functioning of human beings' cognitive mechanisms. Hence, no matter how seriously the epistemic faculties of human beings have been and are damaged by sin, they still function sufficiently according to their design plan to produce (true) belief in God and certain of his properties, such as his omnipotence.

This idea is confirmed by other verses in the Bible, such as Psalm 19:1, where David says that the heavens declare (מְסַפְּרִים) the glory of God and that the skies proclaim the work of his hands (מַעֲשֵׂה יְדָיו מְגִיד הַרְקִיעַ). They even display knowledge (יְחִיָּה־דַעַת; v. 2). Another example is Acts 14. When Paul and Barnabas have healed a lame man in Lystra, its inhabitants mistake them for Hermes and Zeus. When the apostles try to sort out the chaos, they say that in the past the God who made heaven and earth let all nations go their own way, but that yet he did not leave himself without testimony (καίτοι οὐκ ἀμάρτυρον αὐτὸν; v. 17). As is clear from other texts in the Pauline writings this means that God has revealed himself, that he has not remained silent, but that he has spoken in his works and deeds, as experienced by the heathens,⁴⁹ whether they have recognised it as such or not. Subsequently, they talk about the rain from heaven, the crops in their seasons and so on.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ For this discussion see, for instance, Schlier, *Der Römerbrief*, p. 54. For the latter interpretation, see Sanday and Headlam, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Romans*, p. 43.

⁴⁹ See Paul's use of μαρτυρεῖν in Rom 3:21, 10:2, 1 Cor 15:15, 2 Cor 8:3, Gal 4:15 and 1 Tim 6:13.

⁵⁰ The idea that God has revealed himself in nature and that man, albeit infected by sin, on that basis is able to acquire some kind of limited knowledge of him, has clearly found its way into several confessions and other church documents. One of the most well-known of these is art. 2 of the Belgic Confession: 'We know him (God; author) by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe,

Thus, in our sinful state our cognitive faculties still function sufficiently to produce certain true beliefs about God on the basis of his revelation in nature.

Second, as a consequence of sin, many human beings suppress this knowledge, that is, they forget, deliberately ignore, distort or deny this knowledge and create their own gods. One might wonder how precisely they are supposed to do such a thing, but I will not and need not go into that difficult issue here. Their knowledge of God, so the text suggests, remains negligible and completely unused.⁵¹ Their suppression of the truth, so it seems, is at least partly voluntary. Thus, their lack of knowledge of God is at least partly due to particular sinful acts, primarily that of suppressing the truth. In this way humans become vain in their reasonings and they acquire all sorts of utterly false beliefs about idols, such as the belief that they can help them and that they are to be worshipped. The same line of thought can be found in Acts 14:15, 17:30 and Colossians 1:21.⁵² Thus, it is a consequence of sin that humans lose true beliefs about God, fail to acquire knowledge by acquaintance with him and acquire all sorts of false beliefs about idols which are created in order to replace the one true God.

Cognition of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit

As we have seen, sin has important consequences for our knowledge of God (the Father), his will, his glory, etc. But, as one might expect, given the fact that God is triune, sin also has effects on our knowledge of the Son and the Holy Spirit. This is especially true of the incarnate Christ's advent on earth, the recognition of him as being the only begotten Son of God and accepting his testimony concerning the Father and our salvation. This is underscored by the following texts: 'The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness

since that universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God: his eternal power and his divinity, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20. All these things are enough to convict men and to leave them without excuse. . . .'

⁵¹ In this context C.K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Black's New Testament Commentaries (London: Black, 1957), p. 37, rightly speaks of 'culpable ignorance'. This is why humans are without excuse if they do not believe in God (cf. Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 106).

⁵² Cf. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp. 214–15: 'Our original knowledge of God and his glory is muffled and impaired; it has been replaced (by virtue of sin) by stupidity, dullness, blindness, inability to perceive God or to perceive him in his handiwork. Our knowledge of his character and his love toward us can be smothered: it can even be transformed into a resentful thought that God is to be feared and mistrusted; we may see him as indifferent or even malignant.'

has not understood/grasped (κατέλαβεν⁵³) it' (John 1:5), 'He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise/know (οὐκ ἔγνω) him' (John 1:10), 'He (Jesus Christ, author) testifies to (μαρτυρεῖ) what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts (λαμβάνει) his testimony' (John 3:32). Here, the idea seems to be that as a consequence of sin (notice the word 'darkness'), people do not truly know who he is, they do not recognise him as the Son of God and they do not attach credence to his words.

Jesus frequently says that the Jews do not believe him (see, for instance, John 10:25). The same idea is developed in the letters of Paul. In 2 Corinthians 3:14 he says of the Jews: 'But their minds (τὰ νοήματα) were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away' and a bit further on (in 2 Cor 4:4), he states that the god of this age⁵⁴ (era), that is, the devil, has blinded the minds or thoughts (τὰ νοήματα) of those who do not believe in God, so that they cannot see (αὐγάσαι) the light of Christ's gospel (cf. 1 Jn 5:10). The latter idea is, I think, not to be taken literally – which would mean that God allows Satan to corrupt certain human noetic faculties – but rather as saying that it is due to sin that unbelievers do not believe in God and do not accept the gospel of his Son Jesus Christ. The Jews are unwilling to see that Christ is the Messiah and unbelievers are not convinced by the gospel (see also 1 Cor 1:18, 23).

What about cognition of the Holy Spirit? Here, texts are much sparser, but not completely absent either. The general idea in the Bible seems to be that because of sin we do not know who the Holy Spirit is and do not accept his testimony. Let me offer two illustrations of this idea. First, in John 14:16–17 Jesus says: 'And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept (λαβεῖν, as above) him, because it neither sees (θεωρεῖ) him nor knows (γινώσκει) him. But you know (γινώσκετε) him, for he lives with you and will be in you.' The world, that is those who do not believe in God, cannot accept the Holy Spirit, i.e. invite the Spirit and his testimony in their hearts, since they are not acquainted with him. This is not due to their finiteness as creatures, since the apostles *do* know him, although they are just as finite as others. Apparently, that some do not know the Holy Spirit is due to sin. Second, Acts 19:1b–2 reads: 'There he (Paul; author) found

⁵³ For this use of καταλαμβάνω, cf. Eph 3:17b-18: 'And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp (καταλάβεσθαι) how wide and long and high and deep is the love of God.'

⁵⁴ For similar 'titles', see Eph 2:2, John 12:31, 16:11.

some disciples and asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” They answered, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit”. Here we find people who do believe in God, but have no idea that there is such a person as the Holy Spirit. In both cases, I am inclined to say, the failure to know the Holy Spirit, which, again, implies a privation of both propositional knowledge and knowledge by acquaintance, is due to the profound existential separation from God from which the people in question suffer. If they had lived closer to God, they would have known and experienced the working of the Holy Spirit, as in the case of Jesus’ disciples. And something similar applies to the testimony of the Holy Spirit: ‘The man without the Spirit does not accept (δέχεται) the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness (μωρία) to him, and he cannot understand (γινῶναι) them, because they are spiritually discerned (πνευματικῶς ἀνακρίνεται)’ (1 Cor 2:14).

Conclusion

Before offering some concluding thoughts, I would like to make one cautionary remark. We should be careful not to conclude from anything I have said that our lack of knowledge concerning God – that is, there being truths about God which we do not know and properties of God with which we are not acquainted – is entirely due to the cognitive consequences of sin. Nothing I have said should make us oblivious to the fact that, as scripture intimates at several points without stating it *expressis verbis*, part of all this has much more to do with our cognitive limitations as finite creatures compared to the immeasurable greatness of God (cf. 1 Tim 6:16 and Rom 11:34).

We have seen that sin has (had) profound and devastating consequences for our knowledge of God. It is primarily a privation of knowledge by acquaintance, but, partly because of that very fact, it also has effects on our propositional knowledge of God. The major reason for this is our existential separation from God, which has resulted in a sinful condition. As Paul points out in 1 Corinthians 13:9–12 it is because of our alienation from God in our sinful state that we fail to have direct knowledge through our acquaintance with him. Nonetheless, as Paul argues in Romans 1, we have a certain limited knowledge of God, knowledge that is propositional rather than experiential. Even this little knowledge, however, is suppressed, partly by performing all sorts of morally reprehensible actions. As a result, humans form all sorts of false beliefs about God and about a whole range of idols. Finally, it is also through sin that without divine grace we fail to know Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit and do not believe or even disbelieve their testimonies concerning God and our salvation. Hence, there is no reason to think that

sin has completely taken away certain of our cognitive faculties or that they are damaged to such an extent that without divine grace there is nothing we can know of God.

In this article I have attempted to avoid any substantial comparison with and evaluation of accounts of the effects of sin for our cognition of God which we find in the writings of certain theologians and official church documents. I hope that the above provides a good starting point for such a project.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ I would like to thank Martien Brinkman, Kees van der Kooi, Eric Peels, Jeroen de Ridder and René van Woudenberg for their valuable criticisms of earlier versions of this article.