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READING ROMANS TODAY

BY JAMES W. THOMPSON

Adolf Harnack, the church historian of a century ago, once commented that the history of the church is the history of reactions to Paul. More specifically, this history involves the reactions to Romans. Augustine's profound influence began at his conversion, when he heard a child's voice saying, "Take it and read, take it and read." At that moment he read the words of Rom 13:13-14, "Not in reveling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries. Rather, arm yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ; spend no more thought on nature and nature's appetites" (*Confessions* 8.12). Later, as a Christian theologian, he articulated the doctrines of original sin and the divine grace based on his reading of Romans. More than a millennium after Augustine, Luther found in the doctrine of the righteousness of God in Romans the answer to his search for a gracious God and a challenge to the Catholic doctrine of works-righteousness. In the early twentieth century, Karl Barth confronted liberal optimism about human progress with his

commentary on Romans, which affirmed the absolute sovereignty of God. For many people of my own generation in the Churches of Christ, Romans has continued to be revolutionary—a challenge to doctrinal systems that placed the emphasis on human achievement and a liberation from a righteousness by works. Today, Romans continues to be the focal point for discussions of a variety of issues that concern Christians.

Luther's comment that Romans is "rightly the chief part of the New Testament and the clearest gospel of all" has been widely shared in most Protestant traditions, making Romans a very familiar book throughout European and American Christianity. Like many others who had been educated in the Churches of Christ, however, I had neither considered Romans "the clearest gospel of all" nor gained great familiarity with the epistle until I read it alongside K. C. Moser's *The Way of Salvation* during my undergraduate studies. This discovery of Romans had a revolutionary impact on my understanding of the Christian

faith. Like Luther, I found good news in such phrases as "The righteous shall live by faith" (1:17), "A man is justified by faith apart from works of the law" (3:28), and "Therefore, being justified by faith, we have peace with God" (5:1). Romans turned my attention away from human achievement to an appreciation of what God has done. As the title of Moser's book suggests, we read Romans as "the way of salvation"—an account of the human predicament and the divine gift of salvation. During this period of the 1960s, many of my peers also read Romans and discovered the doctrine of the grace of God.

What was "revolutionary" for us was, in fact, the interpretation that closely approximated the traditional Protestant reading of Romans. Indeed, the wide resistance to Moser's interpretation among leaders in the Churches of Christ reflects a wariness of this Protestant emphasis on justification by faith. In our discovery of the Protestant interpretation of Romans, we treated the epistle as a timeless statement of Christian

doctrine, following Melancthon's view that Romans is a "compendium of Christian doctrine" and Luther's view that Romans tells us all that we need to know about sin, salvation, justification, and sanctification.

The center of Romans, according to Luther, is the doctrine of the righteousness of God. Thus if Romans is the heart of the gospel, 1:17 is the heart of Romans. Luther translated *dikaio syne tou theou* in 1:17 as the "righteousness from God," and he rendered the final phrase of 1:17 as "he who through faith is righteous shall live." This interpretation was truly revolutionary, insofar as his influence has dominated Protestant Christianity since Luther's time. One observes this influence, for example, in the NIV translation of Rom 1:17: "For in the gospel a righteousness *from* God is revealed" (emphasis mine; cf. 3:21). According to the dominant interpretation that emerged with Luther, the thesis statement of 1:17 is repeated in 3:21–26 and amplified in chapters 5–8. According to this view, the message of Romans is unrelated to a situation either in Paul's own life or in the Roman church. Consequently, it is unrelated to the opening (1:1–15) and closing (15:14–16:27) sections of the book. The epistle describes the individual's experience of salvation in the language of justification and sanctification. Indeed, Paul's description of salvation in Romans, according to this view, parallels his own personal experience. He had struggled to find a gracious God, only to discover

the bankruptcy of his own personal attempt at righteousness by works and the good news of the righteousness that comes from God. Under Luther's influence, Romans became the book about how individuals find salvation. This interpretation of Romans is expressed in Anders Nygren's *Commentary on Romans* and in numerous popular works that focus on justification by faith as the individual's path to salvation.

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One can scarcely overestimate the influence of this reading of Romans in the churches of Europe and North America. The focus on justification by faith as the salvation of the individual has largely shaped American piety and evangelism. Congruent with this reading of Romans, the evangelical tradition has emphasized justification by faith as the moment of conversion, not as the continuing faithful response to God's gift. Under the banner of Luther's discovery of salvation by faith apart from works of the law, popular interpretation resists serious conversation about deeds and rules in Christian ethics.

Although popular piety and hymnody continue to articulate this traditional interpretation of

Romans, the academic literature of the past generation has continued to question the reading of Romans as a timeless statement about the salvation of the individual. Krister Stendahl challenged this understanding of Romans in the article "Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West."¹ He observed that interpreters have consistently read Luther's struggle to find a gracious God and his battle with Catholic works-righteousness into Paul's discussion of the doctrine of justification by faith. Unlike Luther, Paul never struggled to find a gracious God (cf. Phil 3:2–11). Consequently, Paul's doctrine of justification by faith is not about the individual's release from a troubled conscience, but about the means by which Gentiles may have full membership in the community of faith. Stendahl noted that no one had read Romans in individualistic terms before Augustine, and he challenged readers to recognize that Romans 9–11 is the center of gravity for the epistle. Paul's larger agenda in Romans is to demonstrate God's plan for the inclusion of Gentiles. In a later book, *Final Account*, Stendahl argued that Romans is "a theology of the Pauline mission to the Gentiles, and its climax comes in chapters 9–11, where Paul reflects upon how this mission to the Gentiles relates to the people of Israel."

Numerous other works since the 1960s have echoed Stendahl's argument and challenged the traditional evangelical reading. Other Scandinavian scholars

have argued that the center of gravity for Romans is not chapters 5–8, but chapters 9–11 (or 9–16). Johannes Munck argued that chapters 9–11 are the climax of Romans, and that the purpose of Romans is to justify Paul's mission to the Gentiles. Similarly, Nils Dahl argued that the focus of Romans is not the individual's salvation, but the justification of Paul's missionary labors. "[J]ustification by faith is not in itself the theme of the letter but part of, and a criterion for, Paul's missionary theology."²

Two features characterize the interpretation of Romans of the past generation. One is a renewed attention to the relationship between Paul's situation and the message of Romans. Scholars in the past generation have read Romans, not as a timeless "compendium of Pauline theology," but as a response to a concrete historical situation. The other feature is an appreciation of the significance of the entire epistle to the Romans as a coherent argument. Whereas previous interpretations have regarded chapters 5–8 as pivotal for the epistle, interpreters now insist that no section of the epistle is to be regarded as an excursus or appendix. Any interpretation must assume that each part of the letter is germane to the argument. These two issues have set the agenda for the current study of Romans, resulting in the consensus that any interpretation of Romans must do justice to both the historical situation and the literary coherence of the book.

The Historical Situation

The emergence of this consensus does not, however, suggest unanimity in the interpretation of Romans, inasmuch as the areas of agreement have set the stage for a new debate over Romans. These issues are treated fully in Karl Donfried, *The Romans Debate* (rev. ed.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991). The major issue in *The Romans Debate* is precisely what historical situation Paul is addressing in Romans. Günther Bornkamm's article "The Letter to the Romans as Paul's Last Will and Testament," first published in 1963, makes the case that the

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historical situation behind Romans is not an issue in the Roman church, but the issue that Paul faces in all his churches. Moreover, Paul writes Romans immediately before his final trip to Jerusalem, where he faces danger from both Jewish Christians and Jews. According to Bornkamm, Romans is the explanation of Paul's entire missionary endeavor. Consequently, Romans summarizes arguments that Paul has made in previous letters. The idea that Romans is a general defense of Paul's missionary work rather than a response to a Roman situation is developed further in *The Romans Debate* in

articles by Günther Klein, Jacob Jervell, Robert Karris, and T. W. Manson.

The alternative view in *The Romans Debate* is the argument that the epistle is addressed to a concrete Roman situation. In *The Obedience of Faith: The Purpose of Paul in the Epistle to the Romans* (London: SCM Press, 1971), Paul Minear argues that the key to understanding the historical situation in Romans is the conflict between the "strong" and the "weak" in Rom 14:1–15:13. Several essays in *The Romans Debate* develop that interpretation. Wolfgang Wiefel provides a plausible historical situation behind Romans, tracing the origins of the Roman church to the Jewish community of Rome. Wiefel argues that the expulsion of the Jews from Rome under Claudius in A.D. 49 altered the demographic composition of the Roman church, resulting in the emergence of Gentile congregations. The crisis that Paul addresses in Romans was occasioned by the return of Jewish Christians to Rome after the death of Claudius and the resulting ethnic tension in the congregations. Articles in *The Romans Debate* by Karl Donfried ("False Presuppositions in the Study of Romans"), Francis Watson ("The Two Roman Congregations: Romans 14:1–15:13"), and Peter Lampe ("The Roman Christians of Romans 16") strengthen the case for a distinctively Roman crisis to which the epistle is the answer. Subsequent books and articles continue to argue that Romans is a response to ethnic

tensions in Rome, for example, James C. Walters, *Ethnic Issues in Romans* (Valley Forge: Trinity, 1993).

Literary Coherence

That Paul writes to a concrete historical situation in Romans is no longer in dispute. He states clearly his purpose for writing in 15:15–16: to remind the community that he is “a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (NRSV). One assumes, therefore, that each unit of Romans contributes to that single theme: the explanation of Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles. The challenge for recent interpreters has been to find the rhetorical coherence of Romans in making this unified argument. That is, what themes hold the smaller units together? Wilhelm Wuellner’s article in *The Romans Debate* offers a rhetorical analysis of the epistle that demonstrates the close relationship between Paul’s circumstances and his message. W. S. Campbell, in “Romans III as a Key to the Structure and Thought of Romans,” demonstrates that Paul, after announcing the theme of the righteousness of God, introduces the questions in 3:1–8 that he answers in chapters 6–11. Stanley Stowers demonstrates in *A Rereading of Romans* the coherence of the epistle as a declaration for Gentile readers of God’s merciful and impartial justice (*dikaiosyne*), which condemns all injustice (1:18–3:20) and provides a way for all to share equally in God’s

mercy (3:21–5:21). In the present situation, the Gentiles enjoy the privileges of God’s mercy (chapters 6–8), but God will also redeem Israel (chapters 9–11). God has created a new people who demonstrate through their moral existence (12:1–15:13) the power of the righteousness of God to create a community that has overcome the moral disarray described in Romans 1. The thematic thread running through Romans is the reminder that God’s righteousness leaves no room for human arrogance (cf. 3:27; 4:2; 11:16–25; 12:3, 16). Paul’s summons to the strong and the weak in 14:1–15:13 becomes the climax of the book, in which Paul challenges the community members to respond to God’s righteousness by receiving one another without judging.

Summary

We have learned from the past generation that Romans is not merely a book about how the individual comes to salvation but the theological foundation for the unity of a multiethnic church. Unlike older interpretations that focused on the moment of conversion as the occasion for justification by faith, the newer reading demonstrates that God’s righteousness summons us to continued moral formation as a community of faith. For many of us, the discovery of the evangelical reading of Romans was an improvement over the neglect of this revolutionary epistle. The developments of the past generation in the interpretation of Romans move us beyond the evangelical reading of Romans to

a recognition that God’s righteousness creates a community of faith and Christian formation. In the newer reading, we see that Paul’s doctrine of the righteousness of God is also a challenge for Christian obedience.

The abundant literature of the past two decades will assist readers who want guidance in working through Romans. Major commentaries will guide the readers through this discussion. These include Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); Joseph Fitzmyer’s commentary in the Anchor Bible series, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992); James Dunn’s commentary in the Word Biblical Commentary series, *Romans 1–8* and *Romans 9–16* (Dallas: Word, 1988); and Peter Stuhlmacher, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994). Paul Achtemeier’s volume in the Interpretation series, *Romans* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), like other commentaries in this series, is written for preachers and educated laymen. Although, unlike the other commentaries mentioned above, it is not intended for other scholars, it provides a very helpful statement of the issues involved in interpreting Romans. The collection of essays in *The Romans Debate* remains indispensable as an orientation to the study of Romans.

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(See notes on page 216.)