



## The Continuing Importance of Romans

It has been said that all subsequent Western Christian theologies are simply footnotes to Paul's Letter to the Romans. This adage, while perhaps a bit overstated, has much more than a grain of truth to it. Certainly Paul has had a tremendous formative influence on Western Christian theology, and nowhere more cogently and directly than in Romans. Even those theologians who ultimately diverge from Paul do so mainly in reaction to his theology in this epistle, thereby acknowledging that he has set the parameters for debate. Certainly Martin Luther found this epistle, and its theology, to be of the highest importance. He wrote:

This epistle is in truth the most important document in the New Testament, the gospel in its purest expression. Not only is it well worth a Christian's while to know word for word by heart, but also to meditate on it day by day.<sup>1</sup>

Obviously not all theologians agree on what Paul himself had to say (his dialectical approach can lead to such disagreements), but they do often agree that, love him or hate him, Paul has something important to say about Christ and the Christian gospel, and he says it best in this epistle.

Beyond all the doctrinal elements, the centrality of God's justification of us, and the power of God's grace, what continues to draw me to this writing is Paul's humanity and his understanding of the human person. Certainly God's action in reaching out to us through Christ Jesus is absolutely key to the Christian faith, but Paul goes beyond this. In many places in this epistle, Paul vividly demonstrates the nature of the human person, both before justification and after it. There are many powerful examples of this; I will just name several.

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Preface on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans* (1522), in John Dillenberger, ed., *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings* (New York: Doubleday, 1962), 19.

First, there is the human person in their natural state, before the transforming actions of Christ—what Paul would describe as “the flesh.” Of the turmoil and conflict in us, Paul expresses his own conflicted heart:

I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? (Rom 7:21–24)

No one has, before or since, captured in such a vivid manner the angst of wanting to do the will of God but also being resistant to it. The human condition, caught between will and desire, is the one constant in our lives and in our world.

But of course Paul found release from this in the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus, by which this struggle is overcome. Although this “new creation” is not yet complete in us, Paul nevertheless glories in the power of God to overcome all that is resistant to the gospel in us. Furthermore, he exalts, “If God is for us, who is against us?” (Rom 8:31). The power of God to transform is absolute:

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:38–39)

Paul may not have confidence in his own self, but he is absolutely secure in the power of God to keep him safe from all other powers, both within himself and outside of his self.

But Paul is not one to reduce the Christian gospel to trite sayings and pat explanations. He knows the complications of this world and within his own person. There are elements of God and God’s gospel that he trusts implicitly but that are ultimately beyond his understanding, such as the redemption of Israel (Romans 9–11). He can both and at the same time trust God absolutely and still not completely understand what God is doing and how God is doing it. This is the ultimate lesson in faith and trust that Paul demonstrates for us, something that a confused and conflicted age like ours would do well to heed. As would we ourselves.

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