



## Light from Fire

In his preface to the Letter to the Romans, Martin Luther takes up the question of faith and works. He concludes with his classic line: “Thus it is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire” (*Luther’s Works*, 35.371).

The image of “light from fire” can be applied to Romans and its effects as well. Romans is an illuminating and warming fire. In the year 1738 John Wesley found his heart “strangely warmed” while hearing Luther’s preface to Romans being read. Augustine, Luther, Karl Barth, and countless other interpreters of the Christian faith can be added to the list of those who have found Romans to be the ignition, illumination, and warming fire of faith and theology. Luther’s estimate of the book is stated with an unusual economy of language:

This epistle is really the chief part of the New Testament, and is truly the purest gospel. It is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but also that he should occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul. We can never read it or ponder over it too much; for the more we deal with it, the more precious it becomes and the better it tastes. (*Ibid.*, 35.365)

The remark that “every Christian” should know Romans by heart and be occupied with it “every day” sounds like hyperbole to the modern ear. That degree of attention can hardly be expected by clergy, let alone laity.

But we need not get hung up on the terms “every Christian” and “every day.” The danger we face is the virtual neglect of Romans and its message in certain quarters of the church. Romans is considered by some to be too difficult, too searching and relentless in its negative assessment of humanity before God, and too bountiful in its declarations of the divinely given freedom from the law, sin, and death. Better it is to have a theology that travels an easier road, a middle road, which looks upon humanity as not too bad before God after all, and which portrays God as quite pleased with the crown of his creation. “Jesus loves us, this we know,” and so God must love us too...“just as we are.” Isn’t that the gospel?

Not quite. Romans is a fire, a blazing fire, which illumines our lives and the ways of God with us. In this letter Paul portrays God as a God of both wrath and love, a God who both condemns and redeems, a God who locks us up under sin and the sentence of death and then, rather than throwing the key away, sets us free on his own terms by the redemption he provides in Christ. Romans is so fascinating and enlightening because of its focus on God, God’s action, the gospel, and the summons to live as persons who have been transformed through faith and baptism for service to God in the world. More than any other book in the New Testament,

Romans could be called “theology for Christian ministry.”

The essays in this issue approach Romans, or parts of it, from different perspectives. *Martha Stortz* reminds us that Romans has been a preeminent source of reform, even revolution, in the history of the church. She asks whether we can imagine ourselves as kindred spirits with those who have been affected so powerfully by it in the past, so the question about the potential for reform from Romans is more about us than about the book itself. *James Nestingen* provides a brief survey of the history of interpretation of Romans, chiefly on the question of the relationship between law and gospel, from the patristic era into the Reformation, and then he makes some remarks about the modern era. *Robert Jewett* aids us in following the argument of Romans through from start to finish, drawing upon the method and categories of classical rhetoric. *Stanley Olson* speaks of Romans 5-8 as “pastoral theology,” in which Paul addresses the reality of suffering and sin from a confident stance in grace, seeking to confirm his readers in that same stance. *Donald Sneen* presents a study of Romans 9-11, making exegetical observations on the text and drawing from the discussion some important conclusions regarding the relationship of Jews and Christians. *Calvin Roetzel* rejects the view that Romans 12-15 is but an appendix to the rest of the letter. He shows how this section is integral and even essential to the argument of Romans, for it shows how the gospel of grace involves radical demand. Finally, *Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza* examines Romans 16, in which a third of the 26 persons mentioned by name are women. Drawing upon social and historical information from Paul’s world and his churches, she sketches out a fascinating and illuminating reconstruction of the contribution of women to early Christian life and mission.

The Resources section contains three essays. The first is by *Ray Jones*. What does it mean to celebrate the Lord’s Supper in “remembrance” of Jesus? The biblical background of “remembrance” is explored to gain an understanding. In a review essay *Jack Schwandt* discusses one of the most talked about interpretations of contemporary life in America, *Habits of the Heart*, by Robert Bellah and others. Then follows the “Texts in Context” essay by *Eugene Kreider*, which surveys the texts assigned from the Gospel of Luke in the ecumenical lectionary for the Sundays from Pentecost 20 through Christ the King.

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