



## Romans and Reform

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Reform is one of the milder reactions to Paul's Letter to the Romans; revolution is another response with precedent in the history of the church. A list of commentators on Romans places the student of theology in the presence of some of the greatest reformers and revolutionaries in the Christian tradition:

Origen, Cyril of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Ambrosiaster, Augustine, Peter Abelard, Peter Lombard, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, Philipp Melancthon, Martin Bucer, John Calvin, Theodore Beza, Marsilius Ficino, Adolf Schlatter, Karl Barth.

There are voices for quiet reform; there are cries for immediate revolution; there is praise prompted by the working of the same Spirit that moved Paul. All are offered as devout witness to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Confronted with these commentaries and these figures one can hardly suppress the question: Does Romans say anything to us today?

The answer would involve identifying issues within the text and noting points of parity or disparity with our own issues. Can you tell a street person about justification? Where is the sin of Adam in the rubble of Chernobyl? Are there counterparts to the Jews and the gentiles in the contemporary church? Depending on our ability to answer these questions, Romans might have everything, something, or nothing to say to us today. If the text has nothing to say to us, we need not claim it.

Does Romans say anything to us today? The question is a natural one—but misguided. The question is misguided, because it ignores that Romans is Scripture. As Scripture it is a text which possesses us. The question is not how we might claim it, but how it claims us. As Scripture Romans addresses us. The question is not whether it addresses us, but how. As Scripture Romans speaks to us. The question is not whether it speaks, but whether or not we can hear. Suddenly the question as to the authority of Romans today has become a question about the authenticity of the community for whom this text is Scripture. The

question about what Romans says to us today has become a question about who we are. We were set to scrutinize a text; the text is suddenly scrutinizing us.

What does it mean to call this text Scripture? That is the question we must ask. To call a text Scripture means three things. It means quite simply that the text is revelatory, creative, and interpretative. These three facets of "Scripture" are so simple as to demand further elaboration.

1. *Scripture is revelatory.* *Mansfield Park* is a book about manners and mores in the county of Northampton. We read it with interest and even enlightenment, because these people

are *like* us. Scripture is both very similar and very different. It is a book about God and God's people. These people too are like us, and therein is the similarity to a classic like *Mansfield Park*. Scripture is a book about God and God's people—but we *are* the people, and this *is* the God. We are not merely *like* the Israelites, the Sodom- and Gomorrahmites, the disciples on the Road to Emmaus, or the women at the foot of the cross. We *are* these people. This *is* our God. We may pretend to read Scripture with the interest or even the enlightenment that we bring to a literary classic, but the more appropriate response is desperate fascination. Scripture tells us who we are and who God is. In this double disclosure, it is revelatory, and it is revelatory of identity. This is who we are, and this is who God is.

2. *Scripture is creative.* The tiny cadre of people who worship Jane Austen meet, exchange memorabilia, and congratulate themselves on their taste. That literary collegiality tells each of them something good about himself or herself, and locates each in a group defined by the refinement of choice: good taste. The people of God have seen the truth of themselves and their God in Scripture. That ecclesial community tells each of us something true about ourselves and places us in a group defined by baptism and the Lord's Supper, a group formed, informed, and transformed by the Word of God. Scripture helps describe and define that community. Even the enemies of the faith knew this. With malicious perspicacity magistrates in the early centuries of persecution confiscated copies of Scripture. They sensed that these sacred texts were central to who these people were. Without the texts the community would, they hoped, evaporate. Scripture describes and defines a community. Moreover, it places a community in contact with all communities in all times and in all places that have been drawn to these texts for the truth of who they were and who was their God.

3. *Scripture is interpretative.* Mere literary interpretation is limited to the congeries and subtleties of a text. In reading and re-reading *Emma* one sees nuances of Miss Woodhouse's relationship to Mr. Knightley, and by extension the complexities of a woman's relationship to a man, one's relationship to another. Similarly, when we name a set of texts "Scripture" we commit ourselves to reading them faithfully and frequently. But more important, when we name a set of texts "Scripture," we commit ourselves to the dangerous task of letting these texts read us. The texts conspire to shatter false identities; they construct true ones in the ashes.

What does it mean to call this text "Scripture?" It means that the text is revelatory of who we are and who is our God. It means that the text is creative of communities past, present, and future. It means finally that, even as we inter-

pret the text, the text will interpret us, drawing us through its words into the fullness of the word of God.

What does it mean to call this text "Scripture?" Luther knew when, with massive reluctance, he turned his exegetical attention to the text in 1519. He was not asking the question: Does Romans have anything to say to us today? He knew that as Scripture it did. Luther was merely terrified of understanding what. He recorded his fear of encountering the text as "Scripture":

In that year (1519), I had meanwhile turned once more to the interpretation of The Psalms, relying on the fact that I was better schooled after I had dealt in the

classroom with the letter of Saint Paul to the Romans and the Galatians and that to the Hebrews. I had been seized with a really extraordinary ardor to understand Paul in the letter to the Romans, but until then there stood in my way, not coldness of blood, but this one word, i.e., Rom. 1:17: "The justice of God is revealed in it." For I hated this word "the justice of God" which by the use and usage of all the doctors I was taught to understand philosophically in terms of that so-called formal or active justice with which God is just and punishes the sinners and the unrighteous.

For, however irreproachably I lived as a monk, I felt myself before God to be a sinner with a most unquiet conscience, nor could I be confident that I had pleased him with my satisfaction. I did not love, nay, rather I hated, this righteous God who punished sinners, and if not with tacit blasphemy, certainly with huge murmurings I was angry with God, saying: "As though it really were not enough that miserable sinners should be eternally damned with original sin and have all kinds of calamities laid upon them by the law of the Ten Commandments, God must go and add sorrow upon sorrow and even through the gospel itself bring his justice and wrath to bear!" I raged in this way with a wildly aroused and disturbed conscience, and yet I knocked importunately at Paul in this passage, thirsting more ardently to know what Paul meant.

At last, God being merciful, as I thought about it day and night, I noticed the context of the words, namely, "The justice of God is revealed in it; as it is written, the just shall live by faith." Then and there, I began to understand the justice of God as that by which the righteous man lives by the gift of God, namely, by faith, and this sentence "The justice of God is revealed in the gospel" to be that passive justice with which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: "The just lives by faith."

This straightway made me feel as though reborn and as though I had entered through open gates into Paradise itself. From then on, the whole face of Scripture appeared different. I ran through the Scriptures then as memory served, and found that other words had the same meaning, for example: the work of God with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God with which he makes us wise, the fortitude of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God.

And now, much as I hated the word "justice of God" before, so much the more sweetly I extolled this word to myself now, so that this passage in Paul was to me a real gate to Paradise. Afterward, I read Augustine *On the Spirit and the Letter*, where unexpectedly I came upon the fact that I, too, interpreted the justice of God in a similar way: namely, as that with which God endues us when he justifies us. And although this was said still imperfectly, and he does not clearly explain about "imputation," it was gratifying to me that he should teach a justice of God by which we are justified.\*

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\*Martin Luther, *WA* 54,179-187; quoted from *Luther: Lectures on Romans* (Library of Christian Classics 15; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961) xxxvi-xxxvii.

The encounter was revelatory to Luther. It was simultaneously an encounter with God and

an encounter with himself. Luther had expected to meet in Romans the justice of God—indeed, he'd long avoided the text for that reason. But the justice he found was not the justice he had expected. "Then and there, I began to understand the justice of God as that by which the righteous man lives by the gift of God." This is who God was: both merciful and just. In the same moment Luther understood himself: both sinful and saved.

The encounter was creative. Luther found himself in community not only with Paul, but with Augustine as well. His discovery resonated with the work of this ancient father of the Latin Church: "I, too, interpreted the justice of God in a similar way." As the text had claimed Augustine, so the text claimed Luther.

The encounter was interpretive. It is not comfortable to be read by Scripture; yet Luther submitted himself to the text. "I raged in this way with a wildly aroused and disturbed conscience, and yet I knocked importunately at Paul in this passage, thirsting more ardently to know what Paul meant." The fruits of such scrutiny were manifold: "This straightway made me feel as though reborn and as though I had entered through open gates into Paradise itself." The reading altered drastically Luther's understanding of the whole of Scripture, forcing various parts into new constellations. "From then on, the whole face of Scripture appeared different. I ran through the Scriptures then as memory served, and found that other words had the same meaning."

Luther was claimed by this text as "Scripture." As Scripture it revealed God to him in new ways; it told him new things about who a believer was. As Scripture it created a community around him that extended in time and space. As Scripture it interpreted the church, himself, and his own experience. Luther's reform began with his being claimed by a text as "Scripture."

Any reform Romans would now work in the church must begin in a similar fashion. The question is not about the authority of the text for us today; rather, the question is about the authenticity of our communities. What does it mean to call this text "Scripture?" Can we look to Romans for new, sometimes painful disclosure about who we really are and who this God whom we worship really is? Do we have away of understanding identity in away that is God- and not self-centered? Can we understand identity in theological and not therapeutic terms? Only then will Romans be revelatory. Can we imagine ourselves kindred spirits with Luther, Augustine, Aquinas, and William of St. Thierry? Can we envision a community that extends in time and space? Can we be part of something that we did not choose, that may countermand all canons of good taste, all ties of blood and clan and tribe? Can we name ourselves part of a community that seeks out the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed? Only then can Romans be creative. Can we let the text read us? Can we be so out-of-control? Can we open ourselves to its transformative power? Only then can Romans be interpretive.

Romans is a platform for revolution and for reform—not because it is a literary classic, nor because it contains ideas that corroborate or challenge our own. Romans is a platform for reform, because it is "Scripture." Can we see Paul's letter to the Romans as "Scripture"? The answer to the question turns not on the authority of this text for our time, but on the authenticity of our communities.