

THE NEW INTERNATIONAL
GREEK TESTAMENT COMMENTARY

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and
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The Epistle to the
ROMANS

The Epistle to the
ROMANS

*A Commentary on the
Greek Text*

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Preface

Paul's letter to believers in Jesus at Rome has always been highly regarded within the Christian church. It has been, in fact, the most highly acclaimed writing of the NT throughout the entire course of Christian history. It is so because it has been, in very large measure, the heartland of Christian thought, life, and proclamation.

THE VITALITY OF ROMANS FOR CHRISTIAN PIETY AND PRACTICE

In 386 Augustine, having been unable to overcome his sexual addiction, was converted to Christ when he read Rom 13:13b-14: "Not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. But clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of your sinful nature." Later, in 400, in speaking of his conversion experience when reading this passage, he wrote: "No further would I read, nor had I any need; for instantly, at the end of this sentence, a clear light flooded my heart and all the darkness of doubt vanished away."¹

In 1515 Martin Luther found Paul's teaching on "the righteousness of God" and "justification by faith" in Rom 1:17 to be the catalyst for his spiritual rebirth, an open door into "paradise," and "a gateway to heaven," and so the beginning of his own religious revolution — which, of course, eventuated in the Protestant Reformation. In his earlier days as an Augustinian monk he pondered deeply, with both consternation and sorrow, the meaning of the phrase *iustitia Dei* ("the justice of God") in his Latin Bible (though in Greek the phrase is δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ, which is better translated "the righteousness of God"). Later in 1545, recalling the resolution of his own spiritual struggles when he came to a proper understanding of this passage, Luther wrote (with the translation of the Latin

1. Augustine, *Confessions* 8.12.29; cf. 9.2.

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iustitia Dei, “the justice of God,” in the text, and that of the Greek δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ, “the righteousness of God,” in brackets):

I greatly longed to understand Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, “the justice [‘righteousness’] of God,” because I took it to mean that justice [‘righteousness’] whereby God is just [‘righteous’] and deals justly [‘righteously’] in punishing the unjust [‘unrighteous’]. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore I did not love a just [‘righteous’] and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant.

Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice [‘righteousness’] of God and the statement that “the just [‘righteous’] will live by his faith.” Then I grasped the truth that the justice [‘righteousness’] of God is that righteousness whereby, through grace and sheer mercy, he justifies us by faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before “the justice [‘righteousness’] of God” had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gateway to heaven.²

On May 24, 1738, John Wesley, having heard Luther’s “Preface to the Epistle to the Romans” read by someone at the Aldersgate Street Mission in London, wrote in his journal:

About a quarter before nine [that evening], while he [Martin Luther] was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, in Christ alone for my salvation: an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.³

And in 1918 Karl Barth, who was then a young Swiss pastor, related in the Preface to his *Römerbrief* his own reaction to Romans in the following words: “The reader will detect for himself that it has been written with a joyful sense of discovery. The mighty voice of Paul was new to me; and if to me, no doubt to many others also” — which is the response of many people today when first seriously reading Romans.⁴

2. M. Luther, “Preface to Latin Writings,” in *Luther’s Works*, 55 vols., general editors J. Pelikan (vols. 1-30) and H. T. Lehmann (vols. 31-55) (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), 34.336-37; see also *idem*, “Table Talk,” *ibid.*, 54.193, 309, 442.

3. J. Wesley, “Journal and Diaries I (1735-38),” in *Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), 18.249-50.

4. K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2.

THE CENTRALITY OF ROMANS FOR CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

The letter to the Romans has also been central in the formulation and proclamation of Christian doctrine throughout the church's history. In 1540 John Calvin wrote regarding Romans:

Among many other notable virtues the Epistle has one in particular, which is never sufficiently appreciated; it is this: If we have gained a true understanding of this Epistle, we have an open door to all the most profound treasures of Scripture.⁵

In 1886 Charles Bigg, then the Regius Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Oxford University, asserted: "The Pauline reactions describe the critical epochs of theology and the Church."⁶ And Adolf Harnack, in concluding his chapter on "The Presuppositions of the History of Dogma," picked up on Bigg's thesis and expanded it as follows:

One might write a history of dogma as a history of the Pauline reactions in the Church, and in doing so would touch on all the turning points of the history. Marcion after the Apostolic Fathers; Irenaeus, Clement and Origen after the Apologists; Augustine after the Fathers of the Greek Church; the great Reformers of the middle ages from Agobard to Wessel in the bosom of the mediaeval Church; Luther after the Scholastics; Jansenism after the council of Trent. Everywhere it has been Paul, in these men, who produced the Reformation. Paulinism has proved to be a ferment in the history of dogma, a basis it has never been. Just as it had that significance in Paul himself, with reference to Jewish Christianity, so it has continued to work through the history of the Church.⁷

It may, of course, be questioned whether Marcion in the mid-second century or Cornelius Jansen in the early seventeenth century were really "turning points" in the history of Christianity. Likewise, it may be debated whether Paul's thought was only "a ferment" and never "a basis" for the church's theology. Further, one might wonder why John Chrysostom and his colleagues in the late fourth and early fifth centuries receive no mention in Harnack's listing. Nonetheless, it remains true to say that whenever and wherever there has been a serious study of Paul's letters there has occurred in the church some type of renewal, reformation, or revolution.

All this is particularly true with regard to Paul's letter to the Christians

5. J. Calvin, "Theme of the Epistle of Paul to the Romans," trans. R. Mackenzie, in *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, 12 vols., ed. D. W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1960; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 8.5.

6. C. Bigg, *The Christian Platonists of Alexandria* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1886; repr. 1913), 53.

7. A. Harnack, *The History of Dogma*, trans. N. Buchanan (Boston: Little, Brown, 1901), 136.

at Rome. “In fact,” as Joseph Fitzmyer has aptly noted, “one can almost write the history of Christian theology by surveying the ways in which Romans has been interpreted.”⁸

CHALLENGES IN THE STUDY OF ROMANS

Yet despite its status in the church and its importance for Christian thought, life, and proclamation, Romans is probably the most difficult of all the NT letters to analyze and interpret. It hardly can be called a simple writing.

In the winter of 394-395 Augustine began to write a commentary on Romans. But after commenting on the first seven verses of chapter one,⁹ he felt unable to proceed, saying that the project was just too large for him and that he would return to easier tasks.¹⁰ In the early sixteenth century Erasmus, introducing his *Paraphrase of Romans*, said of Romans: “The difficulty of this letter equals and almost surpasses its utility!” — citing both Origen and Jerome as early Church Fathers who had also found the letter exceedingly difficult to understand.¹¹ As Erasmus saw it, this difficulty can be attributed to three causes: (1) the style of “speech” or language used, for “nowhere else is the order of speech more confused; nowhere is the speech more split by the transposition of words; nowhere is the speech more incomplete through absence of an apodosis,” (2) the “obscurity of things which are hard to put into words,” or the content of the letter itself, for “no other letter is handicapped by more frequent rough spots or is broken by deeper chasms,” and (3) the “frequent and sudden change of masks” or stances on the part of the author, for “he considers now the Jews, now the Gentiles, now both; sometimes he addresses believers, sometimes doubters; at one point he assumes the role of a weak man, at another of a strong; sometimes that of a godly man, sometimes of an ungodly man.”¹²

Indeed, 2 Pet 3:16 bears eloquent testimony to the church’s mingled attitudes of (1) deep respect for Paul’s letters generally (and Romans in particular), yet also (2) real difficulties in trying to understand them, and (3) a realization of possibilities for serious misinterpretation, when it says of Paul’s letters that they “contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.” In fact, despite all its appearances of being straightforward and clear, no other NT writing presents greater difficulties with respect to “style,” “stance,” and “audience” (to recall Erasmus’s three categories of difficulty) than does Romans. Likewise, no other NT writing challenges the interpreter with as many problems of provenance, purpose, character, incorporation of tradition, rhetorical

8. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, xiii.

9. See Augustine, *Epistolae ad Romanos inchoata Expositio*, PL 35.2087-2106.

10. See Augustine, *Retractationes* 1.25.

11. Erasmus, *Opera* 7.777.

12. Erasmus, *Opera* 7.777-78.

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genre, modes of persuasion, epistolary type, style, structure, flow of argument, and exegesis as does Romans.

Nonetheless, despite all its difficulties and problems, no other letter in the NT is as important as Romans for (1) the thought, piety, and living of Christians, (2) the theology, health, and ministry of the Christian church, and (3) the reformation and renewal of the church's doctrine and practice, which reforms and renewals must constantly be carried forward within the church of every time, place, and circumstance. It is, therefore, incumbent on all present-day commentators who work on this most important NT letter to attempt to spell out a proper interpretation of what is written, striving always (1) to build on the work of past commentators, but also to be informed by significant studies and insights of interpreters today, (2) to be critical, exegetical, and constructive in the analysis of what is written but also pastoral in its application, and (3) to set a course for the future that will promote a better understanding of this most famous of Paul's letters and a more relevant contextualization of its message.