

The Letter to the Romans

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Emil Brunner

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Introduction

“This letter is the principal part of the New Testament and the purest gospel, which surely deserves the honour that a Christian man should not merely know it off by heart word for word, but that he should be occupied with it daily as the daily bread of the soul. For it can never be read too often and too well. And the more it is used the more delicious it becomes and the better it tastes. . . .”

With these words Martin Luther in the year 1522 began his introduction to the Letter to the Romans in the first edition of the New Testament newly translated by him. We shall hardly be tempted to take the risk of imitating him in this by saying that the Letter to the Romans is plainly the principal part of the New Testament; if one part would have to be called the principal part, then the Gospels, surely, would merit it. But we must agree with Luther in this: that the Letter to the Romans is fateful in the story of the Christian Church. Throughout the centuries of Christian history, the fate of the Church of Christ has time and again depended on the understanding and evaluation of the Letter to the Romans. Why is this? Because in this single literary document what is particular and decisive in the Christian Faith is worked out in the acutest form and presented in a concentrated, instructive manner. Within the entire New Testament, even within the whole Bible, nothing approximates so closely to a theological treatise as this epistle—although it was written as a genuine letter addressed to a definite congregation.

We know little more about this earliest period of the congregation in Rome to which Paul was writing than what we are able to deduce from this letter. The Community was founded neither by Paul nor even by one of his special fellow-workers (Timothy, Silas, etc.); in all probability not by an apostle at all. It had already existed for some time and presumably had its origin in the assembling in Rome, the metropolis, of Christians from

various parts of the world. It consisted of former Jews and Gentiles. On account of its life of faith it had a good name everywhere, though without taking, at that time, any leading part.

How is it that Paul is writing a letter to them?

The apostle to the Gentiles feels that his task in the East has in the main been fulfilled. The call of his Lord directs him to the West. He wants to travel to Spain via Rome, and the purpose of the letter is to serve as a preparation for his first visit to Rome. The Roman Community is to aid him in his mission to Spain; therefore he must gain its confidence and make clear to it what is in his mind concerning the proclamation of the Gospel. This accounts for the didactic character of the letter. It is not polemical like Galatians, Colossians or the second letter to the Corinthians; unlike both the letters to the Thessalonians or the first epistle to the Corinthians, it is not written mainly from a pastoral interest, or as a letter of encouragement like the one to the Philippians, but—and this is what is special about it—as a real letter of instruction. In this letter too, as in all others of Paul, there is a passionate wrestling; not with an opponent, however, or a danger within the community to which it is addressed, but with foes and perils that are found in every man and also with adversaries quite outside the Christian Community. Thus among all the epistles of Paul this is the least dated, the letter which concerns us most directly in exactly the same way as it concerned those in Rome.

The place and time of its composition we can, of course, quite definitely determine within the history of the apostle Paul, though only approximately in regard to the year. Paul is facing his last journey to Jerusalem, whither he wants to take the proceeds of the collection which he has gathered in Greece for the poor of the original Community. His third missionary journey lies behind him; his labours in the East have been concluded. In spite of this fairly accurate dating, the statements of scholars concerning the precise date fluctuate between 54 and 58 A.D. The place of composition is very probably Corinth. For a long time it was looked upon as settled among scholars that chapter 16 did not belong to the original letter, since Paul could not possibly have had so many acquaintances in a Community unknown to him;

this ending of the letter must, although undoubtedly deriving from Paul, have slipped by a mistake into the epistle. To-day another opinion is held, which regards the reasons for its belonging here as stronger than those against. The final verses of chapter 16, on the other hand, have in all probability been added by a later hand, though in content they fit very well into the whole.

The structure of the letter is clear and simple. Following the preamble, in which the apostle introduces himself and seeks to get into touch with this Community, he at once proceeds to the first main theme: the lost state of mankind without the redemption of Christ, both of the Gentiles and the Jews; they are sinners both of them. Then follows the second main theme: the unfolding of the message of Jesus Christ's redemption. This twofold first main part is then followed by two more: Part Two which deals with God's plan for the world as revealed in Christ in the light of the Jewish people, and Part Three, which draws the consequences from Christ's message for the practical life. At the end he comes back again to the beginning; the apostle tells the Roman Community about his missionary plans and assures himself of their friendship.

That is the framework of the letter. But what life it breathes! What a power of the Spirit must have been alive in this Paul to have been able to dictate such a work in a few nights. Paul has supplied the material and pointed the way for the whole of Christian theology and all Christian thought with these sixteen chapters. Here is said the fundamental thing about man's misery and God's help, man's vain striving for the goal and God's wisdom and mercy, about God's gift to all those who will receive it, and the task arising out of this gift; and it is said in a way that no one else could say it before Paul or since. There is probably no document of human spiritual history where passion of feeling, power of thought and inexorableness of will are so permeated by one another as here. In the face of this volcanic original production in which everything surges red hot out of the depths of the divine mystery of love, the cheap contrast between life and doctrine, theology and piety, passes away. To be sure, Paul is a theological teacher and thinker; but he is one whom we cannot follow without having our whole life set in motion. To be sure, Paul is an apostle, evangelist, missionary and pastor to thousands;

yet he takes time off for a few nights to summarize the Christian doctrine for a Community which he wishes to use as a base for a most audacious missionary enterprise; and all theological teaching since can draw the best from this nocturnal dictation as out of an inexhaustible reservoir.

Yet in all this the main thing has not been mentioned. In this letter of Paul to the Romans God Himself wants to speak to us. The Pauline teaching is the means through which God Himself wants to teach us; Paul's epistle to the Romans is a letter from God to us, mankind to-day. It remains the great problem of interpretation, hitherto never entirely solved, how to unite these two things: the keen attention to what Paul wanted to say to that Community then, and the search for what God wants to say to us through Paul to-day. In the end the question is whether the reader will really allow God to speak to him, or whether he evades God by hiding behind "Paul", behind "the past". The little theological dictionary at the end of the book has been written to aid the reader in this task of making it contemporary, and he may consult it profitably while still reading the exposition of the text.