

COSINESS AND CHALLENGE IN ST PAUL'S LETTER TO THE ROMANS

Robert E. Doud

WHEN I THINK of St Paul's Letter to the Romans, I think of the cosiness of my novitiate year with the Trinitarians in Holy Trinity, Alabama. What attracted me to the Trinitarians, properly called the Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity, was their piety based on attunement to the Holy Spirit, and their devotion to the development of the lay apostolate. I felt then that the Holy Spirit was awakening the Church to involve the laity in ever more prominent ways. The year was 1964 and the Second Vatican Council was still in session.

Novitiate experiences are usually not described as *cosy*, but mine was, and some of that had to do with my contemplative exploration of St Paul's first epistle. One of my projects as a novice was an exegesis of Romans. I usually had several hours in each week that were described as *free in silence*, that is, if an exercise was cancelled, we were often given free time for prayer, study, reading or wandering in the woods. As a lad from Brooklyn, New York, where we did not have any woods or swamps, I enjoyed wandering among the snakes, lizards and salamanders of the Alabama woodlands and wetlands, often with a book or pad and pencil to record my thoughts.

I had learnt previously, either from my first seminary experience at Huntington on Long Island in New York, or from my second seminary experience at Innsbruck in Austria, that Romans was the most important of the Pauline epistles, written even before any of the four Gospels. It was Paul's 'Gospel before there were any written Gospels', so to speak. Of course, the gospel is primarily something that is preached, and only secondarily something that is written down. Before it can be preached, the gospel must be mulled over in prayer by the preacher. When I was a novice I had a little orange notebook I had purchased in Innsbruck;

The Way, 54/1 (January 2015), 7–15

read more at www.theway.org.uk

mein kleines Heft, I called it.¹ It had grid pages with little graph boxes on them. On every line I wrote down Greek words from Romans. On each page I made columns of Greek words with English words beside them, leaving out only articles and particles.

The next thing in my mind regarding Romans has to do with my memories of the Claremont Graduate University. When I arrived there to do doctoral work in 1971, I had my sense of the importance of Romans immediately reinforced. Professor James Robinson was as strong a Barthian as he was a Bultmannian. He was teaching Carl Barth's dialectical theology in one course while following Rudolf Bultmann's principles of hermeneutics in other courses. The roots of dialectical theology were in Barth's *Romans*, considered generally at Claremont at the time to be the most important theology book of the twentieth century.² Not having read this when I arrived at Claremont, I had to play catch-up and read it from cover to cover.

I also recall learning at Claremont that Ernst Käsemann considered Romans to be *the canon within the canon* of holy scripture. In other words, all the rest of scripture is to be interpreted according to its consistency with Romans. I was fortunate to spend my novitiate immersed in Romans and Galatians, with their teachings about spiritual adoption (*huiiothesia*) and the freedom (*eleutheria*) of the children of God. Paul's devotion to the Spirit drenches and saturates the letter. Romans 8:14 tells us: 'all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption.' Later on, in 8:23, Paul says: 'we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption ...'. Moreover the Spirit helps us in our weakness, prays within us, teaches us how to pray and intercedes for us.

Justification by Faith, Grace and Ecclesiology

For me, the most memorable verse from Romans is 8:28. 'We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose'. I recall remarks made by a deacon friend at Huntington that impressed me and stayed with me, quoting this verse poignantly at a time when I needed to hear it. Romans is best known for

¹ 'My little notebook'.

² Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, translated by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: OUP, 1968).

its teaching on *justification by faith*. Reading Romans inspired Martin Luther towards his reformation of the Church of his times. He realised that we do not save ourselves by deeds that bring us merit but, rather, we are saved by the grace of God and by faith in Jesus Christ. Of course, this is ancient and orthodox Christian teaching. In the time of Luther, however, its truth seems to have been temporarily lost to Roman Catholic theology.

Redemption by Christ and justification by faith in Christ, not by the law and not by the works of the law, are a gospel

priority. For Lutheran Christians, this is part of the *kerygma*, the essential Good News of salvation, the core of the Church's preaching. Salvation needs to reach us, teach us and be assimilated by us in terms of our personal salvation in relationship with Christ. Martin Luther saw that salvation is not something the Church can mediate or dish out to us in ways that it establishes arbitrarily or derivatively. The Church ought not to make itself an obstacle or difficulty in the way of personal relationship to Christ. The Church does not replace the Spirit or co-opt God's prerogatives in entering human hearts and lives. It is the servant of God. It does not control grace, even as it dispenses grace. God gives graces freely and widely, whether or not the Church recognises the presence of these graces.

This is the ecclesiology implicit in Romans. It is what Paul experienced, and it is what he preached. He did not want the heteronomy of Judaism to be replaced by the heteronomy of a Christian kind of legalism and dogmatism. Today's readers of Romans can easily be bored by St Paul's obsessive attention to matters separating the old Law and the Jews from the new gospel and budding Christian self-awareness. In his time, the Christian Church itself, because of his new emphasis on gospel and Spirit over Law and works, became a Church that was no longer a sect



Martin Luther

within Judaism. In the twenty-first century, we are sure that God's covenant (*diathēkē*) with the Jewish people endures, and that they are saved by living in accord with their own lights and graces. But Paul felt he had to explain, especially to himself, how God had rejected the Jews because they had rejected God, as God came to them in Jesus. Now, for Paul, the emphasis is on the new Gentile Church and its mission but, eventually, he shows hope in his writing that the Jews would be reconciled to Christ and to the new Church of Christians.

Paul honours the roots of Christianity in Judaism, while blazing a path that takes Christianity in a new, authentic and autonomous direction. For Paul, the Law is that which convicts us of our sinfulness, and the gospel is that which announces our deliverance from sin through the death and resurrection of Christ. The gospel brings freedom from the condition of sinfulness, even while we are still imperfect and not yet cured from the habit of sinning. In this condition, grace acts as a medicine to heal and cure us from the plight of sin. Paul preaches and theologizes in Romans out of his own experience of sin (*hamartia*), grace and freedom.

For all of its accommodation to the human reality, human needs, and human understanding, grace remains mysterious and *dialectical*. This means that God's ways often say *No* to our human plans and patterns of understanding. Our finite human capacity is not nearly adequate by itself to comprehend the divine reality of grace and glory. God's ways remain a mystery, and faith opens us to many surprises and challenges. There is no controlling or comprehending God's grace, especially where the Church is concerned. Yes, the Church is the privileged medium through which grace is communicated. Yes, the Church is the chief repository of truth, tradition and moral guidance. But the Church's complete reality is a mystery to itself, something that in any and every generation it never fully comprehends.

The identity of the Church is a dialectical reality. God's grace works in the world because of the Church's sacramental works. Sometimes, less often, it is only in spite of the Church's humanly misguided work, her blind spots, her callousness, her bureaucracy and her scandals, that God's grace prevails. There are some things in the Church, as there are even more in the world, to which the gospel must say *No*. And still, as Paul says in Romans: 'where sin increased, grace abounded all the more' (5:20). Grace always abides in the Church, and we should not allow ourselves to be scandalized if sin is also found there. Each generation is left to sort this out for itself. Patient endurance (*hypomonē*) is always a

theme of Paul, and, in our own time, some patient endurance is required in our own relationship with the Church!

Because the Church proclaims a gospel at the core of which is freedom, and because the gospel speaks first of all to the unique and authentic heart of each individual, the Church will always have internal problems with its authority. The authority to preach the gospel that comes from God is absolute, but the Church's attendant authority to organize itself and set up systems for the services it provides is fallible and conditional. Christians need at times to be patient with their Church in this regard, but they also need to be critical and indignant with patterns of error and neglect. They must see glory in the gospel and in the Church that presents the gospel, and they must be critically attentive to aspects of authority that need not be regarded as absolute. The Church is not meant to be a despotic or totalitarian reality.

The Church has rules, but it is not a community based on rules. The rules of the Church must always be taught and learnt in light of the Letter to the Romans. These rules are not laws whose purpose or whole effect is to teach us that we are sinners and to convict us of our wrongdoings. The power of the gospel delivers the Christian from the oppression of the old Law. It is not the job of the Church to convince people once again that they are slaves of sin and transgressors of the law. The Church always needs to guard against allowing its own rules and bylaws to become burdens to its people and causes of oppression. The systematic organization of the Church needs to be viewed in this light, that is, in the spirit of the Letter to the Romans.

Prayer, the Personal and the Pro me

Prayerful experience is at the heart of Paul's message. Evangelization is not at all for him a dry, dull and ponderous process, but one full of involvement, anxiety and thankfulness for the freely given grace that brings relief from that anxiety. Dialectically considered, evangelization is a matter of the full realisation of freedom and the authentic practice of obedience (*hupakoē*). Growing in the life of the gospel, then and now, is a matter of prayer and meditation, and also of continuing formation, active assimilation and constant application of gospel values. It is this inner dialectic of anxiety and relief from anxiety that Luther experienced with Paul in his reading of Romans. So *experience*—that is, experience of grace and faith, experience of our own prayerful and progressive transformation, is key. Part of the work of a novice in religious life is to probe prayerfully



St Paul Addressing the Romans, from *John of Berry's Petites Heures*, fourteenth century

into his or her own experience to discover the pattern of God's work within his or her own life, loves, ambitions and inclinations. Through the work of the Spirit in us and around us, we are being conformed to Christ.

Reading the Letter to the Romans, we can pray with Paul and follow his own thought process as it takes shape. Certain theological ideas that were important to him, occurring to him in particular terms as he wrote his letter, are linked together as in a chain. So, he says that whom God predestined, God then called (8: 29, 30). Whom God called, these also God justified. In justifying them, God also sanctified them. Whom God sanctifies, those also God glorifies. So, these ideas are all descriptive of the one process of salvation, including stages of predestination, vocation, justification and glorification. Grace leads to glory. It is all a free gift or succession of mutually enhancing gifts from God. Grace is participation in the very life and glory of God.

This personal experience, Paul's and ours, is interpreted by Luther in his doctrine of the *pro me*. Christ died *for me* and would have done so even if I were the only person in the world. For Luther, the value of one soul and the value of all humanity is the same in the judgment and estimation of God. Jesus would have endured his passion and execution, and would have risen again in glory, just *for me*. The gospel is preached and written down just for me!

In the context of prayer, I take the *pro me* to heart, even as I realise that this letter belongs to the whole Church. Romans is like a personal and intimate letter, and so it seemed to me as a novice and thereafter. On this view, it was written, not only by Paul, but by God: written just for me. Grace is very personal, a gift that does unique and different things in the souls of various individuals. We are not saved as a crowd or gang, or as a batch of interchangeable items or scooped up grains of cereal

that do not matter as individuals. We are saved one by precious one, and with regard for our personal response to God's grace.

Having been a child back in the 1950s, I can remember a certain current of spirituality that was still rampant in those days. It was related to the heresy of Jansenism, but there were orthodox versions of it that were still common. There was stress on the individual's becoming a perfect specimen of Christian virtue. Focus was often not on Jesus Christ as forgiving Lord, but rather on individuals saving their souls, and on their state of worthiness before God. Maintaining personal sinlessness and worthiness to receive the eucharist outweighed even charity and social justice. The vowed religious life was regarded as the *state of perfection*, meaning that if someone kept the rule of a religious congregation flawlessly and unflinchingly, then that person would become *perfect*. The idea of becoming and keeping worthy and perfect was at the heart of religious life, which supplied the essential spirituality for the laity as well, so this attitude trickled down to them.

These aberrations or exaggerations about being perfect and keeping worthy often led to focus on the self instead of on God, even in circumstances of worship. Spiritual benefits had to be, in some way, merited by a person worthy of them, rather than being free and generous gifts from God, who gives the grace that makes one worthy. As novices, we sought to collect as many indulgences as we could on each single day. For St Paul, justification by faith meant forgiveness freely given by God, not something to which the person forgiven had any claim under the law. For Luther, the Letter to the Romans seemed to have been largely forgotten, or else only remembered selectively, in the Catholic tradition.

Gifts, Unity, Dissent

The Pauline teaching about the variety of the gifts, graces and services of the Holy Spirit appears in Romans, perhaps in its earliest form. Paul says: 'For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another' (12:4). Paul contemplates how the gifts and those who have them work together in the Church. He discerns the presence of several gifts (*pneumatika*), among them prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, generosity, leadership, compassion and even cheerfulness. Authority, it would seem, is subsumed in leadership, and should be appreciated only in the context of the other gifts. Authority and leadership are there to promote unity and balance among the gifts, and to bring other gifts to the fore, not to suppress them or lord it over them.

Dissent and protest, in a spirit of unity, are gifts that are sometimes needed in the Church to guard against abuses of authority. No doubt, whoever in the Church is in possession of any of these gifts is also obliged to have a concern for gentleness, harmony and mutual respect. Let us read Romans 16: 17, and take care to hear one of Paul's closing admonitions: '... keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and offences, in opposition to the teaching that you have learned; avoid them'. Dissenters and protesters need to test the Spirit as to whether they are prophesying in truth or grieving the Spirit. They must take it to heart that they may be abusing the gifts given to them, just as authorities must try to hear the voice of the Spirit in dissent and protest. In the Church, as in every good family, there are times of strife and disagreement. All must be careful to hear the gospel itself and to seek the will of God in difficult times. This is the obedience that faith demands.

The Letter to the Romans is itself a balance between protest in favour of change and plea on behalf of unity. Paul's letter is in part a protest against the practice of circumcision and the other Mosaic laws. It is also a plea for unity in a Church that needs to learn how to handle the gifts of new identity, freedom, forgiveness, justification and resurrection that it has received. Indeed, the Church is bound together with the intricacy and intimacy of the very members of the Body of Christ. The letter is addressed to the Church in Rome, but it is intended by the Holy Spirit for all Christians and for all times and places. Romans is inspired scripture.

The Remnant: Cosiness and Challenge

In chapter 11 of Romans, we find the biblical theme of the remnant (*hypolemma*). The Hebrew and Jewish people in the Bible were often afflicted with near extinction. This was partially owing to their many infidelities, but it was also owing to the abiding mystery of the way in which God works with God's people. In our own day, especially when we feel that either church authorities or the bulk of God's people are not measuring up to the demands of the Spirit's new Pentecost or to the teachings of the Church as we understand them, we may be consoled by thinking of ourselves as members of the remnant. God will save some of God's faithful ones, and from us again a new generation of believers will come. Hope lies with the faithful remnant. There is even hope that the less faithful will be grafted back on to what will become a renewed and thriving Church later on. This hope involves, perhaps, both a consoling cosiness due to our own fidelity, and a daunting challenge to become a better and wiser Christian.

Reflecting on the whole Letter to the Romans, we may discern Christ and the gospel itself as the greatest of gifts. This implies the gift of preaching for the preachers who preach it, and the gift of freedom for the children of God who hear and heed it. The central insight of Romans is that the whole of this process is gift, including our thankful response and use of what we are given. This process involves forgiveness of sin as a great gift of God's love, but also the gift of the Spirit who binds us into a community, a new covenant and the integral Body of Christ. What we are called to in our prayer, even today, is the development of a new and higher level of consciousness in which we become aware of the intensity of our unity as the Body of Christ. The eucharistic liturgy is the context, primarily, in which we experience this new unity and common identity. It is as we experience the Spirit as the bringer and revealer of this higher unity and identity that an ever deepening evangelization will occur.

Romans 16 contains a long catalogue of the friends and co-workers of Paul, bound together by grace in the work of preaching and ministry. We would do well to read this list of names slowly, and also to name with reverence our own companions as we try to live the gospel. The work of the gospel has to do with the use of gifts, the gifts of Paul's co-workers in their own time, and our gifts in today's world and situation. It may give us a cosy and contemplative feeling occasionally to realise that we have gifts, perhaps even a unique combination of gifts, to employ and to enjoy. Reading Romans carefully and prayerfully, we can make for ourselves a novitiate time, somewhere in the midst of life, to pray alertly with scripture, to wonder at the mystery of the Church, and our own personal gifts and calling. Of course, with that coziness there also comes the challenge to share our gifts more generously, to employ them more assiduously, and to take with humility some criticism of the ways in which we use them.

Robert E. Doud is emeritus professor of philosophy and religious studies at Pasadena City College in California. He has a particular interest in bringing together philosophy and poetry, using poetry as material offering insight into philosophy and using philosophy as a tool in the interpretation of poetry. His articles have appeared in *Process Studies*, *Review for Religious*, *The Journal of Religion*, *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, *Philosophy Today*, *The Thomist*, *Religion and Literature*, *Horizons*, *Soundings* and *Existentialia*.