



“Paul to the Roman House Churches”

Colossians 1:15-20; Colossians 2:6-15; Colossians 3:1-4, 12-24

Paul writes a letter to the believers in Rome, even though he has never been there.

Romans, written in 55-56AD, is a letter from the apostle Paul to the house churches in Rome. All Jews, including those Jews who had become Christians, had been expelled from Rome about five years before. Jewish Christians were now returning to Rome, only to find out

that the Gentile (non-Jewish) Christians were running the show! In this letter, Paul urges harmony and unity, reminding those Christians who had been Gentiles that the Jews were the root of the Christian tree and reminding the Jews who were now Christians that God’s salvation is for all people. There is one people of God and one faith.

What love looks like

Reading through Paul’s letter to the Romans, many people see a marked turn in Romans 12. But it is not the turn people often think is taken. Some contrast Paul’s “theology” (Chapters 1-11) with his “ethics” (Chapters 12-16), perhaps describing it as “belief” and “practice.” But this does Paul a disservice. There can be no such separation for Paul or for us. What we “believe” and what we “do” are woven together and cannot be pulled apart. Both the intellectually minded and the ever-practical find it more comfortable to put belief and practice in two separate boxes, but, as N.T. Wright aptly notes, it is like trying to separate our blood and our breath.

Romans 1-11 takes us up a mountain, showing us that God’s faithfulness to the covenant made with Abraham and the Israelites has been brought to its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. And with Jesus’ arrival nothing can ever be the same. Creation and humanity have been remade, even as we await this re-creation’s final consummation.

In Romans 12, Paul begins to show us, concretely, what this re-creation looks like. We are transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that we may see clearly what is “good and acceptable and perfect,” so that we can imaginatively comprehend and embrace the will of God (12:2). This renewing does not take place in isolation, but in relationship within community. Our reshaping plays out differently from person to person, but all of it is given to us for the building up of the community (12:3-8).

And what does this renewing look like? It looks like love. And what does love look like? Love is genuine, coming from the center of ourselves. It can’t be faked. Love is sacrificial. It is mutual. It is being willing to play second fiddle. Love is taking care of those who need us or are simply in need. We laugh with our friends when they laugh and we cry with them when they mourn. Read Romans 12:9-18. Read it in different translations. Try reading it less as a series of exhortations and more as a description, an imaginative description of the renewed mind living with others, including even those who are hostile to us or to the Gospel of Christ.

It is always worth remembering that the New Testament word for love is nearly always the Greek, *agape*. In Greek usage, it was a colorless, empty word, waiting to be filled with meaning and Paul doesn’t hesitate to fill it right up. All understandings of love that exclude God are mere distortions of the real thing. Thus, Paul tells the Christians in Rome that they are to love but then has to tell them exactly what genuine God-given love looks like, so that they can despise what is evil and hold on to what is good (12:9).

All this takes more imagination than we think. The world wants to teach us about love, to conform us to its ways. In the memorable words of J.B. Phillips, the world wants to squeeze us into its mold. So we must train ourselves to recognize the face of Christian love. This training has the aim of transforming us, maturing us, so that we can be the people God created us to be.

Transformation

In his letters, Paul does not concentrate on Jesus’ teachings but on the implications of what Jesus has accomplished. And what Jesus has accomplished is so profound, so creation-remaking that the only proper response is to offer ourselves, our entire beings, as a living sacrifice, for God has demonstrated that he is worthy of nothing less (v. 1). We can never stay as we once were. Our commitment to Christ demands nothing less than our transformation, the complete and utter renewing of our minds such that our thoughts, feelings, and actions are conformed to the ways of God. It is the marriage of what we believe about God with how we live with God, the joining of biblical theology and holy living.

How does this transformation happen? How do we “grow up in every way . . . into Christ” (Ephesians 4:15)? It seems, well, impossible so much of the time. There is so much in me that needs transforming. How can I put to death the old self (the living sacrifice) and put on the new self (the renewing of the mind)? Only by the grace of God. This renewing of the mind is the work of God’s Holy Spirit (see Romans 8:5-9). If it were up to us alone we couldn’t get there. Make a trip to Barnes and Noble and count the self-help books. Many of these are filled with excellent advice. The problem is that we just don’t actually do much of it. No, only by grace can we ever hope to live a holy life.

For, who wants to be called a baby? When I was in elementary school, those were fighting words. But that is pretty much how Paul sees the Christians in Ephesus. He pulls the punch just a bit by saying “we must no longer be children, tossed to and fro” (Ephesians 4:14) but the sharp point still hits home. To the Christians in Corinth, Paul wrote “And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as a spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh” (1 Cor.3:1-3). No punches pulled there.

Is Paul *trying* to be insulting? I don’t know whether Paul was going for a little shock value or not, but his point was well taken. These Christians were infants in the faith, Christian novices, fresh enlistees in the body of Christ. Now Paul doesn’t call the Colossian Christians infants or children, but he says that he prays for their growth, that they will “produce fruit in every good work and grow in the knowledge of God” (Col 1:10). He knows how far these new believers have to go on their journey to a deeper faith.

When we read Paul’s letters in the New Testament we have to remember that they are largely letters written to small, emerging communities of faith that he himself had founded only a few years before. He is their “senior pastor,” writing to his churches to provide guidance, to settle disputes, to teach, to encourage, and to otherwise help these new colonies of God’s re-born people grow toward Christian maturity.

Just try to imagine the journey that lay ahead of these Christians. There were no churches for them to grow up in. No parents or grandparents to turn to. No theological libraries or seminaries. No Bibles. Only this strange Good News about a God who gets himself crucified by the Romans. They were asked to give up their belief in the existence of many gods and embrace the Jewish claim that there was only one God. Their embrace of Christ often meant ostracism from their families and friends, for already there were nasty rumors about these followers of Christ, including gruesome whispers of their gathering to eat Jesus’ body and drink his blood.

They had as much to “unlearn” as to learn, as they grew into ever-truer disciples of Christ. In this, we are like them, for nearly all of us carry around unquestioned but misleading assumptions about the Christian proclamation. We think we understand and then are surprised by how much we have to learn and “unlearn,” how much our minds must be renewed if we are to be transformed.

Getting to the truth

This organic connection between what we know about God and how we live with God, depends on our making our way ever closer to the truth about God. But how do we do that? How do we arrive at a trustworthy core of beliefs about the God with whom we live?

We affirm that Scripture is the primary criterion of what we believe, the measure against which all claims are judged. But we recognize that we learn about God also by listening to those who have come before us, by seeking to understand our own experience with God and others, and by learning to think well, using our mind as well as our heart.

We are Methodists because we do not desire to be like children, tossed here and there by the latest Jesus fads. Instead, we pray that by “speaking the truth in love,” we will “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” We seek the “renewing of our minds” so that we can “discern what is the will of God,” so that we can grow into “maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” May we all embrace a calling to be spiritual theologians. And so we practice and practice some more. Each day we strive to grow in knowledge and in love, so that we might be ever more like Jesus.