

The Letter that Changed the World: The Influence of Romans

Rob Yule, 1998

Paul's letter to the Romans, written in 56-57 AD, has had an enormous influence on the history of the Christian Church. This introductory message in a series of sermons on Romans, preached by Rob Yule at St Albans Presbyterian Church, Palmerston North, New Zealand, on 15 February 1998, shows the impact that Romans has had on Christian leaders down the centuries, from St Augustine to Karl Barth.

A North African Teacher of Literature and Rhetoric

In the summer of AD 386 a thirty two year old North African teacher of literature and rhetoric, living in Milan, north Italy, sat weeping in the garden of a friend. He was a brilliant intellectual, searching for the meaning of life, struggling morally, and to the grief of his Christian mother Monica, living with a mistress. He was weeping, because he was too weak to break his immoral lifestyle.

As he sat, he heard the voice of a child coming from a neighbour's house, 'Tolle, lege! tolle, lege!' 'Pick up and read! Pick up and read!' As he heard the sing-song words of the child's game, he saw a scroll nearby that his friend had been reading. He picked it up and began to read. His eyes lit on these words from Paul's letter to the Romans (13:13-14):

' . . . not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts.'

He wrote later about this experience in his Confessions, the first autobiography ever to be written (8.29): 'I neither wished nor needed to read further. At once, with the last words of this sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled.'

The Professor's name was Aurelius Augustine. He went on to become Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, a great pastor, leader, and Christian theologian. His writings shaped the Western Church for more than 1500 years.

A German Monk and Teacher of Theology

In August 1513 an Augustinian monk and Professor of Bible in the University of Wittenberg, Germany, began a course of biblical lectures. At the time he was struggling with the issue of how to get right with God. He was puzzled by the phrase in Romans 1:17, 'the righteousness of God is revealed through faith'. How could the righteousness of God save a tormented sinner like him? Didn't God's righteousness condemn sinners?

'I greatly longed to understand Paul's letter to the Romans, and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, "the righteousness of God", because I took it to mean that righteousness whereby God is righteous and acts righteously in punishing the unrighteous Night and day I pondered until . . . I grasped the truth that the 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 I hated the righteousness of God" had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This message of Paul became to me a gateway into heaven.'

The name of the German monk was Martin Luther. From his rediscovery that God makes us right with himself through faith in Jesus Christ came the great movement of Christian renewal called the Protestant Reformation, which transformed Europe in the 16th century.

A Church of England Clergyman

On the evening of 24 May 1738 an unwilling and unconverted Anglican clergyman went to a meeting of Moravian refugees on the site of the present Barclays Bank in Aldersgate Street, London. He was a graduate of Oxford University, where he had been a member of an earnest Christian society nicknamed the 'Holy Club.' He had done a stint of missionary service among the Indians of North America, but had returned disillusioned. Someone was

reading Martin Luther's Preface to the Romans. The clergyman recorded in his journal what happened to him at that house meeting:

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

The clergyman's name was John Wesley. Later forced out of the Anglican Church because of his evangelical convictions, he became the great open air preacher of the Evangelical Revival that transformed England in the 18th century. It is estimated that Wesley preached 40,000 sermons and travelled nearly a quarter of a million miles on horseback. His movement profoundly affected the urban poor, and some scholars believe, saved England from a comparable upheaval to the French Revolution.

A Swiss Reformed Pastor

During the First World War a Swiss Reformed Pastor sat in his study in the village of Safenwil wrestling with what to preach Sunday by Sunday to his first congregation. He was disillusioned with the liberal theology he had been taught in seminary, because to his dismay all his theological teachers had supported the Kaiser's war policy. His liberal optimism was shattered by the carnage and destruction of the First World War. What should he preach? He made a joyful discovery of the message of Paul's letter to the Romans. He began to preach through Romans, and to write a commentary on it - with the sound of the guns booming away to the north. To his surprise his commentary challenged the human-centredness of the theology of the day, dropping 'like a bombshell on the theologians playground.'. Later he said:

'The man who sat writing his commentary was then just a young country pastor Altogether ignorant both of the forces which were ranged against him and of those upon which he might call for help, he tumbled himself into a conflict . . . the significance of which he could not foresee If we rightly understand ourselves, our problems are the problems of Paul; and if we be enlightened by . . . his answers, those answers must be ours.

The pastor's name was Karl Barth, who became the most prolific and influential theologian of the 20th century. He was challenged by Paul's letter to the Romans to let God be God. The Christian message is not just an insipid reflection of the current mores of society. It is a message about 'the Godness of God,' the majesty and otherness of God, and God's initiative and redeeming love for humankind through Jesus Christ his Son. Barth went on to become the prophetic spokesman of the German Confessing Church in its opposition to Hitler.

There is no telling what may happen when people begin to study Paul's letter to the Romans. What happened to Augustine, Luther, Wesley and Barth launched great spiritual movements which had a profound impact in their lifetimes and changed the course of history. Read this book, study this book, listen to the message of this book. It can change your life.

The Origin of Romans

Paul wrote Romans in the winter of AD 56-57. He was staying in Corinth, the chief seaport of ancient Greece, at the home of his friend and convert Gaius. Paul had been an itinerant preacher for nearly twenty years. He'd seen the gospel of God's salvation through Jesus Christ change the lives of Jews and Gentiles he'd witnessed to. Now he was writing down, in letter form, an account of this Gospel which he knew to be so dynamic and effective in bringing people to salvation. Romans is a full statement of Paul's missionary message.

Unlike Paul's other letters, his one to the Romans is the only one to a Church he hadn't started or visited. He knew every other church he wrote to personally, but not the church in Rome (which may explain the long list of personal greetings in the final chapter). That list of names tells us . . .

1. How the letter was written (16:22)

Paul, as was his usual custom, dictated it to a secretary or an amanuensis, Tertius. Paul would then sign the letter at the end in his distinctive large handwriting (Galatians 6:11).

2. How the letter was delivered (16:1-2)

Official mail in the Roman Empire was sent by runner. In the case of Romans - the largest of Paul's letters with 7,100 words - Paul sent it by a woman, Phoebe, a wealthy deaconess and benefactor in the church at Cenchreae, the port area of Corinth. She'd carried the papyrus sheets, wrapped in a waterproof skin, 1,500 kilometres across the Adriatic to Rome. Imagine if she'd lost it! I wonder if she (or the imperial police) realised what an influential document she was carrying! It just goes to show that a humble act of Christian service can be a link in a very important chain of events.