

THE
VISIONARY
CHURCH



THE VISIONARY CHURCH

A HANDBOOK FOR UNITY BASED ON ROMANS

JAY TROTT



The Visionary Church: A Handbook For Unity Based On Romans
Jay Trott

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing, 2025

Kindle Direct ISBN: 9798313677019

Editing: Heidi Jensen

Cover/Interior design: Kent Jensen | knail.com

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to those who kindly read and commented on the manuscript, especially Fr. James Wheeler, the Rev. Tara Shepley, and my wonderful long-suffering wife, Beth Trott. Many thanks to Fr. Joseph Shepley for his inspiration and service to the visionary church.

Many thanks to Heidi Jensen for her copyediting expertise, very much needed, and to Kent Jensen for the cover art and interior design.

“And the glory which you gave me
I have given them; that they may be one,
even as we are one.”

—John 17:22



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FOREWORD

My dear friend,

Paul's letter to the Romans is not an easy read by any means. I had a year-long wrestling match with it when I was about your age, inspired by Coleridge and wondering what he had in mind when he called it the most profound book in the world.

It can certainly be read without too much wrestling. That is how we usually read it—if I am not mistaken. We tend to break it into small pieces that seem more easily digestible than the whole. I do not necessarily think of this as cherry-picking, as I intend to make clear as we go along, and I hope I did not give any such impression.

However, as I was reading alone in my room many years ago, those little pieces of information seemed to have some deeper, hidden meaning, as if they were coded. There seemed to be some message or way of thinking that was not readily apparent on the surface, a mysterious theme that linked them all together and gave the letter a unified purpose that might otherwise seem lacking.

It took me a year of close reading and poring over every word in different translations before I began to have any inkling of what this unifying theme might be. In short, I believe Romans is a handbook for the visionary church. And the unseen subtext I was looking for is Paul's longing for unity, which begins to leap out at you the more you become aware of it.

Now, I know this is ancient wisdom. Traces of it can be seen in Origen, Chrysostom, and Augustine. Somewhat closer to home,

we find that Clarke and Paley have ideas about the letter that are similar to our own; that, as Paley puts it, the overall purpose of the letter is to put the Gentiles on an equal footing with the Jewish Christians. We have this summary from Philippi: “This gospel was revealed to him, the former Pharisee and zealot for the law, as deliverance from the yoke of the law, and by this very means as a breaking down of the wall of division which separated the Jewish and Gentile worlds.”¹ More recently, Dunn described “Jew first and also Greek” as the integrating theme of the letter.

But our understanding of Romans was so filtered by Reformation theology that we were not aware of it at all. It did not occur to us, either on casual reading or hearing expository preaching in church, that Romans might be about the possibility of unity in Christ. Based on what we see on social media, this message is still very relevant today. In a time when the Internet gives Christians, lay and ordained, a forum for publicly lashing each other day in and day out, Catholics for being Catholic, and Protestants for being Protestant, Paul’s message to the Romans seems more important than ever.

Paul had a passion for the church. In 2 Corinthians, he lists the many calamities he endured on his missionary journeys. Then he adds this intimate detail: “Beside those things that are without, that which comes upon me daily, the care of all the churches” (2 Cor. 11:28). He even likened this passion to Christ on the cross: “Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body’s sake, which is the church” (Col. 1:24).

But why was he suffering so much? Well, from Romans and many of his other letters, we see that one thing that profoundly

1 Philippi, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, 10.

grieved him was the divide between Jewish Christians and Gentiles in the early church. The first Christians were, of course, Jews. Paul, arriving on the scene later, became the apostle to the Gentiles. It was mainly through him that so many came into the church. However, Jewish Christians did not always welcome them with open arms. Some insisted that they had to become Jews first and be circumcised. Paul makes his feelings about this clear in Titus: “For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, especially they of the circumcision [Jews]: whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre’s sake” (Titus 1:10-11).

Strong words! But why did he want “the circumcision” (his fellow Jews) silenced? We believe it was because of his love of unity, as reflected in the great Psalm, “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!” (Psalm 133:1). Christ fervently desired unity among his followers, as seen at the Last Supper: “Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; that they all may be one; as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that you have sent me. And the glory which you gave me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them, and you in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that you have sent me, and have loved them, as you have loved me” (John 17:20-23).

Why was he so eager for them to be in unity? We can imagine several reasons. First, he wanted them to enjoy the sweetness of unity as reflected in the psalm, the sweetness that reflects the love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Also, he was probably worried about them. He knew he was about to be struck down, and they would need to be in unity in order to endure the trauma of the coming

days. After that, he would ascend into heaven, and they would need unity to “abide in him” (John 15:4) and not be overcome by the world and its hostility to the new faith or the severe trials he predicted at the end of Matthew. The early church would need to be in unity to endure persecution not just from the Romans but from unbelieving Jews who wanted to destroy it.

But there is more, much more. Unity also glorifies God. “By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one to another” (John 13:35). As Tertullian said, “See how these Christians love one another!” The perfect unity of those who believe in Christ, as described in Acts 2, is a witness to him in a world that is always at war, always in upheaval, and constantly at odds with each other. It shows God had indeed sent him. And moreover, unity also furnishes knowledge of God and the riches of his love. Christian unity is not just pleasant, and it is not just a witness; it is also a means of obtaining spiritual enlightenment. In short, Christ had a passion for unity, as seen in his most passionate prayer. And it seems unfortunate that so little of this passion is evident in the church that bears his name today.

This passion for unity is also very evident in Paul. “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that you walk worthy of the vocation wherewith you are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with long suffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, even as you are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (Eph. 4:1-6). Such soaring rhetoric exalts unity, which comes from the Spirit and is a sign of the Spirit working in the church. When Paul talks about “walking in the Spirit” later in Romans, he is referring to unity. We will have

more to say about this later.

Like Christ, Paul teaches that unity glorifies God. “Do all things without murmuring and disputing: that you may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom you shine as lights in the world” (Phil. 2:14-15). Christians shine like stars when their unity reflects the sacrificial love of Christ shown on the cross. Also like Christ, Paul describes unity as a source of spiritual enlightenment: “For I would that you knew what great conflict I have for you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh; that their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgement of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ; in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:1-3). The phenomenon of unity leads to an understanding of God because God is love. This idea comes up in many of Paul’s letters. And the “mystery” he has in mind is the glorious opening of the kingdom to the Gentiles.

Unity is universally desirable. The street gang is as sure a sign of the thirst for unity as the country club. Very few want to be solo travelers on the highway of a vast and indifferent universe. We want to be understood and accepted. We want to be part of something larger than ourselves, something of enduring value. We want the fellowship, the kinship that unity provides. Our love of unity can be seen in the idealization of the team, where everyone is expected to make sacrifices for the sake of a worthwhile goal. Teams are admired for their unity, which shows a recognition that unity is a highly desirable thing for its own sake.

The church becomes a beacon of unity when it bases itself on the love of Christ. This is the love that lays down one’s life for

one's friends, making it possible for there to be unity between Jew and Greek, male and female, Republican and Democrat, capitalist and socialist, and even Red Sox and Yankees fan. Only in a church with the mind of Christ is it possible for unity to be seen between groups that are naturally at odds with each other. And this is not just a superficial unity, as is seen with secular teams. It is tender and profound. "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 13:34). "Be kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you" (Eph. 4:32). "Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love" (Rom. 12:10).

But if everyone longs for unity, then why is it so rare? According to the Bible, we tend to be proud of ourselves and cannot bend towards unity. Adam and Eve lived in perfect harmony with each other and God until they were tempted to make themselves "like God" (Gen. 3:5). In other words, the first sin was pride, which put them at odds with God and each other. Because of their disobedience, they became mortal, inflaming their vanity even more. For the first time, they saw their nakedness. They realized they were made of dust, so they tried to build themselves up at the expense of others. The spirit of *emulation* entered the world. Cain slew Abel. This envious spirit was passed on to their children, who also were mortal. And it makes unity incredibly challenging.

Fortunately, there is good news about unity in the New Testament. First, Christ has taken away our sins; therefore, those sins no longer have the power to separate us from God or our fellow beings. Second, because of him, we have life through the Spirit. No longer are we abject slaves to the fear of death and nothingness. We do not have to contend with each other for a durable identity because we already have such an identity in Christ. We have been adopted into the family of God. We are "sons of God," no longer

mortal. With these two impediments removed—sin and death—the possibility of unity is restored.

Alas, our natural selfishness has not been taken away, however. Our bodies are still mortal; we are still “in the flesh”—in other words, sinners. Therefore, unity requires some work on our part. Unity in Christ is sweet, like oil running down Aaron’s beard, but it doesn’t automatically appear just because we join a church, are baptized, or take communion. It requires sacrifice, just as he sacrificed on the cross. Self-sacrifice is not something we do naturally. No, it must be taught. Just as a sports team must be coached to make sacrifices that lead to winning, so Paul coaches for unity in his letters. “If there be any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, fulfill my joy, that you be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory, but in lowliness of mind, let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others” (Phil. 2:1-4). This is unity of the highest order. There is nothing like it anywhere else. And it is predicated on the sacrificial love seen on the cross.

There is coaching for unity in Romans as well, couched in labyrinthine doctrine. Indeed, our working hypothesis is that Paul’s desire for unity is the key to understanding the entire letter. We believe it is possible to interpret almost every verse, at least in the first fifteen chapters, as fabric in the great quilt of the visionary church, built on unity and sincere love. The letter obtains a more profound significance when read this way; and, as a bonus, many divisive perplexities and paradoxes seem to melt away, as we will attempt to demonstrate as we go along.

Paul was trying to bring peace and unity to the church by

suppressing longstanding ethnic rivalries that we don't think about too much today. Historically, there was an impassable gulf between the circumcised Jews, the "chosen people," and the Gentiles, who were considered unclean. But according to Paul, this gulf no longer exists. A "great mystery" has been revealed to him. Gentiles who believe in Jesus Christ are also the chosen people. The seal of circumcision that marked the original covenant between God and the Jews has been replaced by baptism and the "seal of the Spirit" (Eph. 1:13).

Peter, holding the keys to the kingdom, was the first to witness this new seal. He was invited to the house of Cornelius, a Gentile, where he talked about Christ. "As he was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word, and the believers were amazed...for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God" (Acts 10:44-46). These Gentiles had not been circumcised and yet received the same distinctive gift of the Spirit that was seen on Pentecost (talking in tongues). Therefore, Peter knew the Spirit had been poured out upon them, too. Thus the apostles concluded at the Jerusalem Council in 50 A.D., a few years before Paul wrote his letter to Rome, that a new covenant was in effect based on faith in Christ—and in this new covenant, circumcision was no longer required. Peter used his keys to open the door of the kingdom of heaven to the Gentiles.

Through the seal of the Spirit—a new kind of seal of the promises of God—the sweetness of unity became possible for the first time between Jews and uncircumcised Gentiles, something that was previously unimaginable and would still be unbelievable if it had not been testified to by Peter himself. Paul attempts to give a sense of how astonishing this is from a historical perspective by commenting that it reveals the wisdom of God to "the principalities

and powers in heavenly places” (Eph. 3:10). What God has done to bring Gentiles and Jews together in Christ is just as impressive to the angels as it is to the Jews. And the seal of the Spirit was manifest in more ways than just talking in tongues. This was the first and most spectacular sign, but subsequently it was also seen in the “fruits of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22)—in the life of the believer—and through other “spiritual gifts” (1 Cor. 12:1) that every believer has been given; gifts for service of the church.

The Spirit facilitates unity between circumcised Jews and uncircumcised Gentiles—but bringing them together was causing conflict in the early church. Fitzmyer and others suggest that there was conflict in Rome due to a specific historical circumstance. The church in Rome was primarily Jewish at the outset, but it may have become mainly or exclusively Gentile after Claudius’ expulsion of the Jews from Rome in 49 AD (Acts 18:2). Thus (they argue) there was a conflict with the Gentiles when the Jews returned and tried to reimpose their religious traditions on the church. This seems plausible, but it doesn’t explain the conflict over circumcision in Galatia or the strong similarities between Romans and Ephesians. Indeed, it is unclear whether Paul is addressing *any* specific conflict in the Roman church, which he had never visited and did not know personally. Instead, he seems to have been using the opportunity to write a letter to Rome to expand upon what he had already said in Galatians.

From that fiery letter, we know Paul was preoccupied with the problem of Jewish Christians dividing the church by insisting on circumcision and other aspects of the ceremonial law. Galatians is very direct because Paul is dealing with a specific problem in a church he knows well, which appears to be backsliding. He seems to have had the same topic on his mind when he wrote to the Romans

a few years later. Clarke says that the Gentiles in Rome were facing challenges to their claim to equality in the church, which the Jews were opposing based on circumcision. There is no way to root this claim in documented history; it is based on the text of the letter itself. One thing is clear, however: Paul addresses the circumcision problem in Romans just as in Galatians, only with more subtlety. His basic argument is that the Jews were boasting in the law by trying to exclude uncircumcised Gentiles from the church—boasting in their righteousness—and thus negating the righteousness of Christ in saving them. Romans primarily deconstructs this boasting.

Boasting comes up in many of Paul's letters. Here's what he has to say about it in 2 Corinthians, showcasing a talent for sarcasm: "That which I speak, I speak it not after the Lord, but as it were foolishly, in this confidence of boasting. Seeing that many glory after the flesh, I will glory also" (2 Cor. 11:17-18). Boasting is false confidence. We would not need to boast if we genuinely believed in our actions. Second, boasting is "glorying in the flesh." As we will see, this connection between boasting and "the flesh" becomes critically important in Romans. And finally, boasting in the flesh is foolish. No one has any right to boast since the grave will overpower us all at one point or another. This critique of boasting is a significant theme of the Old Testament and a preoccupation of Christ when confronted with the behavior of the Pharisees.

In Paul's mind, "the circumcised" were boasting about their righteousness in the flesh by insisting that the Gentiles be circumcised. Since they were in love with boasting, Paul says he will boast too—but not in the flesh. Yes, he too was an Israelite and descendant of Abraham, he too was circumcised and zealous for the law, but unlike his fellow Pharisees, the only thing he will "boast" in is his weakness as a poor sinner and his need for Christ.

“If I must need to boast, I will boast of the things which concern my infirmities” (2 Cor. 11:30). This is a radical statement in the Judaism of his time. He will boast of the work of God in saving him and not of his own works, of God’s righteousness and not his own, the type of boasting seen in David: “My soul shall make her boast in the Lord: the humble shall hear of it, and be glad” (Psalm 34:2), and in Jeremiah,² quoted by Paul: “As it is written, He that boasts, let him boast in the Lord” (1 Cor. 1:21).

Paul has shown us the straightest path to unity—indeed, the only path, to our mind. If we boast in ourselves, or what he calls “the flesh” and its righteousness, we will be divided, since such boasting glorifies us at the expense of others. But if we boast instead of the righteousness of Christ, we will be united. We will have one mind, which is to praise God and give thanks for his goodness. And thereby we will obtain the unity that comes down from above, the “unity of the Spirit” (Eph. 4:3), which is available to us because the Spirit has breathed on us, and we have life.

The connection in Paul’s mind between insisting on circumcision and “boasting in the flesh” becomes even more evident in Galatians: “As many as desire to make a fair show in the flesh, they constrain you to be circumcised; only lest they should suffer persecution for the cross of Christ. For neither they who are circumcised keep the law; but desire to have you circumcised, that they may boast in your flesh. But God forbid that I should boast, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world. For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision avails anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature” (Gal. 6:12-15). The Jews were insisting that the Gentiles be circumcised. In Paul’s mind, this was a form of boasting. And boasting destroys unity.

2 Jeremiah 9:24.

Paul's desire to end boasting is the basis of the contrast he draws throughout Romans between "Spirit" and "flesh." When we hear the term "the flesh," the first thing we may think of is fleshly sins or concupiscence. But Paul provides an extensive list of the "works of the flesh" in Galatians, and they include much more than that. To be sure, "adultery, fornication, uncleanness, and lasciviousness" are on the list—things we usually associate with "the flesh"—but in Paul's lexicon, this term also refers to "hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies" (Gal. 5:20). In short, "the flesh" is also the spirit of emulation. "For whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are you not carnal [i.e., in the flesh], and walk as men?" (1 Cor. 3:3). In Paul's mind, "the flesh" also means boastful behaviors that lead to division in the church.

While boasting about circumcision was the main thing that upset Paul, it seems there was boasting going on in the Gentile camp as well. Clarke supposes that Roman Gentiles were educated in contempt of Jews as haters of humankind and imbued with a superstitious religion (as Tacitus wrote of them a few years later). In any case, we know the Gentiles were proud of their philosophers. Here is Paul's verdict: "God has made foolish the wisdom of men" (1 Cor. 1:20). In Corinth, they were puffing themselves up over speaking in tongues. Paul makes it clear in both 1 Corinthians and Romans that *every* church member has been gifted by the Holy Spirit in their own way and is worthy of honor. Some were proud of their prosperity, a phenomenon not unknown in the church today. Paul shames them by pointing to the abject condition of himself and his fellow apostles: "We are made as the filth of the world" (1 Cor. 4:13). And some were proud of their numerical superiority. He issues a stern warning about this in his allegory of the branches.

Some Gentiles, mixing philosophy with the gospel, decided

they could do anything they wanted with their bodies and commit any carnal sin because of the freedom they had in the Spirit (more on this later). This, too, was a type of boasting, in the form of Gnosticism, or claiming to have secret knowledge of salvation that less enlightened people aren't privy to. As Paul says of their tolerance toward the fornicator who was living with his father's wife in Corinth, "Your glorying is not good" (1 Cor. 5:6). It strikes us that this type of boasting may have been doubly injurious to unity because it gave the Jews a way to justify the low opinion they already had of the Gentiles. In any case, Paul strongly condemned it in several places, especially in chapter six of Romans.

But what does all this have to do with our modern churches, where there is no thought of circumcision or Greek philosophy? "Much in every way." We have our own boasting to do, cloaked in religiosity. For instance, churches tend to meet in buildings. Those buildings can bring glory to God when the worshippers live in unity and peace. But if we are divided over the physical plant—say, wall colors, pew cushions, speaker systems, what kind of windows we have, the list goes on and on—in short, if our church meetings sometimes turn into shouting matches, then we bring shame and dishonor to God. And there are items inside those churches that often are regarded as being holy as if they were taken from the Tabernacle of Moses—including communion things, crosses, vestments, hymnbooks, specific translations of the Bible, altar candles, and flowers and coverings, liturgies, and (sigh!) music. There is nothing inherently spiritual about any of these things. Only the Spirit confers spirituality, and the unity of the Spirit cannot be seen if we are criticizing others for not doing things the way we think they ought to be done or the way we like them done.

Our love of *doctrine* can also become a subtle form of boasting.

The Catholic church became divided over the doctrines of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, two consummate writers and sincere followers of Christ with different ideas about the nature of God and man, as will be discussed. Followers of these two teachers found a way to coexist in the Roman church because they cherished unity highly. However, doctrine that divides the church seems based on the flesh, not the Spirit, since the Spirit unites us; and today we have thousands of separate denominations explicitly based on the dividing power of doctrine. It is difficult to square that circle with Christ's plea that we may all be one.

To summarize—Romans was written primarily to facilitate unity between Jew and Gentile by discouraging any boasting about our righteousness. Paul wants Roman Christians to walk in the Spirit of love and reconciliation, not the flesh of law and judgment. To this end, he begins by showing that all are equally condemned under the law; therefore, no one has a right to boast in the law. Then Paul shows that we are all equally saved through Christ and his righteousness, saved by faith in the power of his blood, which gracious gift applies as much to Gentiles as to Jews. Then, he attempts to explain the prevalence of Gentiles and lack of Jews in the early church in terms of salvation history and to justify his ministry to the Gentiles. Finally, he provides a detailed roadmap for obtaining the visionary church.

Why did Paul write such a long and involved letter to a church he had never visited? This has been much debated. One thing seems clear: Romans is an exercise in church-building. Probably sensing the importance of a church in Rome, the seat of the empire, Paul writes extensively and often passionately to provide a solid foundation, as he describes in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15. This letter was written early in the church's history, perhaps in 55 AD.

Unfortunately, we do not know who founded the Roman church, but common sense tells us that its grasp of sound doctrine at this early date was probably tenuous. Hence, Paul was working out the fundamentals of Christianity in his letter to Rome, aided by the Spirit and his experience with church-founding elsewhere.

To whom was he writing? Although Paul had not yet visited Rome, he probably had an idea of the composition of the Roman church from Priscilla and Aquila, Roman exiles with whom he lived in Corinth. Commentators take the following to indicate that he believed the church to consist mainly of Gentiles: “Now I would not have you ignorant, brothers, that oftentimes I purposed to come to you (but was hindered till now) that I might have some fruit among you also, even as among other Gentiles” (1:13). But the actual content of the letter seems primarily directed toward Jewish Christians, elaborating on the arguments he made in Galatians to stop the mouths of the legalists. And if there were few Jews in Rome in 55 AD, as some claim, then it seems reasonable to conclude that the audience Paul had in mind was Jewish Christians everywhere. Letters by the apostles were intended for circulation among all the churches and not just those to which they were addressed.

A brief word about Paul: we know his background from his own words in Acts 22. He was born in Tarsus in Cilicia (in 6 AD), a citizen of Rome, but brought up in Jerusalem. He was “raised at the feet of Gamaliel” (Acts 22:3), one of the most famous rabbis, and became a Pharisee, zealous for the law. In his zeal, he persecuted Christians unto death in the earliest days of the church, binding and delivering both men and women into prison. He was standing by when Stephen was martyred and consented tacitly to his death, holding the outer garments of those who slew him. He experienced conversion, however, in 33 AD, when he was on his way to

Damascus to bring Christian prisoners to Jerusalem. A great light shone and caused him to fall to the ground, and he heard the voice of Jesus say, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4).

Saul, later calling himself Paul, was singled out for conversion through a miraculous direct intervention by God, who tells Ananias that “he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel” (Acts 9:15). It seems the church needed him. We can think of several reasons why. First, the conversion of a persecutor of Christians glorified Christ, as Paul himself says in Galatians 1:23-24. Second, he was trained by a renowned rabbi and was a Pharisee, which gave him the background to address the law authoritatively, as we see in Romans. His teacher was famously learned, and through him, Paul acquired a level of erudition and sophistication not seen in other New Testament writers. Finally, he was a Roman citizen, which may help to explain why he wrote such a long letter to the church in Rome.

Why is Romans so hard to understand? This is not the case with Paul’s other letters. The two letters to the Corinthians, for example, are perfectly transparent. However, it is very much the case with Romans, as the differences among commentators attest. The reason may be that Paul was struggling with a mighty foe in his own mind. His heartfelt desire was to have the Gentiles welcomed into the church and not pushed away by observant Jews—but he was an observant Jew who had lived the Jewish life and believed in it fervently until his conversion, as he relates at the beginning of Galatians. Thus, the arguments against his doctrine of unity probably seemed to him to be deep-rooted, profound, and formidable. Circumcision was fundamental to the Jewish identity. He had laid out his basic argument for inclusion without circumcision in a burst of fury in Galatians. In Romans, we see him

attempting to shore it up in a more contemplative mood, trying to deal with the magnificent tree of Judaism, still highly revered in his own mind, far more beautiful than any other tree, and create a sure foundation for a new church built on Christ that did not violate its basic precepts or integrity. The difficulty of reconciling the old to the new may have led to some of the challenges encountered in his prose.

Incidentally, we've used the King James version for our Bible quotations, partly because it is universal but mostly because it seems to us to be one of the least filtered of the commonly-used translations. We have taken the liberty of cleaning it up in places to make it seem less forbidding to modern eyes. In some areas, we have used the NASB and/or Strong's Greek lexicon for clarity.

Finally, we are writing because of our passion for unity among Christians and not for any other reason. We would not be writing if it were not for this passion. We are not so foolish as to think we have anything of value to add to the massively accumulated commentary on Romans. And to be frank, we are often inclined to despair of the possibility of unity when we look at the militant discourse of some of our fellow Christians in social media and the state of the church today. But we sincerely hope this little book will contribute positively in some small fashion and not add to the conflagration.

CHAPTER 1

THE OBEDIENCE OF FAITH

This may seem to be an unconventional place to start—but we do find the following statement intriguing: “By whom [Christ] we [Paul] have received grace and apostleship, for obedience to the faith among all nations, for his name” (1:5). Romans is often described as a book of doctrine, but from these words it seems Paul is also interested in *obedience*; or as Fitzmyer calls it, “faith that manifests itself as obedience.”¹ He said the following in defense of his ministry to King Agrippa: “I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision but showed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and do works suitable for repentance” (Acts 26:20). Later in Romans he says he has preached the gospel “to make the Gentiles obedient, by word

1 Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 237.

and deed” (15:18). And at the very end of the letter, he says his gospel was “made known to all nations for the obedience of faith” (16:26). Clearly it is not just faith—in the sense of doctrine—that he has on his mind as he commences writing. It is also obedience.

Romans is not just a letter about what we believe or how we think about things, although that is undoubtedly important. It is also very much a call to action. Yes, it is true, as he says in Ephesians, that “by grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). However, it is also true that “we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God has before ordained that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). These two statements cannot be separated. Literally! The point of Romans was not to make doctrine per se; it was to use doctrine to bring about reconciliation between Jew and Gentile. From Galatians: “For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision avails anything, nor uncircumcision; but faith which works by love” (Gal. 5:6). In context, faith working by love refers to the Judaizers putting aside their objections to welcoming uncircumcised Gentiles into the church. Does Paul simply want us to have faith and do nothing? Not at all. He wants us to have faith and become “living sacrifices” for the sake of the visionary church. “Among all nations” means he is bringing his message of the obedience of faith to the Gentiles as well as the Jews. He has specific instructions for them in chapter six, but most of the arguments in Romans are directed at his fellow Jews. The obedience he wants from them is to what he calls the “law of faith” (3:27), by which all divisive boasting over circumcision is ruled out.

But then why does he say that “to him that works not, but believes on him that justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness” (4:5)? It was because he was trying to shut the

mouths of the Judaizers. Paul was faced with an explosive situation. The Judaizers were insisting on the “work” of circumcision in order for the Gentiles to be welcomed into the church. The church’s future depended on the outcome of this contest between observant Jews and the liberalizing influences seen in Paul as well as Peter and John. Paul tried to settle the circumcision question at the Jerusalem Council, but apparently some Jews were not ready to give up the fight. They were still insisting that circumcision was necessary for salvation. When Paul talks about “him that works not” in Romans 4, the specific work he has in mind is circumcision, as is evident in context. He is making the argument that Abraham was justified by faith *before* he was circumcised—saved from childlessness by his unwavering faith in God’s promises and not by the work of circumcision. And the moral is that the Gentiles are also justified by faith without this work. Therefore, they should not be barred from the church.

Paul is adamantly opposed to the idea that the work of circumcision is necessary for salvation—but he’s not opposed to the idea that the work of the law has salvific value. Indeed, he advises us to “work out our salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12). The work he has in mind is the life-giving work of love, which he describes in chapters 10 and 12-15 of Romans. He does indeed talk about the “righteousness which is by faith” (3:22), but the main point of this righteousness was to erase the dividing line between Jew and Gentile, as we see from Ephesians 2:11-16. In Reformation theology, there is a tendency to use such passages to lift faith up at the expense of works, to make faith seem like the only vital thing and relegate works to a lower level of importance. But while Paul discounted the work of circumcision, he did not in any sense discount works of love. Indeed, he glorified faith in order

to promote the good work of love, as will be discussed.

We are aware that some interpret the “obedience of faith” to mean the obedience of believing; for instance, Murray. It is our duty to believe in God and in the one who was sent—Jesus Christ, his Son. We do not discount this interpretation by any means. Without question, our first and most important duty is to believe. But this, too, applies to the Jews. Through their insistence on circumcision for salvation, they were showing a lack of faith in Christ and the saving power of his blood. We plan to make all of this clearer in a bit, but for now, our point is that the doctrine found in Romans is not merely doctrine for its own sake, as it is often treated. Paul is not trying to get us to sit around and talk about faith. Instead, his doctrine is a tool for advancing the “obedience of faith.” In Romans, he used doctrine mainly to encourage the obedience that leads to unity and a more perfect love. This will be our theme in all that follows.

Having started unconventionally, we will now place our highlight pen upon the second verse: “Concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was made of the seed of David according to the flesh; and declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead” (Rom. 1:3-4). This statement strikes us as being vital to interpretation of the letter for many reasons. That Jesus was a “son of God” in the general well-accepted sense of someone who has a special relationship with God was self-evident. However, Paul uses the Resurrection as proof of something Peter could only take a guess at in his confession: Jesus is the actual only begotten Son of God. He is not the Messiah in the sense that many Jews conceived him—a military conqueror of worldwide importance. He, in fact, is God. Christ’s divinity is the cornerstone of salvation through faith. An

army commander like David may be able to foil our foes, but he does not have the power to justify us or forgive our sins. The Son of God does have this power, and Paul will expand upon it at some length when he comes to the “one man” argument comparing Christ with Adam. Christ blessed Peter for calling him “the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16), saying this acknowledgment was the rock upon which his church would be built; Paul shows he agrees by placing his statement about Christ being the Son of God at the beginning of the letter, since his purpose in writing Romans was to build a Christian church upon the rock of Christ. And we think he might have had another iron in the fire, too. The Resurrection, which shows the righteousness of Christ—that he had fulfilled the law—is also for the justification of those who believe in him, as Paul tells us at the end of chapter four. But we will say more about that when we get there.

In our view, this statement does something else as well. It establishes *life* as our highest value. This is very important. The highest value among the philosophers was intellect—and this is also true of many theologians, who claim that God is intellect in his essence and indirectly glorify intellect through their doctrine-making. But if, as John says, “the life was the light of men” (John 1:4), then it is the Resurrection that brings the true light into the world, not intellect and its qualitative powers. Jesus points to the value of life in our understanding of who he is and of God: “For as the Father has life in himself; so, has he given to the Son to have life in himself” (John 5:26). It is eternal life that distinguishes between God and men. Life is the highest value for Paul, higher than the letter of the law that the legalists were in love with. The “spirit of holiness” seen in the Resurrection has been explained in myriad ways as early as Origen. We think it might mean that the

Resurrection proved that the spirit of holiness was seen in Christ—that he fulfilled the law and, therefore, obtained life, just as Moses promised. Others think it reflects the role of the Spirit as the Lord and giver of life—that, as Luther put it, Christ was raised up by the power of the Spirit. In any case, life is exalted by this connection with holiness. Life comes from the Spirit and is sacred. “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul” (Gen. 2:7). Any talk about whether something is “spiritual” should always begin with the value of life.

Why does this seem important to us? Because the entire letter reflects this valuation. The value of life underlies Paul’s fervent desire that we love one another in the church and stop biting and devouring each other. The value of life determines the difference between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. Some Jews were condemning the Gentiles—their fellow brothers in Christ—for being uncircumcised. They were clinging to the letter of the law, which, as Paul will argue, brings death, since no one can obey the law perfectly. The value of life is reflected in his call to accept one another just as Christ accepted us and to be humble and peace-seeking, looking to the needs of others, and thinking of them as being of more importance than ourselves. The value of life is reflected in his desire for diversity and tolerance of cultural differences in the church, which will be discussed in chapters fourteen and fifteen. It is reflected in the dichotomy of “flesh” and “Spirit,” which is crucial to understanding the letter, as Augustine and Luther realized. The flesh is mortal, but the Spirit gives life. If life is our highest value, then the flesh—including circumcision—is nothing. Therefore, we should walk in the Spirit, which builds up life, and not in the flesh, which builds up mortal beings.

THE CALLED OF CHRIST

Paul concludes his statement about the obedience of faith by adding, “Among whom are you also the called of Christ” (1:6). The “you” he has in mind is all believers in Rome, including the Gentiles, or especially them, since they had apparently proliferated by the time the letter was written. For the first time, he hints at a shocking doctrine that he will develop in great detail later. To put an end to the resistance of Judaizers to uncircumcised Gentiles coming into the church, he is going to argue that the Gentiles are also “called,” based on the seal of the Spirit witnessed by Peter and debated at the Jerusalem Council. In other words, the Gentile Christians are also now the chosen people. Through faith, they have become part of the family of God, as Paul says in Galatians, whether or not they have been circumcised, contrary to tradition, and indeed to Genesis 17:10-14. Paul reinforces the point by saying, “To all that are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints” (1:7). *All* who believe are called to be saints, not just the Jews, with their obedience to the law.

He says that the gospel of which he is “not ashamed” is “the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believes; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek” (1:16). This statement is often interpreted to mean that the preaching of the gospel brings one shame in the world. Cranfield says the reason Paul is not ashamed is because the gospel is God’s saving power, which is an excellent point. But it seems likely to us that the specific thing he is not ashamed of is his insistence that the gospel is for uncircumcised Gentiles as well as for Jews, as he actually says elsewhere: “Concerning which I am appointed a preacher, an apostle, and a teacher of the Gentiles. This is the reason I also suffer from these things. Nevertheless, I am not ashamed: for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that

he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day” (2 Tim. 1:11-12). Here, at the beginning of Romans, he boldly states that salvation is “to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” This is what he is not ashamed of proclaiming. In fact, the entire letter can be seen as an explanation of why he is not ashamed of his ministry to the Gentiles, which seems to have been causing him some grief among his fellow Jews.

Why to the Jew first? Thomas² says it is because the Jews received the promises, and the Savior came from the Jews. The Jews are also first because they were chronologically first in God’s affection. They were the first chosen people, beloved by God and sustained by God in the midst of their enemies despite their repeated faithlessness. Secondly, Paul himself was a Jew—and he wanted his fellow Jews to know it. He became the Apostle to the Gentiles by default, as we will see later, but this formulation indicates that he did not want the Jews to think he favored the Gentiles in any way. To say “to the Jew first” is to send a signal to his fellow Jews that they are still first in his heart and mind, even though most Jews had rejected his gospel, and he was bringing many Gentiles into the church.

Paul praises the members of the Roman church by claiming that their “faith is spoken throughout the world” (1:8). This used to strike us as a friendly blandishment of the type often seen in letters. Still, Benson and others point out that the existence of a church in Rome, the seat of the empire and presumed center of the world, would have been notable to Paul and other churches scattered throughout the empire. This may help to explain why Paul wrote such a long letter to a church with which he had no personal acquaintance, anticipating the importance of Rome to the faith

2 We will use this to avoid the awkwardness of “Thomas Aquinas.”

in times to come. Or it could be, as Barnes says, that the Roman church was simply famous for its faith because it was famous.

In any case, the praise of their faith foreshadows the famous argument he will make later on that we are saved by faith and not by works. This was something new. When Moses gave the people the law, he told them, “Do this and you shall live” (Lev. 18:5). If they showed their commitment to their covenant with God by obeying his commandments, then “he will love you, and bless you, and multiply you: he will also bless the fruit of your womb, and the fruit of your land, your corn, and your wine, and your oil, the increase of your cattle, and the flocks of your sheep, in the land which he swore unto your fathers to give you” (Deut. 7:13). That’s salvation through works. However, Paul will argue that it is impossible to use the law to justify ourselves or obtain righteousness. God, through his own righteousness, offers a new kind of justification, which is obtained by believing in Christ and his power to save. Paul expands on this foreshadowing by quoting Habakkuk: “The just shall live by faith” (Hab. 2:4). In context, this meant that, although Jerusalem was about to experience the wrath of God in the Babylonian conquest, those who were faithful would live to see the destruction of Babylon. The just shall live because they have faith in the justice of God, which sustains them even in the calamity that was about to befall Jerusalem. The same is true of Christians who put their faith in Christ. Dodd comments: “Paul took the passage from Habakkuk to mean that, though it was impossible to gain life by obeying the Law, it was possible to do so by simple reliance on God, in the conviction that He is able to give the blessing He has promised to men.”³

In short, Paul uses this passage to introduce his doctrine of

3 Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, 15.

justification by faith, which plays a significant role in the letter. It is a good example of what we meant when we said that the doctrine in Romans was designed to promote action and was not just doctrine for its own sake. Paul used the argument of justification by faith to debunk the claim of the Judaizers that the work of circumcision was necessary for salvation. Its purpose was to promote Gentile inclusion as well as unity between Gentile and Jew in churches where the two populations mingled, like Rome. The main barrier to this unity was the belief of the Judaizers that they were righteous because they were circumcised. Based on this claim, they refused to be welcoming to uncircumcised Gentiles. The concept of justification by faith removes this barrier entirely, as Paul explains in Ephesians 2. There was a disparity between Jews and Gentiles with regard to the work of circumcision, but with regard to faith in Christ, they were perfectly equal. Both obtained justification by faith in the power of his blood; therefore, the Judaizers must stop their boastful insistence on circumcision, which was dividing the church. Again, this is not just doctrine for its own sake. It is doctrine for the sake of unity and inclusion. Sacrificial love is the goal that Paul has in mind with the doctrine of justification by faith. To focus on the doctrine itself and neglect the good work of “leading a life of love” (Eph. 5:2) is like serving a sandwich without the meat.

But then, are we saying that this doctrine is somehow *contingent* upon his contest with the Judaizers? Not at all. It is entirely possible that he came upon the doctrine before he ever contemplated writing letters to the Galatians and Romans, perhaps during his sojourn in Syria after conversion. Nor does the doctrine’s validity depend in any way upon the specific context in which he deployed it in those letters. Justification by faith is crucial to our belief system

as Christians, regardless of whether we have Gentiles and Jews at each other's throats in our churches.

We will say this, however: the purpose of the doctrine as employed in those letters is to promote the visionary church. Paul desired unity and inclusion, and the doctrine facilitates these things by indicating that both Jew and Gentile are saved through their faith in Christ apart from works, including circumcision, as he will argue in the following three chapters. The Judaizers had no basis on which to exclude the Gentiles from the church. Justification by faith levels the playing field⁴ between them, as will be discussed in more detail later.

THE WORLD IS UNDER JUDGMENT

Why is it important to remind us of the ancient prophecy that “the just shall live by faith,” sort of out of the blue, as it were? As Luther points out, Paul tells us in the very next breath. It is because “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (1:18). In short, we’re in big trouble if we are relying on our own merit for justification, like the Judaizers. Only faith in Christ and his merits can save us from the wrath to come.

Paul uses this dire warning to kick off the deconstruction process we discussed earlier. In the first half of the letter, he is going to take a wrecking ball to Jewish religious pride and the idea that we can justify ourselves through works. The reason for doing this seems quite simple. The Judaizers were boasting about their righteousness by insisting that the Gentiles be circumcised; therefore, Paul is going to negate their boasting and love of judging by showing that

4 We are gratified to find this same language in Douglas Moo, but, as it happens, we did not borrow it from him. Chrysostom calls it “setting them upon a level.”

they, too, are sinners and very much under judgment.

Before we go any further, it is probably important to acknowledge that the term “law,” as it pertains to the Old Testament, can mean two very different things in Romans—the ceremonial law and the moral law. This can lead to interpretive challenges, as Origen points out, since Paul has a habit of rapidly pivoting from one to the other without stopping to let us know. The ceremonial law includes circumcision, dietary laws, and observance of the Sabbath and feast days. It is quite possible to obey this law perfectly, at least in an outward sense, whether or not we are conscious of its inward significance. Thus it is entirely possible to boast in the ceremonial law—to use it to make ourselves seem righteous, as, in Paul’s view, the Judaizers were doing when they insisted on circumcision, being themselves circumcised.

Meanwhile, the moral law consists of the Ten Commandments and various elaborations in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Now, it is also possible to obey the moral law outwardly. That is, it is possible literally not to murder our neighbor—which is the letter of the law. But no one who is a “Jew inwardly” (2:29) would ever dream of boasting in the moral law because it is impossible to obey it inwardly—the *spirit* of the law, which requires perfect love, as Jesus explained in Matthew 5 and Paul will demonstrate in his confession of his inability to obey the tenth commandment. Romans becomes easier to follow if we keep in mind that Paul uses our inability to obey the moral law perfectly to negate the boasting he sees in the Judaizers over the ceremonial law. We will try to untangle this as we go along.

And there is something else that seems vitally important as an aid to interpretation. Paul has just invoked the “righteousness of God” (1:17) in connection with the idea that the just shall live

by faith. They obtain life through their faith in Christ because of the righteousness of the cross, where God fulfilled his promises of salvation by giving his own Son to pay for their sins. Murray says the phrase reflects Isaiah (51:5-8; 56:1), where God's righteousness was "to be revealed in action and operation; the righteousness of God was to be made manifest to saving effect."⁵ It establishes a contrast between the righteousness of God and the righteousness of man that courses throughout the letter. The purpose of this contrast is to demonstrate to the Judaizers that their presumed righteousness—their good works under the law—is paltry compared to the righteousness of God in giving us his own Son as a sacrifice for our sins. Our righteousness is like "filthy rags" (Isa. 4:6). It cannot save us from the wrath of a holy God and should not be used to justify any boasting in the law.

However, salvation *can* be obtained through Christ and the redeeming power of his blood; through *his* righteousness, imputed to us through faith. And who can be saved in this way? All who believe in him—including uncircumcised Gentiles. This is the argument Paul is foreshadowing. The righteousness of God is revealed "from faith"—that is, from faith in Christ, which Gentiles also have— "to faith," or the lifting up of the saving value of faith itself, which is what Paul is going to spend some time doing later on in the letter. Romans can be described as an attempt to lift up faith in the righteousness of God in keeping his promises over the false confidence seen in the works-righteousness of the Judaizers, as will be discussed when we come to chapter four. Origen and others use the previous verse to suggest that Paul means from the faith of the Jews to the faith of the Gentiles—from Abraham's justifying faith in the promises of God to the Gentiles' justifying faith in

5 Murray. *Romans*, 29.

Christ. We like this explanation, too; but another possibility is that Paul affirms that faith in the gospel leads (or should lead) to faithfulness—to the obedience of faith.

Paul begins his attack on works-righteousness by exposing the depravity of humankind. The wrath of God is being revealed in the pagan world because they suppress the truth of the righteousness God requires through the unrighteousness of their lack of faith. They know the truth even if they do not have the revealed law because God's eternal qualities are seen in everything that God has made, yet they do not believe. God reveals himself to them, his power and his goodness, through his magnificent creation; therefore the pagans in Rome and elsewhere have no excuse for their lack of faith (Chrysostom's discussion of natural revelation is the best we have seen). They fail to see God's "invisible things" (1:20) not because they are stupid—no one would dream of calling Plato or Aristotle or Seneca stupid—but because they are proud. They "glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened" (1:21). They did not glorify the Creator by believing in him, even though his handiwork was perfectly obvious. "Professing themselves wise"—boasting about their philosophers and learning, as the Greeks and Romans were wont to do—"they became fools" (1:22) and worshipped idols they had made with their own hands.

They exchanged the truth for a lie and worshipped the creature rather than the creator, so God gave them over to depravity in order that the creaturely bodies they worshipped would be dishonored. Paul describes the depravity among the pagan idol-worshippers in some detail. This damning description does not seem exaggerated based on what we see in Roman literature of the day or the lifestyles of the Caesars as described by Suetonius or public art from

Pompeii. It does not describe the totality of Roman behavior—not all Romans were like this—but it is not intended to. Its purpose is to compare the boastful pride of Rome with the behavior of many of its citizens. We will simply point out that the same description could be used by a moralist to characterize modern society, not in its totality but in its pridefulness. “Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same but have pleasure in them that do them” (1:32). It should not be hard for us to understand what this means.

Since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them over to depraved behaviors, which Paul describes. But this passage is more than a condemnation of the depravity of the pagan world. It is part of Paul’s overall brief against boasting in the law. If this is what human beings actually are, then they don’t have any right to boast about their wisdom or holiness or to judge others. Now, in chapter one, he talks about people who do not have the Mosaic law, which is the Gentiles. But in chapter two he sets his sights squarely on his fellow Jews: “Tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that does evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile; but glory, honor, and peace, to every man that works good, to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile: for there is no respect of persons with God” (2:9-11). Just as the pagans were proud of their wisdom and foolish in their behaviors—“boasters,” Paul calls them—so the Jews were proud of being keepers of the law but morally depraved. Since they did not obey the law but acted just like the pagans, they had no right to boast by insisting that the Gentiles be circumcised like them according to the law.

But suppose the purpose of this demolition of human pride and righteousness is to stop the Judaizers from boasting about circumcision. Why does Paul start by condemning the Gentiles?

Many have suggested that it was to make his message more palatable to the Jews. Philippics against the Gentiles were common among the Jews, focusing on their idolatry and sexual immorality, according to Moo. At this point in the letter, the Jewish Christians in Rome would have been cheering Paul on. “Paul attacked the Gentiles first, and while the Jews are saying ‘amen,’ he shockingly indicts them as well” (Schreiner).⁶ He is about to turn the tables, but he is less graphic when talking about the Jews, allowing what he has already said to hint at their own lack of righteousness.

The purpose of the philippic is to paint an unhappy picture of the righteousness of humankind in its faithlessness. It is the beginning of Paul’s contrast between man’s righteousness and the righteousness of God, which he uses in an attempt to shame the Judaizers into some semblance of modesty and restraint. “The wrath of God is revealed” (1:18) in the behavior of the pagans. God, in the wrath inherent in his holiness, has handed them over to self-destructive behaviors on account of their pride. Paul is about to say this same wrath is evident in his fellow Jews as well, on account of their boasting.

6 Schreiner, *Romans*, 82.

CHAPTER 2

OUR PERVERSE LOVE OF JUDGING

Now, of course, there were no chapters in the original letter. And the break created here does not seem helpful. It makes the first chapter appear to stand on its own as a blistering attack on the pride and faithless depravity of pagan culture—and yet the second chapter begins with “therefore.” This indicates that the conclusion of the argument is contained somehow in the second, as most commentators acknowledge. It can be boiled down to this: the Jews are no more righteous than the reviled Gentiles. It is necessary to obey *all* the laws in order to be deemed righteous. As Cranfield puts it: “Since the gospel reveals the fact of the universal sinfulness of men, the man who sets himself up to judge other men is without excuse.”¹ And we find out exactly what sort of judging Paul has in mind later in the chapter. It was the Jews judging his Gentile flock over circumcision.

1 Cranfield, *Romans: A Shorter Commentary*, 43.

The famous words of Christ come immediately to mind: “Do not judge, or you also will be judged” (Matt. 7:1). Some find this disconcerting because they think it means erasing the line between right and wrong, but that is not what he had in mind at all, since he also said “be therefore perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matt. 5:48) and told his followers “if you love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15). Nor is he referring to the judging that goes on in courts of law. The Bible honors such judging highly, clarifying that judges must be fair and impartial. In fact, the first period of Israel’s history was the time of the Judges. David identified justice as the highest quality of a king, and Solomon prayed for the wisdom to judge rightly. This type of judging can also become necessary in churches. For instance, Paul told the Corinthians to “put away from among yourselves that wicked person” (1 Cor. 5:13). They could not know he was wicked without judging him.

We could give many examples to show that Christ was not opposed to judging *per se*, and neither was Paul. But the judging they *were* opposed to is the kind we use to make ourselves look better than our fellow mortals, to glorify ourselves at their expense. More specifically, it is Pharisaic boasting, as seen in Christ’s parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. It is the type of boasting in which I declare that I am holier than thou, in which I use God and his holiness to glorify myself and make you look small. No one is holy if the standard of holiness is life. Jews loved to judge the Gentiles for being uncircumcised. They loved to boast about how righteous they were. This is very clear in Galatians. Their behavior was destructive, and Paul wanted it stopped immediately.

He warns them: “But we are sure the judgment of God is according to truth” (2:2). In their vanity as the chosen people, they thought they could indulge in the same depraved behaviors

as the pagans without suffering the consequences. We know this from Jeremiah and Micah. They thought they were immune to judgment because they were chosen by God and circumcised. Paul disabuses them of this notion by basing judgment, not on heritage or a mark in the flesh, but on God's eternal standard of truth, the plumb line Amos saw by which all mortals are measured and found wanting. Fitzmyer says the Jews had a superior moral understanding on account of the law, which enabled them to judge the perverse behavior of the pagans, but their own behavior was no better. Thus, when they judged them, they also judged themselves.

We feel obliged to pause and point out that Paul's condemnation of judging has nothing to do with devaluing the law, as some seem to think. It is not the law that is at fault when we judge others. No, "the law is spiritual" (7:14), firmly rooted in the value of life and summed up in the commands to love God and our neighbor. But we mortals love judging a little too much. In us, the power to judge and the truth of the law get mixed up with vanity. We are aware of our nothingness, and we cling to the sword of judgment in an attempt to chase it away. But in the end, it turns out we are all equally mortal. "All flesh is grass" (Isa. 40:6). This is the Bible's judgment on our unseemly love of judging.

The case can be made that the love of judging was what caused our fall from grace in the first place. Adam and Eve were tempted to think they could become godlike through the "knowledge of good and evil" (Gen. 2:17). This knowledge furnishes the power to judge. Since they themselves were created good, they could only obtain such divided knowledge by doing evil. But disobedience did not bring them the happiness they desired. It did not make them "like God." Instead, it opened their eyes to their nakedness compared with God. The same happens to us when we wield the two-edged

sword of judgment. When we judge others, we also judge ourselves, since we are no less sinful than they are.

And that is Paul's point. "Do you think, O man, when you judge them who do such things, and then do the same things yourselves, that you will escape God's judgment?" (2:3). This is an example of how the explanatory filter of the visionary church can become helpful in sorting out the flow of argument. Paul was not merely trying to condemn the depravity of pagan culture in the first chapter; no, he was using it to shame the boastful Jews and cure them of their love of judging. The judging he had in mind was over circumcision. Romans 2:1 is the gateway to Romans 2:25: "For circumcision truly profits, if you keep the law: but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision is made uncircumcision." The Jews were judging the Gentiles for being uncircumcised. It is impossible to have unity in the church when we are busy judging one another. The sword of judgment must be laid aside for the visionary church to come into being.

Here is Paul from Galatians: "For, brothers, you have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another. The law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. But if you bite and devour one another, take heed that you be not consumed one of another" (Gal. 5:13-15). As we said in our introduction, it is clear that "the flesh" means more to Paul than just fleshly sins. It also refers to backbiting in the church, specifically over circumcision, which is contrary to the unity of the Spirit. It refers to the judging of Gentiles that was going on by the Judaizers who crept into Galatia after he left, which was the cause of great unhappiness and unrest and personal anguish for him as the founder of the Galatian church.

If Romans 2:1 and 2:25 are connected, then our reading of the entire letter is affected. Carrying this linkage forward results in a different view of Romans from what is often proffered. It also supplies the missing information for a unified reading, as we plan to demonstrate.

KINDNESS, NOT JUDGING, DRAWS OTHERS TO CHRIST

Paul asks if we “despise the riches of [God’s] goodness and forbearance and patience” (2:4). This can mean, as has usually been said, that we show contempt for his kindness and forbearance by continuing to sin, which might make it a very pointed reference to the forbearance and patience God has shown toward the Jews throughout their unflattering history. But we think Paul might be expanding on what he said in the previous verse. Do we “despise” God’s goodness and forbearance when we judge others after he has been merciful to us in Christ? “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors” (Matt. 6:12). Think of the parable of the wicked servant who was forgiven much by his master and then went out and had his fellow servant tossed into jail for owing him a little. By giving his Son, God has been rich to us in mercy and kindness. This is why we love him so dearly. But we despise his mercy when we turn around and judge others.

Then Paul adds something that seems wonderful to us: “Not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance” (2:4). Apparently, the question of whether we should embrace mercy or judgment is an evangelical one. Barnes says, “The most effectual preaching is what sets before people most the goodness of God.”²

2 Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament*, 1834. “Chapter 2. Verse 4,” <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/eng/bnb/romans-2.html>

Luther makes this comment on another verse: “And this is the only way to convert anyone: to show him love and kindness.”³ Naturally, Paul, “called to be an apostle” (1:1), is interested in finding the best way to glorify the goodness of God so that the world will be drawn to him and obtain the promise of life. Is it by judging, as seen in the Judaizers and their condemnation of the uncircumcised, or is it by glorifying his mercy in our own merciful behaviors? It was mercy that drew us to God, not judgment, which does not have any drawing power. Paul may have had this wonderful verse in mind: “With gentle cords, I drew them with bands of love: and I was to them as they that take off the yoke on their neck, and I stooped to them and fed” (Hos. 11:3). Are the Judaizers interested in saving lost souls? If so, they should embrace mercy, not judgment, for it is in his mercy that God is glorified to sinful beings.

This is about our picture of God—the picture we present to the world to show them his goodness and why we should love him. God is like the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son, overflowing with grace and mercy, full of smiling benevolence when we repent and return to him, even tripping down the hill to greet us. It is this very winsome picture of God and his welcoming love that draws the lost sheep, not the flinty face of judgment that the church sometimes presents to the world. The lost sheep long for love, unity, and kindness. These things cannot be found very readily in the world, but they can be found in a church where a choice has been made to forego judging and embrace mercy. But if they come to us and find bitterness and division, backbiting and envy, then how is the church any different from the world? And why in the world would they stay?

The specific judging Paul had in mind was that of the Judaizers

3 Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 356.

regarding circumcision, as we will discover in a moment. But this teaching has a much broader application for us today.

THE WORK OF FAITH

We are in the middle of a complex passage, lacking transitions between thoughts, but additional insight can be gleaned by keeping Paul's passion for unity in mind, which gives it a cohesiveness that it may otherwise seem to be lacking.

For instance, Paul now says, "After your hardness and impenitent heart you treasure up unto yourself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God" (2:5). A straightforward reading of this may lead to the conclusion that it refers to continuing to sin in the ways described in the first chapter. Origen has quite an extensive discussion of the "day of wrath" on account of our sins and its Old Testament history. But this sobering statement follows immediately upon the condemnation of judging. Therefore, it may mean that the wrath they are storing up for themselves is due to their love of judging, which, indeed, is contrasted with the "righteous judgment" (2:5) of God. Paul may simply be invoking the principle of judge not or you also will be judged, warning the Judaizers that they are storing up judgment for themselves by judging the uncircumcised Gentiles.

He quotes Psalm 62: "Who will render to every man according to his deeds" (2:6). God will judge us based on what we have done. This is the clear message of the Old Testament. Paul's statement causes angst in some circles because it seems to clash with the concept of justification through faith. But let's try looking at it in the light of the visionary church and asking ourselves what "deeds" Paul had in mind. He draws a contrast between those "who by patient continuance in well doing seek

for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life” (2:7) and “them that are contentious and do not obey the truth” (2:8). Apparently, the specific deed he is thinking of—the work that leads to judgment according to our deeds—is contentiousness, or being “of a quarrelsome or litigious disposition,”⁴ as Barnes puts it. He seems to be upbraiding the Jews for the friction they were causing over circumcision. They “do not obey the truth” because they are glorifying their righteousness and refusing to accept the free gift of righteousness they have in Christ. And “well doing” may simply mean to refrain from judging and quarreling; to live in peace and patient continuance despite our cultural differences, which Paul will treat at length in chapters 12-15.

But wait a minute. How can simply refraining from judging others be a *work*? This brings up something we have not heard discussed but seems quite important to the interpretation of Romans. In the most obvious sense, the word “work” means action; therefore, the most apparent “good works” are justice, charity, and mercy. But in the Bible, there is another kind of “work” that is not action at all but negation. It involves actively negating our natural selfishness. The greatest work of all time was just such a negation—Christ going to the cross. The commandments are all about work—“do this, and you shall live”—and yet eight of them are negations of our selfish desires. They tell us to “have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3) and to “do no harm to your neighbor” (13:10). Not to do these things is to do the good work of the law, as Paul will say very plainly in a little while.

Paul wanted a negation, too. He wanted Christians to stop judging one another and “walk in love” (Eph. 5:2). This good

4 Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament*, 1834. “Chapter 2. Verse 8,” <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/eng/bnb/romans-2.html>

work is challenging because walking in love requires us to sacrifice ourselves and put our identities entirely into God's hands. It requires faith, as Calvin says. Christ went to the cross and was able to resist the temptation to call down a legion of angels on his tormentors because of his faith in his Father and his promise to reward such a sacrifice: "Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:2). A similar trust in God and his promises is the only thing that makes it possible to lay down our natural love of judging and of making ourselves seem a wee bit taller than our fellow beings, the itch that is universal and seems almost impossible not to scratch.

Paul does not devalue "works," as he will show in upcoming chapters, but he is adamantly opposed to *boasting* about our works; as, in his view, the Judaizers were doing by refusing to mingle with the Gentiles over circumcision; "boasting in the law" (2:23). His goal in this section of the letter is to demonstrate that they have nothing to boast about when it comes to the law. Circumcision cannot justify them or ratify their love of judging the Gentiles—not when they "do the same things" as the pagans. Therefore, they must stop judging them based on this work. Paul is not devaluing work. He will make it plain later on that he wants the Romans to work for the visionary church. And the first work he is looking for is to stop judging others. He wants Christians to be reconciled to each other. He wants us to pursue peace. He wants us to take up the cross and make ourselves a living sacrifice just as Christ did for us. He wants us to walk in the Spirit and not in the flesh with its love of judgment.

MORE ON LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD

“Tribulation and anguish, [will come] upon every soul of man that does evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile” (2:9). This is the first time that Paul openly signals his intention of leveling the playing field on behalf of the Gentiles, which is a necessary step in promoting the visionary church. Judgment is coming. Tribulation will come to the Jew first because they had the law first and are more culpable. As Thomas says, “A greater punishment was due the Jews as knowing God’s will through the Law.”⁵ In fact Chrysostom observes that the Gentiles are *less* culpable than the Jews for the very reason that they did not have the law—that the Jews needed the new covenant of grace more than the Gentiles, an idea that will figure prominently in Romans. And perhaps there is another reason why judgment was “to the Jew first”: they were the ones who were doing the judging. The judgment they were making based on circumcision is what Paul is condemning in these verses. But then he balances this stern warning by promising that glory and honor will also come to the Jews first if they are faithful and obedient and if they give up their love of contentiousness and condemnation.

“For there is no respect of persons with God” (2:11). Now Paul knocks out the last prop of Jewish boastfulness. God does not favor the Jews in the sense they believe. Yes, they were the chosen people, singled out among the nations for a special dispensation, and they also had God’s holy law, which made them highly distinctive, culturally speaking; but simply having the law does not make them holy and will not save them from the wrath to come if they continue to sin. The Gentiles are the “many as have sinned without the law.” They will “perish without the law” if they do not repent. But “as many who have sinned in the law”—that is, the Jews—will also

5 Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Romans*, 2.203.

perish if they continue to be hardhearted, for they will be “judged by the law” (2:11) they have and by which they are judging.

The point is that Gentiles and Jews are perfectly equal based on the law: both fall short of the glory of God. Paul reinforces this great leveling by saying it is not the “hearers of the law”—again, the Jews—who are justified in God’s sight but the “doers of the law” (2:13). Simply hearing the law on the Sabbath will not avail them. Then he rubs salt in the wound by suggesting that if any Gentiles, following their consciences, actually do what the law requires—that is, “do no harm to their neighbor” (13:10), which Paul interprets as fulfilling the law—they will become a “law unto themselves” (2:14). They have the law of love etched on their consciences, although not in the perfect form of Moses. Therefore, there is less difference between them and the Jews than the Judaizers liked to think. And indeed, we know from ancient literature that many Gentiles cherished virtue—while many Jews did not. It would be a gross misreading of history to claim that the Jews had a monopoly on virtue simply because they were Jews and had been favored with the revealed law.

So yes, this entire passage can be interpreted to refer to the visionary church, although we know that is not usually the case. To have such a church, Paul must get Christians to stop judging one another. To this end, he reminds the Jews that without Christ they too are liable to judgment.

BOASTING IN THE LAW

Over the course of the next several chapters, Paul is going to expose the vanity of the Judaizers’ love of judging by showing that it is impossible to obey the very law that they were using to make their judgments. One can read these chapters without thinking of the

visionary church and derive benefit from them, as is often done. Still, Paul was also trying to promote unity by condemning the boasting that was leading to controversy and division in the church. The type of boasting he has in mind is very specific. It is not the right fielder boasting about his batting average or the politician about his accomplishments. No, he is referring to a subtler kind of boasting that is designed to make some look holier than others.

Let's call it "holiness boasting." Christ captured it perfectly in a parable. The Pharisee stands on the street corner proclaiming his righteousness compared to the tax collector who beats his breast in misery. The Pharisee may appear to the world to be holy, but it is the penitent tax collector who goes home justified by God. Holiness boasting is insidious because it clothes itself in religion, pretending to be humble piety when it is something quite different. Paul takes pains to expose it in the first part of Romans. He makes many arguments and takes many dizzying tacks, sometimes so dizzying that even he seems to get lost, like his ship driven in the wind to Rome, but the overall meaning is quite plain. All are condemned under the law, and, therefore, no one has the right to boast in the law. No one has the right to judge.

It was his fellow Jews that he had in mind in what follows; as Clarke puts it, a Jew writing to Jews. Some of them were using the law of circumcision to separate themselves from the Gentiles in churches where these two populations mingled. Now, the law was the glory of the ancient world in the minds of the Jews. "All his commandments are sure. They stand fast forever and ever and are done in truth and uprightness" (Ps. 111:7-8). "The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the

eyes” (Ps. 19:7-8). The law was entrusted to the Jews and became the root of their identity, the “inheritance of the congregation of Jacob” (Deut. 33:4). The psalmist gives us a sense of the pride that devout Jews took in the law: “Unless your law had been my delight, I should then have perished in my affliction. I will never forget your precepts, for by them, you have given me life. I am yours, save me, for I have sought your precepts. O, how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day. Through your commandments, you have made me wiser than my enemies, for they are ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your precepts are my meditation. I understand more than the ancients because I keep your precepts” (Ps. 119:92-100).

In fact, Psalm 119 is a long and passionate meditation on the surpassing excellence of God’s holy law. This glorious psalm clearly shows the glory of God’s law in the Jewish mind, the law that is precious because it shows us how to obtain wisdom, peace, and, most of all, life. But although God showed his goodness when he gave the law to the Jews—showed that he was good through the goodness of the law—it was not the purpose of the law to glorify the Jews or justify any holiness boasting they might be inclined to do. The psalmist freely admits this when he says he has seen an “end of all perfection” (Ps. 119:96). The Jews’ history shows that they failed to justify themselves through the law. Paul takes this failure a step further and concludes that the very purpose of the law was to make them aware of this impossibility. The law was not given to enable them to boast of their holiness, as the Judaizers were doing at the expense of the Gentiles; it was given to show them that they were *not* holy. They could not save themselves through their own righteousness. They needed the righteousness of God and his promise of salvation.

What Paul was proposing was a new and profound way of looking at the law. The Old Testament prophets knew Israel had not obeyed the law and said so in the most vehement terms. But Paul goes a step further and argues that the law literally *cannot* be obeyed—certainly not ideally—even by those claiming to be religious. It is impossible for mortals to justify themselves through the law and obtain life, which, according to Moses, is the end of the law. Paul describes the law as an equal-opportunity leveler of human pride. It was the Gentiles who did not have the law and sinned “without the law,” and it was the Jews who did have the law and “sinned in the law.”

“Behold, you are called a Jew”—a name of high honor in the minds of Jews, indicating elevated spirituality. The Jews “rest in the law and make their boast in God” (2:17). According to Philippi, “The Jews were filled with pride and conceit in their possession of the law, their hearing and knowledge of the law. In this, they held their superiority to the Gentiles to consist.”⁶ This pridefulness appears to have been characteristic of Jewish religious culture at the time, as seen in the parable and in Christ’s unflattering description of the teachers of the law. The Jewish religious leaders saw themselves as a guide to the blind and a light to those who walk in darkness, instructors of the foolish, and teachers of babes. Chrysostom says Paul is talking in their own pompous language here, as these were the denigrating names they used for proselytes. They had the same preening attitude that was seen among followers of Greek and Roman philosophers, only worse, because they based it on their custodianship of the divine law, a claim no philosopher could make. But then, they were even more culpable than the Gentiles

6 Philippi. *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, 82.

for all their pride. They continued to sin despite their boasting and ostentatious knowledge of the law.

“You that say a man should not commit adultery; do you commit adultery? You that abhor idols, do you commit sacrilege?” (2:22). There’s just one problem with boasting in the law. “There is none holy like the Lord” (1 Sam. 2:2). We are not spiritual; we do not obey the law perfectly. The Jews dishonored the law through their holiness boasting because they themselves were not holy. They were making God look bad since it was God who gave them the law. To quote Chrysostom again, they “dishonored that whereby they were honored.”⁷ “You that make your boast of the law, through breaking the law do you dishonor God?” (2:23). Here, Paul actually tells us what kind of boasting he has in mind. It is boasting in the law, which is a peculiarly Jewish trait. Quoting Isaiah: “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you” (2:24; Is. 52:5). Those outside the church can clearly see our hypocrisy when we boast in the law since we, too, are poor, miserable sinners. And our hypocrisy reflects not just on us but also on God, driving the lost sheep away.

But what is the purpose of all these complicated arguments? Was it simply to expose the hypocrisy of the Jews? Not at all. Paul had something much more personal in mind as the self-styled apostle to the Gentiles. He is making the case that merely having the law does not give the Judaizers any right to boast in the law by judging the Gentiles. In order to be in a position to judge, they must obey the law perfectly, which they were not doing. They were judging the Gentiles for not being circumcised. To Paul, this was holiness boasting. He uses several arguments against it, the main

7 Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Epistle to the Romans*, <https://sites.google.com/site/aquinasstudybible/home/romans/st-john-chrysostom-on-romans/chapter-2, 2:23>.

one being that to boast of obedience to the law of circumcision was to put themselves under the burden of the entire law. “For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law” (Gal. 5:3). “For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continues not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them” (Gal. 3:10).

Galatians can help us to decipher what Paul is trying to do in Romans. “As many as desire to make a fair show in the flesh, they constrain you to be circumcised; lest they should suffer persecution for the cross of Christ. For neither they themselves who are circumcised keep the law; but desire to have you circumcised, that they may glory in your flesh” (Gal. 6:12-13). The attempt of the Judaizers to enforce circumcision on the Gentiles is glorying in the flesh, in the fact that they themselves were circumcised, to Paul’s way of thinking—it is holiness boasting. They glory in their righteousness in the flesh, but they have not obtained the righteousness they loved to boast about because they do not “keep the law,” which argument is finally summed up in Rom. 11:7. If they are going to claim righteousness through circumcision, then they must be righteous under all of the law. And no one is capable of this.

Besides, the righteousness of circumcision involves something deeper than a mark in the flesh. “Circumcision truly profits if you keep the law: but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision is made uncircumcision” (2:25). Circumcision does profit you if you take it as a sign of a sacred covenant to obey the law. But those who were judging others for not being circumcised were *not* keeping the law. They were boasting of their righteousness but were not, in fact, righteous. “And shall not uncircumcision, which is by nature, if it

fulfills the law, judge you, who by the letter and circumcision do transgress the law?” (2:27). If the uncircumcised Gentiles by nature and conscience fulfill the law of loving God and doing no harm to their neighbor, won’t their righteous behavior become a judgment on Jews who are trying to judge them by circumcision but do not obey the law? The Jews are in love with the outward sign—they are boasting in it—but the sign is not what it appears to be in them. Their circumcision has become uncircumcision.

This whole section of the letter, beginning with the description of prideful pagan depravity, is about the circumcision controversy and the continuing attempt by the Judaizers to force the Gentiles to conform to the letter of the law. But are we saying these verses do not have any relevance to our life in the church today? Quite the opposite. No one boasts about circumcision anymore, but we have invented many other ways to engage in holiness boasting and scaring away the lost sheep. Chrysostom has an astonishing lament about this in his closing comments in chapter four. With his beloved Jeremiah in mind, he weeps a river for the church and its dividedness. It is just as impossible for us to fulfill the law as it was for the Judaizers. Therefore, we should not be so full of ourselves and how righteous we might imagine ourselves to be. We should walk “with all lowliness and meekness, with long suffering, forbearing one another in love” (Eph. 4:2). This is the way to obtain the unity of the Spirit. And it is the subject of Romans.

CIRCUMCISION CONTROVERSY

The Judaizers touted circumcision as an indispensable sign of righteousness, having been commanded by God in Genesis 17. But Paul argues that circumcision does *not* necessarily indicate righteousness—the sign does not “profit” them in the sense they

believe—if they are breaking the law, since in that case they are clearly unrighteous. Circumcision was a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham. The immediate consequence of the sign was to separate Abraham and his household from the surrounding peoples, which was a necessary part of the plan for salvation. But Moses saw a deeper significance in the sign. To him, it was an outward sign of an inward spiritual reality, a sacrament. He implores the Israelites to “circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked” (Deut. 10:16). This indicates that he saw circumcision as a sign of a covenant to put aside sin and submit to God and his will. And that’s what it was for Abraham, too. He was commanded to be circumcised after his disastrous misadventure with Hagar, when he attempted to obtain an heir through the flesh. Having himself circumcised at God’s command was a sign that he was willing to return to the fold and would henceforth depend upon the promises of God and not on the flesh for salvation. The paring away of the flesh of the regenerative organ is symbolic of humbling oneself for the sake of Spirit. It is not just a distinguishing mark. It has spiritual significance.

The problem Paul was wrestling with in Romans is that circumcision can be understood on two completely different levels. It is certainly a mark in the flesh, and anyone who has this mark can claim to be righteous according to the letter of the law, as the Judaizers were doing. However, it was more than a mark in the flesh to Moses and Paul. It was a sign of a covenant to submit to God’s will and obey the law. And that is just what the Judaizers were *not* doing, according to Paul. They were judging the Gentiles for not being circumcised, as if their sign in the flesh made them righteous, but they were still sinning. Therefore, the sign in the flesh to which they were clinging had lost its spiritual significance. Circumcision

had become uncircumcision, the implication being that they had no right to judge the Gentiles for not being circumcised.

Moses made the link between circumcision and obedience clearer through the following restoration promise: “And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart, and the heart of your offspring, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, that you may live” (Deut. 30:6). According to this, circumcision is an outward sign of putting aside the flesh and its pride in order to obey the greatest commandment. This is a spiritual view of circumcision, and it was echoed by Jeremiah: “Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, and take away the foreskins of your heart, you men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem: lest my fury come forth like fire, and burn that none can quench it, because of the evil of your doings” (Jer. 4:4). And later on he adds: “Behold, the days come, says the Lord, that I will punish all of them which are circumcised and the uncircumcised...for all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in the heart” (Jer. 9:25-26).

True circumcision, then, is of the heart and not the flesh. It is this spiritual way of looking at circumcision that we see in Paul: “He is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God” (2:28-9). Many have pointed out the similarity between this and what Christ said about doing good works. Do not be like the Pharisees and use good works to puff yourself up. Instead, do your good works in secret, and your heavenly Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. Paul wants the Judaizers to stop boasting about circumcision by judging the Gentiles. So he tells them to circumcise their hearts in secret, where no one can see what they have done, and then they

will have the approval of God in heaven instead of the praise of men.

Is our view of circumcision spiritual and God-serving, or shallow and self-serving? Are we investing our identity in the letter of the law, the mark in the flesh, which can be used in a superficial way to glorify our righteousness, or in the spirit of the law, the circumcision of the heart, through which we put away all pride and selfishness? These are the kinds of self-critical questions that Paul is inviting his feisty opponents in the circumcision camp to ask themselves. He goes further. Since they do not obey the law, he claims that they are, in effect, uncircumcised. They have nullified the outward sign by neglecting its significance. And what if the Gentiles whom they are so busy condemning do obey the law? Won't their uncircumcision be counted as circumcision in God's eyes, since the deeper significance of circumcision is to circumcise our hearts? Is it the outward fleshly sign that God wants or the spirituality the sign is supposed to signify? Is our view of God shallow or deep?

The uncircumcised Gentiles were just as capable of loving God and their neighbor as the Jews. The name "Melchizedek" means king of righteousness, but he was not circumcised. Similarly, God declared that there was no greater example of righteousness than Job, also uncircumcised. There was the centurion who came to Jesus to ask for healing. "Truly I say to you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel" (Matt. 8:10). There was Cornelius, another centurion, "a devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, which gave many alms to the people, and prayed to God always" (Acts 10:2). Paul argues, no doubt to the dismay of his Jewish adversaries, not to mention many modern commentators, that when Gentiles like these obey the law out of conscience, their

obedience becomes a judgment on those Jews who do not obey the law but boast of being circumcised and consider themselves righteous. Augustine thinks Paul has Gentile *Christians* in mind here, who have had the law written on their hearts by the Spirit, as was promised in Jeremiah, through baptism. Even so, it would still be true that their obedience to the moral law, while uncircumcised, becomes an indictment on those who boast about being circumcised but do not obey the law. If Paul is thinking of the Gentile Christians who are being judged by the Judaizers, then the statement becomes even more pointed and poignant.

But what about the question Käsemann raises? Why would Paul propose two impossible things within the rabbinical tradition—circumcision becoming uncircumcision and uncircumcision becoming circumcision? The reason is that he is not proposing these things literally. The “antitheses” are part of his argument against holiness boasting and dividing the church. Paul is not claiming that Gentiles literally become circumcised when they obey the law, or even that they *can* obey the law, which is impossible if Gentiles and Jews are “all under sin” (3:8). He is not trying to create circumcision doctrine. He is posing provocative questions regarding the holiness boasting of the Judaizers at the expense of his Gentile flock. He is the shepherd and has his staff in his hand for fending off wolves. Not every statement that Paul makes in Romans is intended to be taken as literal doctrine. In many cases, he is simply sparring with his Jewish opponents. This distinction will become especially important when we look at his predestination arguments.

Meanwhile, we’re not sure what to make of Käsemann’s claim, despite Moses and Jeremiah, that there was no deep thought among classical Jews over the meaning of circumcision. This would be like looking at the gospels through the eyes of the Pharisees or Hamlet

through the eyes of Claudius. “He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Mic. 6:8). This is a spiritual interpretation of the law, unsurpassed in the New Testament. The same thing is seen in Isaiah 58, even more explicitly, and in many other places in the prophets. Jesus himself is all the evidence we need that there were Jews who were well aware of the difference between the letter and the spirit of the law, who realized that the spirit of the law is love, and, therefore, the law has a more profound significance than what is seen on the surface. “Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:20). This is a critique of Phariseeism and a shallow understanding of the law. The Pharisees were parading their righteousness outwardly but were unrighteous in their hearts, as Jesus demonstrates vividly in his interpretation of the sixth and seventh commandments. They were using the letter of the law out of self-love when the true spirit of the law is love itself. This same resistance to preening religion, to holiness boasting, to arrogance and unfeeling condemnation, is seen in Paul and his arguments about the letter and the spirit of the law regarding circumcision.

Circumcision was practiced by many people in the ancient world, not necessarily for religious reasons. But it was explicitly a religious rite for Abraham and his descendants because God commanded it. Thomas describes it not only as a “sign of faith and obedience” but as a remediation of original sin, which is passed down through the “chief organ of concupiscence,” and therefore “a figure of and a preparation for baptism.”⁸ When the Israelites who were born in the wilderness were circumcised after crossing

8 Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Romans*, 2.347-349.

into the Promised Land, the Lord said to Joshua, “This day have I rolled away the reproach of Egypt from off you” (Jos 5:9). This suggests that circumcision “rolls away” sin, which is why baptism has replaced it. In any case, the apostles had decided at the Jerusalem Council that circumcision was no longer required for Gentiles. Peter said, “God, who knows their hearts, bore them witness, giving them the Holy Spirit, even as he did unto us; and put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:8-9). Paul talked about the signs and wonders he had seen in his ministry to the Gentiles. Then James, as leader of the church, spoke for all when he said, “We trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God” (Acts 15:19).

They composed a letter to the churches of Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, noting that some from Judea had “troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, you must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment” (Acts 15:24). And then they said this: “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; that you abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if you keep yourselves, you shall do well” (Acts 15:28-9). Circumcision was deliberately left off the list of things Gentile converts were required to do. The Council did not come right out and *say* circumcision was unnecessary, perhaps because emotions were running high or because it seemed too bold and violative to say such a thing in direct contradiction to Genesis 17. But they implied it by leaving it off the list. It might have been better if they had been more explicit, however, because some Jews were still clinging to circumcision as a necessary sign of righteousness five years later when Paul wrote his letter. They are called the Judaizers

because they wanted to make Christianity more identifiably Jewish. Their persistent meddling was causing much sorrow and unrest in the church and heartache for Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles. It played a prominent role in at least two of his letters—Galatians and Romans.

WHAT ABOUT SIGNS?

Paul's treatment of the circumcision controversy points to the problem of signs in religion. It strikes us as being just as relevant today as it ever was. Religious signs come to the surface by their very nature. Therefore, the question becomes—are they shallow or deep? Are they of the flesh or of the Spirit? There is a temptation to use them to make ourselves seem spiritual, like the Pharisee in the parable. This temptation is so strong that radical measures have been prescribed against it. "But you, when you pray, enter into your closet, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father which sees in secret shall reward you openly" (Matt. 6:6). It seems the only safe way to pray is to do it in private so that no one will think we are trying to seem holy. "Therefore, when you do your alms [charity], do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Truly, I say to you that they have their reward. But when you do your alms, let not your left hand know what your right hand does: that your alms may be in secret: and your Father which sees in secret himself shall reward you openly" (Matt. 6:2-4). This suggests that we are so naturally vain that we need to outfox ourselves in order to avoid falling into the trap of using charity for self-aggrandizement. Luther says that "outer righteousness is praised by men and reprov'd by God; inner righteousness, however, is praised by God and reprov'd and

persecuted by men.”⁹ This was the case with Christ.

The Jewish leaders had many religious signs that they used to make themselves seem righteous, to boast about their holiness, as seen in Christ’s scathing commentary in Matthew 23:28: “Even so you also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.” And Paul had the same complaint. In his view, the Judaizers were using the sign of circumcision to boast in the law. “Circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God” (2:29). The outward sign can be used to compare ourselves favorably with others, as the Judaizers were doing with the Gentiles—a comparison based on the flesh—but the sign itself is only truly spiritual when it signifies love for God and neighbor. The significance of the sign, which is in the flesh, must be discerned according to the Spirit and not the flesh. This deconstruction of religious signs is still relevant today. Are we in love with our signs of religiosity? Are we using such signs to glorify ourselves and oppress others? “Therefore, you are inexcusable, O man, whosoever you are that judge: for wherein you judge another, you condemn yourself” (2:1). The only sure foundation for the Christian church is the supreme humility seen in Christ in coming to us in the flesh and submitting to the cross, which was the utter deconstruction of all signs of power.

Paul has more to say on this problem of religious signs elsewhere. “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal” (1 Cor. 13:1). Speaking in tongues, the highest sign of spirituality in the minds of many in the wake of Pentecost, is nothing in itself; that is, it does not indicate spirituality unless accompanied by love, which is Spirit in action. “And though I bestow all my goods to feed

9 Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 59.

the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profits me nothing” (1 Cor. 13:2). Charity and martyrdom are signs that can make us seem righteous in the world, but they are not the same thing as righteousness itself if we use them to boast, for true righteousness requires circumcision of the heart and its self-love.

CHAPTER 3

A QUESTION OF IDENTITY

We know Paul is thinking about identity because now he says, “What advantage has the Jew?” (3:1). Is he saying, through his vigorous deconstruction of circumcision—the ancient and indispensable sign of being a Jew—that this identity no longer has any value? Not at all. He himself was a circumcised Jew. But he reminds his fellow Jews that their identity as “the circumcision” is based on something far more valuable than a mere mark in the flesh. God entrusted his “oracles” to circumcised Jews. The law, prophets, histories, and poetic books of the Old Testament are the things that make the Jewish identity highly distinctive. There is no other identity like it in the world. “And what nation is there so great, that has statutes and judgments so righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day?” (Deut. 4:7). Circumcision does not come close to providing any such distinction, especially since

some of Israel's neighbors practiced it. Indeed, they became "the circumcision" *because* of the oracles. The purpose of circumcision was to set them apart as a vessel for the revelation of God's word. God did not set them apart because they were holy. Quite the opposite. He set them apart because they were weak, and he knew they needed to be separated from temptation.

In short, Paul glorifies the identity obtained through God's "oracles" to encourage his fellow Jews to give up their fixation on circumcision. But now it occurs to him that there may be a clever objection to this identity. "For what if some did not believe? shall their unbelief make the faith of God without effect?" (3:3). "Some" is a kind way of putting it since most Jews did not believe in those oracles in the past, as the Old Testament plainly shows. But in that case, which has more power to confer a Jewish identity—circumcision or the "oracles," since all Jews were circumcised but few believed? Paul responds to the potential quibble he has raised by saying that their unbelief does not make the faithfulness of God "without effect" in giving them the oracles. It does not cancel out the honor with which God honored them, as Chrysostom puts it. Instead, their unbelief glorifies God's faithfulness to his promises, since he gave them the oracles in spite of it. "Let God be true, but every man a liar" (3:4). The high value of the identity derived from the oracles depends upon *God's* faithfulness to the covenant he made with Abraham—God's righteousness and not the righteousness of man. "God's faithfulness is not determined by man's response, either of faith or of unfaith"¹ (Dunn). This self-effacing proclamation makes Paul think of the penitential attitude seen in David, who shows what it is to be a "Jew inwardly" by wanting his confession regarding Uriah and Bathsheba to ratify the

1 Dunn. *Romans* 1-8. P.140.

judgment of God on his sins so that “you [God] might be justified when you speak, and be clear when you judge” (Ps 51: 4) —unlike Paul’s imaginary interlocutor, who is trying to wriggle his way out of God’s judgments by twisting his meaning.

As an aside, this self-effacing penitential attitude reflects an awareness among at least some Jews that they did not have much to boast about as a people, as can be clearly seen in Psalm 106. The truth was they had failed to live up to their exalted identity. “We have not wrought any deliverance in the earth” (Isa. 26:18). “Since the days of our fathers have we been in a great trespass unto this day; and for our iniquities have we, our kings, and our priests, been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, and to a spoil, and to confusion of face, as it is this day” (Ezra 9:7). This is made perfectly clear in the great national confession in Nehemiah 9. Their own scriptures do not glorify them by showing how righteous they were; far from it. They glorify God by showing that he has been faithful to the covenant he made with them in spite of their faithlessness. As Augustine puts it, “We know no other books that so destroy pride.”² The Old Testament is a story of abject failure as a nation, not righteousness. They were chosen, liberated from Egypt, given the glorious law, and repeatedly warned to follow it if they wanted to have life. They were placed in a land flowing with milk and honey and made very prosperous.

And yet, they did the very things they had been warned not to do. They chased after false gods, engaged in child sacrifice, lived in selfish luxury and immorality, oppressed the poor and the weak, and corrupted justice. Because of this, God allowed them to be overrun by four successive empires until their former glory had been

2 Augustine, *Confessions*, 189.

annihilated. This is what their prophets explicitly said. “They are waxing fat, they shine—yes, they overpass the deeds of the wicked: they judge not the cause, the cause of the fatherless, and yet they prosper; and the right of the needy do they not judge. Shall I not visit [them with judgment] for these things? says the Lord: shall not my soul be avenged on such a nation as this?” (Jer. 5:28-29). The Jews were not faithful; but then what reason do the Judaizers have for boasting about the identity conferred by circumcision? Would it not be better to seek a desirable identity in the oracles of God, which reflect true spirituality, having come from the Spirit himself? And those oracles, as we are about to see, point to Christ and a new kind of righteousness not earned by prideful men; a righteousness that is a gift from God.

A JEW INWARDLY

Paul continues his deep train of thought about signs, the kind of deep thought that would have impressed Coleridge. “For he is not a Jew, who is one outwardly” (2:28). There is that honored name again, Jew, a name indicating spirituality and the practice of Judaism, and this is about circumcision, the outward sign by which the Jew has been identified since he first became a Jew and which the Judaizers were using to cow the Gentiles into submission or ostracize them. The Jewish identity, loaded with spiritual signs of various kinds, was considered highly valuable and gave distinction in the world. The most important sign of that identity by universal consent was circumcision, which is why the Judaizers were clinging to it so tenaciously. But Paul reminds them that their identity has exalted value only if it is spiritual and deep, not if it is based on a mere mark in the flesh.

True circumcision is “in the spirit [of the law], and not in the

letter” (2:29). To us, this is one of the most gratifying distinctions in all literature. The letter of the law was written in stone, hard and cold, but the spirit of the law is written on the heart and is therefore softer than flesh. The difference between these two things is immense. Augustine spends an entire book on it. The letter is based on judgment, but the spirit is based on love. The Spirit through whom the law was written is love. Hence, the law cannot be properly understood except in the spirit in which it was written. The Judaizers thought the outward mark in the flesh made them righteous, but the Spirit informs us that circumcision is of the heart, a deep act by which pride is removed, and one is enabled to love God as we ought and obey his holy life-giving law. If the Judaizers were circumcised in heart—that is, had humbled themselves before God—then why were they boasting about circumcision? Paul tells us why. They were looking for praise from men. They used circumcision for holiness boasting, not for repentance or a change of heart—which is what circumcision actually is, which is the deep meaning of the paring away of flesh, according to Origen.

We wouldn’t be surprised if Coleridge was impressed by this distinction between letter and spirit since it also marks a great dividing line in literature. Think of poor Hamlet mourning for the father he loved while the other courtiers were ostentatiously pretending. This is the same frustration Moses felt as he dealt with stiff-necked people who could not tell the difference between meat on the spit and the providence of God; that Jesus felt as he wept for Jerusalem, which was clinging to the letter of the law at Passover, the same Jerusalem that was about to crucify him for preaching in the spirit of the law; that Paul felt as he was wrestling with the legalism of a church that he himself had founded in the saddest of his letters. It strikes us that “letter” and “spirit” are still a great

dividing line today. The church has accreted an abundance of signs and doctrines over the ages. In many cases, the spirit of these things has been long forgotten, and all that is left is an empty husk of judgment. Chrysostom has a passionate homily about this in his book on Romans.

Paul identified the following dichotomy: “The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6). Augustine interprets this to mean that the letter of the law kills if the Spirit is absent because it causes sin to be known rather than avoided and thereby increases sin rather than diminishing it. We like this very much, but we think it may mean, even more simply, that the spirit of the law is love while the letter is judgment. Love gave us life on the cross, but the letter of the law takes away life by condemning us. This is why Paul says later on that the entire law is summed up in the command to “do no harm to our neighbor” (13:10) and that he who loves has fulfilled the law. The “law is spiritual” (7:14) because it is based on love and preserves and builds up life. But then why were the Judaizers using the letter of the law to boast about circumcision and harming the Gentiles by insisting on something that was considered shameful among the Greeks and was likely to make them pariahs in their own families? They were not using the law for love; they were using it for judgment.

“Circumcision is of value if you obey the law” (2:25). The sign commanded by God is important and has enduring value if interpreted spiritually, as has been discussed. But even then, it is no longer necessary for the remission of sins because it has been replaced by baptism. Paul tells the Colossians they have received a new kind of circumcision through faith in Christ, “in whom also you are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of

Christ: buried with him in baptism, wherein also you are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who has raised him from the dead" (Col. 2:11-12). Baptism in Christ takes away our sins. This confirms Thomas's teaching that circumcision was both a figure of and a preparation for baptism. Thomas uses this passage to describe baptism as a sign of the "spiritual circumcision to be accomplished by Christ in the soul," the one prophesied by Moses, which would be why circumcision is no longer necessary.

GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS VS. MAN'S RIGHTEOUSNESS

Paul has argued that God's faithfulness in giving his oracles to the Jews is glorified by their unfaithfulness in not believing them; therefore, their unfaithfulness does not discount the value of the identity conveyed by having those oracles. God has been faithful to them as his chosen people despite their unbelief because he made a covenant with them and is true to his covenant. "Let God be true and every man a liar" (3:4). This demonstrates God's righteousness in the face of their unrighteousness.

But now he realizes that such an argument could open another line of attack from his clever opponents, trained at the feet of other rabbis. "If our unrighteousness commends the righteousness of God, what shall we say? Is God unrighteous who takes vengeance? (I speak as a man)" (3:5). Paul speaks in the voice of someone objecting to his own identity argument by claiming that it undermines the justice of God. If he is correct in saying the unfaithfulness of the Jews in not believing God's oracles glorifies the faithfulness of God in giving them, then how could a just God punish them for not believing? Paul swats this logical fallacy away. "God forbid, for then how shall God judge the world?" (3:6). The

unrighteousness of men sets off the righteousness of God; if this bare fact prevented God from judging, then he would be unable to judge anything at all. But the pesky interlocutor persists: Why are the Jews considered sinners if their lie abounds to the glory of God by showing his truthfulness? If their “lie” glorifies God, as Paul has claimed, then how can God be just in condemning them for it? Or, to take this idea to its logical conclusion, why shouldn’t they go ahead and do evil if, as Paul says, their evil glorifies the righteousness of God, who remains faithful to his covenant despite their sinning?

Paul’s opponents attacked his identity argument through the reduction to absurdity. Apparently, these were things that were actually being said, possibly in Corinth or Galatia, since he comments, “as some affirm that we say.” Now he adds, “Their condemnation is just” (3:9). This unexplained interjection has occasioned plenty of comment. Personally, we think it might have something to do with reaffirming the justice of God in judging as he does, which has just been called into question and will be discussed below. In any case, Paul drops it for now and returns to his main theme and desire to put an end to divisive boasting. To discourage the Jews from clinging to circumcision, he has just glorified their identity as conservators of God’s oracles—but, come to think of it, he doesn’t want them boasting about that either! So now he says, “What then? Are we better than they?” Are the Jews better than the Gentiles for having been entrusted with the oracles of God? Is he boasting more than the Judaizers themselves? “No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin” (3:9)—he means in Romans 1:18-2:29. The Jewish identity is not without value—indeed, in Paul’s mind there is no more valuable identity, because of the oracles and because of Christ—but that doesn’t mean the Jews are more *righteous* than the

Gentiles, as the Judaizers were claiming. The oracles gave them a far more valuable identity than circumcision. But there's no reason to go around with their noses in the air about *that*, either, since God gave them the oracles even though they did not believe them and since the oracles condemned them.

Are we enjoying the rollercoaster? Chapter three is very difficult to parse because Paul is carrying on an elliptical conversation with an imaginary interlocutor who is determined to poke holes in his argument. Now, we say "imaginary," but it sounds like Paul may have encountered the interlocutor's arguments in his ongoing struggle with his fellow Jews over the circumcision controversy. We tend to see these things as a done deal, but it wasn't that way for Paul. He was still in the thick of it, still entwined in interminable wrangling with those who really knew how to wrangle and wanted to hang onto the old ways. If we feel like our heads are spinning as we try to follow these complicated arguments and unexplained twists and turns, then this may reflect a certain spinning in his own head as he tries to deal with determined and unrelenting opposition. In fact, we suspect these arguments are even more vertiginous than that. They may reflect a war in his own mind between wanting to expose any boasting over circumcision while at the same time wanting to hold onto the Jewish identity as something of great and historic value. However, this would take too much time to demonstrate verse by verse, so we move on.

Some interpretive sunlight finally breaks through the fog of rhetorical war in 3:9: "No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin." With this statement, Paul reveals what he has been up to all along since the middle of the first chapter. He has been leveling the playing field for the Gentiles by proving that "all have sinned and fallen short of the

glory of God” (3:23)—that is, the righteousness of God, which is being compared with the righteousness of men. As Thomas puts it, “After showing the Jews’ advantage over the Gentiles so far as God’s blessings are concerned, the Apostle now rejects their vainglory, by which they preferred themselves to Gentiles converted to the faith.”³ Paul uses a barrage of highly provocative quotations from the exalted oracles of God to prove his point, e.g., “There is no one righteous; no, not one” (Ps. 14:3); “Their mouth is an open grave; with their tongues, they have used deceit” (Ps. 5:9); “Their feet are swift to shed blood; destruction and misery are in their ways; and the way of peace they have not known” (Is. 59:7).

The inference Paul wants us to draw from these passages is that the Jews, if not necessarily totally depraved, were at least incapable of justifying themselves through the law, even though it did give them a distinctive identity as the people chosen to receive the law. Their histories show that the purpose of the law was not to glorify them and their righteousness. “What things soever the law says, it says to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God” (3:19)—which, incidentally, is just what Paul has been trying to do: stop the mouths of the circumcision crowd by holding them up to the mirror of the law that they love so much. Why specifically those who are “under the law”? Because it is the law that shows them their manifold sins and wickedness. Those who are “Jews inwardly” know the extent of their unrighteousness more than anyone else because they have the law, a fact that Paul will demonstrate with a personal confession later on. One of David’s psalms illustrates this phenomenon: “For innumerable evils have compassed me about: my iniquities have taken hold upon me so that I am not able to look up; they are more

3 Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Romans*, 3.271.

than the hairs of my head: therefore, my heart fails me. Be pleased, O Lord, to deliver me: O Lord, make haste to help me” (Ps. 40:12-13). He was acutely sensitive to the perfection of God’s law, of which we fall woefully short. But if the law shows that the Jews have been unrighteous, including her greatest king, then who are the Judaizers to judge the Gentiles for being uncircumcised?

Yes, it is true that the Gentiles are “sinning without the law,” but it is also true that the Jews are “sinning with the law.” So then, why are they boasting about their righteousness by judging the Gentiles for not being circumcised? And by the way, it is not just the Jews who stand condemned by the law. They have sinned under the law so that “all the world may become guilty before God” (3:19). The part stands in for the whole. Their inability to obey the law from their highly privileged position becomes an indictment on proud Gentiles as well, exposing human depravity in general, for the behavior of the Gentiles was deplorable, as shown by their own literature. Chrysostom points out that they made their passions their gods—lust into Venus, anger into Mars, drunkenness into Bacchus. Nothing could show their spiritual depravity more clearly. Paul’s point is that Jews and Gentiles are all alike condemned under the law. “Therefore, by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin” (3:20). No one can justify himself through the law, and therefore no one has a right to boast in the law.

Is this a critique of Judaism, as has sometimes been contended? Not at all; not if we take “Judaism” to refer to an ideal of acting in the spirit of the law. Neither Paul nor Christ has any problem with the moral law, the glory of Judaism, or with obedience to it. In fact, they both insist upon it. Paul said that the Jews were glorified through the oracles entrusted to them, and Moses said the same

thing. Paul is not critiquing Moses' statement that those who obey the law obtain life or his contention that the commandments are not really that hard to follow. But he *is* critiquing the unfortunate tendency among some of them to boast in the law as if they had justified themselves through it. Judaism is good in itself and worthy of praise. It is not intrinsically legalistic. It is not intrinsically blind to the spirit of the law. But the inclination of certain Jewish religious leaders to use the letter of the law to boast about themselves and their holiness was abhorrent to Jesus as well as to Paul. Was Jesus critiquing *Judaism* when he said the Sabbath was made for man (his rest) and not man for the Sabbath? Not at all. He was critiquing the unspiritual application of the commandment by those who used the letter of the law to glorify themselves and keep others in chains—just as the Judaizers were attempting to do to the Gentiles by insisting on circumcision.

Chapter three is complicated and incredibly challenging. Origen laments that Paul's "sequence of thought is incoherent."⁴ In the rapid flight of inspired thought and dictating without a pen in his hand, Paul does not give us much of anything to hold onto, which makes it easy to lose sight of the forest for the trees as we scramble to fill in the gaps. For this reason, we would not presume to vouch for the accuracy of our interpretation of any individual verses, especially where we may not be in harmony with traditional commentary, which is basically everywhere. Dodd complains that this section of the letter is "weak" and should have been left out. We can see how it might be easy to feel this way if we are not thinking about the visionary church and Paul's struggle with those who were insisting on circumcision, which he carries on through a complicated identity argument as well as his continuing comparison

4 Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 178.

between the righteousness of God and of man. Luther interprets it in the light of justification by faith, and we would never presume to say he is wrong. And other erudite interpretations abound. At the same time, the overall purpose of the arguments seems quite clear to us. It is to condemn what Paul sees as the holiness boasting of his fellow Jews—and thereby promote the visionary church.

A RIGHTEOUSNESS APART FROM THE LAW

Paul has been building a contrast since the first chapter between the righteousness of man and the righteousness of God. The purpose of this contrast was to put an end to the circumcision controversy and the boasting of the Judaizers in the law. To do that, he has been trying to show them that their righteousness is not what it seems. Yes, they were circumcised according to the law, but in order to obtain *righteousness* under the law—that is, justification—they must be righteous under *all* of the law, which is impossible. But now, by the incomparable grace of God, a new kind of righteousness has become available to them, according to Paul, a righteousness *apart* from the law, bestowed by God as a free gift on all who call upon the name of Christ and believe God raised him from the dead. This type of righteousness becomes available through the cross, where Christ fulfilled the law on our behalf. It is the righteousness of God, imputed, not earned.

Paul is drawing a contrast between this astonishing righteousness—God’s loving sacrifice of his only begotten Son for our sake—and the meager righteousness obtained by the Jews through involuntary infant foreskin removal. God promised to make a new covenant with his people, to “write the law in their hearts” (Jer. 31:33), which promise Paul alluded to in Romans 2:15. Under this new covenant, salvation is not a matter of man’s

righteousness, as it is in the covenant of Moses. It does not come through circumcision, as “certain men from Judea” (Acts 15:1) were insisting, causing much grief in the church. Instead, it comes through faith in Christ as our Savior. Paul was trying to get his fellow Jews to stop thinking that circumcision made them righteous. He wanted them to put their faith in Christ and his righteousness instead. But then they must stop judging the Gentiles. They, too, have been saved by faith apart from the law, saved despite being uncircumcised, just as the Jews are saved despite being sinners under the law.

This notion of the righteousness of God as restoration love is seen throughout the Old Testament, in the protoevangelium, in the rainbow after the Flood, in God’s repeated promises to Abraham, in his intervention on behalf of the Israelites in Egypt, in Moses’ promise that there would be restoration, and in numerous tender promises in the prophets that God would not abandon his people despite the judgment to come but would restore them to glory. These things were shadows of his greatest act of restoration love in sending his Son to make the faithful righteous through his blood. Paul is trying to get the Jews to see the *advantage* of God’s loving restoration. He wants them to let go of the old covenant of obligation, signed by circumcision and a burden to all, and embrace the new covenant of grace, as shown by the wedding analogy to come. He wants them to stop boasting of their righteousness and boast instead in the righteousness of God. This was the only way for the young church, composed of circumcised and uncircumcised believers, to be united. It is still the only path to unity today.

His method so far (1:18-3:20) has been to dismantle the boasting of the circumcision camp by showing the depravity of humankind. He has proved the depravity of the prideful pagans in

some detail. He has shown that prideful Jews are also sinners and judge themselves when they judge. He has struck down their false confidence by showing that circumcision signifies perfect obedience to the law, of which no mortal can boast. He has produced a blistering list of scripture passages describing the waywardness of Israel down through the ages, which he sums up with the following important comment: “Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh shall be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin” (3:20). The specific “deed” he has in mind is circumcision. The Judaizers were clinging to it in their ungracious treatment of the Gentiles. However, the above statement is the beginning of Paul’s argument that the law, far from ever having made anyone righteous, only increases awareness of sin: his main argument against boasting in the law.

Up to this point, the letter has been all gloom and doom. Paul has been applying the lash of the law to pride and holiness boasting. The haughty pagans failed in making themselves righteous through their philosophers and natural law, and neither did the haughty Jews obtain righteousness through the divine law that they themselves possessed. “There is none righteous; no, not one” (3:10). He uses this verse from the Psalms to summarize the Bible’s dark view of man’s righteousness. But (praise God) that is not the end of the story. Having severely chastened his readers, Paul now cheers them with exceedingly good news. “Now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God which is by the faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference” (3:21-22). We can obtain this new order of righteousness through faith in Christ. And it for *all* who believe. The Judaizers must stop condemning the Gentiles and trying to

get them excluded from the fellowship. All believers are justified by their faith in Christ. There is no exception.

Why is it righteousness “without the law”? Because the Gentiles did not have the law. That is the whole point. They had not been ritually circumcised on the eighth day, as the ceremonial law requires, and because of this, the Judaizers were condemning them. But they did believe in Christ as their Savior, which circumcised Jews, on the whole, did not, and thus they obtained the new righteousness described by Paul that comes via faith without the law. The Gentiles had the thing that mattered most, the one thing that can give life to us poor sinners. As Christ himself said, “This is the work of God, that you believe on him whom he has sent” (John 6:29). To believe in him is not only a righteous work, since he is who he says he is, but it is the first and most important work of all. This righteousness is “for all who believe, for there is no difference” (3:22). This radical statement is the reason for Paul’s argument and his contrast between man’s righteousness and God’s. Because God was faithful to his promise, the wall between Jew and Gentile created by circumcision has come tumbling down, just as Paul describes it in Ephesians 2:11-22.

In short, Paul uses the idea of the righteousness that comes by faith not just to clarify doctrine in the new Christian church but also to justify the presence of uncircumcised Gentiles in the church. As Thomas puts it, “After showing that Jews and Gentiles are equal as far as the state of previous guilt is concerned, the Apostle now shows that they are also *equal* as far as the state of subsequent grace is concerned.”⁵ The key word here is equal. From Galatians: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal.

5 Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Romans*, 3:308.

3:28). This is the radical new equality Paul is proclaiming, and it is essential to unity since there can be no peace without it, no unfeigned love; and equal standing in the eyes of God is bestowed through the justification that comes through faith, since this justification comes to all who believe.

RADICAL EQUALITY

As an aside, it might be a little hard for us today to appreciate just how radical these words really were: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). The very boldness of the statement may blind us to how unusual it was at the time, how strange and exotic it would have sounded to Jewish ears, and indeed to any ears. Mary’s soulful prophecy has come true. “He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty” (Luke 1:51-53). And likewise, from Isaiah: “Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins. The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them” (Is. 11:6).

This is what we mean by *visionary*. This is not a “church” in the humdrum way the word is often used; no, it is an ecstatic vision of perfect equality and love. It is a vision Paul himself shares, as indeed do all of the apostles, as we could demonstrate by wearying you with familiar quotations. But just as the lion and lamb can only lie down together by the supernatural power of God, so God has brought Jew and Gentile together through the supernatural

righteousness of the cross and justification by faith; not because they were worthy—their own righteousness had nothing to do with it—but because they believed in the one who was sent. When we understand this, truly understand it, we begin to see our fellow beings in a completely new way. We are all sinners at the foot of the cross. And this should make us willing to give up the love of judging that divides us and causes so much pain and destruction in our churches.

Speaking of this ecstatic vision—have we attained it? Is this what the world sees when it looks at the Christian church? Perfect love, perfect equality, perfect peace? The Jews believed the Messiah would overthrow all misery and despair and institute a completely new order of things. Would they recognize this new order in the Christian church of today? The New Jerusalem, the bride of Christ in all her glory, a light to the world of mercy and justice and charity and unity and kindness and love; spotless, beautiful, majestic, pure? Has she descended from heaven, or is there still some work to be done?

GOD'S JUSTICE

Remember those quibbling arguments we were talking about a while back—people lampooning Paul's teaching about the Jewish identity by suggesting that it opened the door to questioning the justice of God? This is where we believe he finally responds to the charge (although we should note that no one else seems to believe this, except Dunn). Perhaps Christ was sent as a propitiatory sacrifice to show that "their condemnation is just" (3:8); that is, to justify the justice of God when he judges. Did the Jews manage to keep their exalted identity as the chosen people and custodians of God's oracles despite their unbelief, as Paul's argument seems

to imply? In other words, did their unbelief go unpunished, contrary to the justice of God, as his adversaries claim? Not at all. Instead, their sins were placed on Christ on the cross. God proved he is just in judging their unfaithfulness while still upholding their honored identity as the chosen people by sacrificing his Son to remove the stain of their sin. This astonishing sacrifice paid the full price necessary to overcome the wrath of a righteous God against man's unrighteousness, a just God against unjust mortals. Christ's sacrifice is the "propitiation" for their sins, just as above the law in the Ark of the Covenant there was an elaborate "propitiation" or mercy seat which foreshadowed Christ. From Thomas: "As a figure of this it was commanded in Exodus that a propitiatory seat, i.e., Christ, be placed on the ark, i.e., the Church."⁶ On the Day of Atonement, the high priest sprinkled the blood of a sacrificial goat on the mercy seat, thus making atonement for sins. The blood of the goat was a propitiation for those sins, and Paul is linking the ancient ceremony of atonement with the sacrifice of the cross.

The theological conundrum raised by Paul's identity argument and pushed by his teasing opponents is this: How can God's mercy towards the Jews in continuing to give them the oracles and a desirable identity, despite their unfaithfulness, be reconciled to his justice, which requires punishment for their unbelief? How can the justice of God be reconciled to the mercy of God asserted by Paul? In Leviticus, this problem was addressed through the blood sacrifice. The people of Israel needed relief from the burden of sin—they needed mercy—but how could mercy be obtained without compromising the justice of God? The solution was to command them to sacrifice a spotless goat, of high value and without defect, its value being a sign of true sacrifice and its spotlessness being a

6 Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Romans*, 3:308.

preview of the perfect sacrifice to come. “Without shedding of blood, there is no remission [of sins]” (Heb. 9:22). This blood is offered in place of the blood of those seeking mercy, which divine justice requires. It is a substitution. But according to Hebrews, those sacrifices did not take away the burden of sin. The relief they provided was fleeting and insubstantial, which is why the sacrifice had to be repeated year after year. Therefore, our gracious God made a blood sacrifice that was fully sufficient on their behalf. God paid the necessary price for dispensing mercy while also upholding divine justice by sacrificing his own Son on the cross. The deeper meaning of the story of Abraham and Isaac finally becomes clear. God himself provided a spotless lamb. And the result? “Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other” (Ps. 85:10).

Paul continues: “But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets” (3:21). God’s righteousness, which can almost be described as the subject of the entire letter, and which has been called into question by Paul’s opponents in order to undermine his identity argument, was “manifested” by Christ and the cross, just as in Exodus God had said he would “meet with you and commune with you” (Exod, 25:22) from above the mercy seat, a figure of Christ and his redeeming work. By God’s “righteousness,” Paul means Christ’s atoning sacrifice through which we obtain the salvation promised by God, which is why this verse follows hard upon the reference to the mercy seat. Without his blood-stained righteous act, there can be no atonement. The point is their sin was *not* set aside, as Paul’s pesky interlocutors are suggesting; it was judged and punished in the horrible death suffered by Christ on the cross. Justice was served. Divine wrath was appeased. This is “righteousness without

the law” because those whose identities were justified by it had not obeyed the law. It was “witnessed by the law and the prophets” because the law is a shadow of the glory to come, including the sacrificial law, and because the prophets spoke of the righteousness of God in fulfilling his promises, as alluded to by Christ: “These are the words which I spoke unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me” (Luke 24:44).

Christ came “to declare, I say, at this time his [God’s] righteousness: that he [God] might be just, and the justifier of him which believes in Jesus” (3:26)—that God could be just and still glorify the identity of the Jews as keepers of the oracles despite their unbelief because of the sacrifice of Christ; so that he might become the justifier of *all* who believe in Christ, whether or not they have the ceremonial law—i.e., the Gentile Christians. Paul finally tells us what he has in mind with “the righteousness of God.” It was manifested on the cross, the place where salvation occurred. God’s justice has been vindicated by the steep price he paid in his Son for sins among the Jews left unpunished in the past. The Jews were not able to redeem their identities through their sacrifices, but through this one, perfect, all-sufficient sacrifice, God made himself the justifier both of the unjust and of the Jewish identity, the subject of chapter three (and four, as we shall see). Therefore, he is also the justifier of all who put their faith in Christ and his righteousness, implying not just those Jews who did not believe the oracles or follow the law they had, but also the Gentiles who did not have the law or the oracles.

And here’s the point of all this very deep and mind-boggling reasoning. If God is the justifier—if the good news is that we are redeemed by his righteousness in spite of our unrighteousness—

“where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? Nay: but by the law of faith” (3:27), since all who believe in Christ are “justified by faith without the deeds of the law” (3:28)—including circumcision. The conjunction of verses 26-29 shows that Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith is connected with his desire to get the Judaizers to stop boasting in the law of circumcision and start welcoming Gentiles into the church. Just as God has been merciful to unfaithful Jews on the cross, redeeming their identity in Christ, even though they were disobedient to the law and did not believe the oracles, so he has been merciful to the Gentiles and given them a way to obtain life and happiness without the works of the law. If we are justified by faith and not works, then there is nothing for “the circumcised” to boast about and no reason for them to push the Gentiles away. It was not the deeds of the law that made them righteous and justified their identity; it was not circumcision, not if they kept on sinning. It was the righteousness of Christ on the cross. Since they did not make themselves righteous or justify themselves through their works, they must stop boasting in the law. They must stop condemning the Gentiles for not being circumcised. Christ is their mercy seat. They need him because they need a covering over the law that condemns them. Philippi comments: “The pride of the Jew in the law could not be more effectually humbled than by the allusion to the Kapporeth as covering the blood-besprinkled, curse-dealing law.”⁷ And if Thomas’s typological reading is correct, the ark of the covenant has now become the church, with the law inside to convict us of our sins, but the grace of Christ covering all, not through a yearly sacrifice of atonement, as in the old temple, but through his one, all-sufficient sacrifice. All who call upon his name are covered by him, whether circumcised or uncircumcised.

7 Philippi, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, 144.

They have justification even though they are still sinners, a theme that will be discussed in more depth in chapter seven.

This whole chapter, then, with all of its complicated and sometimes seemingly incomprehensible arguments, has been about boasting in the law and condemning the Gentiles for being uncircumcised. Now Paul connects his argument about justification by faith to the honor of God. “Is he the God of the Jews only?”—that is, only of those who have the law? “Is he not also of the Gentiles? Yes, the Gentiles also” (3:29). Is Jehovah so small and insignificant that he is merely the God of a minor oppressed language group and not all people? The Jews were too proud to admit any such thing. “For God is the King of all the earth: sing you praises with understanding. God reigns over the heathen: God sits upon the throne of his holiness” (Ps. 47:7-8). The one God invoked in the Shema justifies both “the circumcision” and “the uncircumcision” through faith in Christ—both Jew and Gentile. The oneness of God is reflected in the unity thus effected by grace. God becomes God of all the world through the righteousness of the cross, which was not the case under the law, given to the Jews. But which is more glorious—God’s righteousness, by which the whole world is saved and made one, or the righteousness obtained by the Jews through circumcision, by which none are saved but a few are set apart? Paul’s question is meant to embarrass the Judaizers and show them the insularity of their identity. They thought they were the whole world. The world was not thinking of them.

Again, these verses are complex, and we have given them a reading that is far from the beaten path, to say the least. But whatever the exact meaning of each verse may be, one thing seems clear: this whole chapter is about boasting in the law. Paul’s argument is that the Jews were unable to justify themselves and their exalted identity

through the law, but God has justified them through the cross. They are saved through the righteousness of God, not their own righteousness; through his power to justify them, not their power to justify themselves, for they too “have no excuse.” Ergo, it is high time for them to stop boasting in the law.

But “do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid; indeed, we establish the law” (3:31). There are many interesting explanations of this... One we like very much is Calvin’s. Justification through faith is necessary for the very reason that the moral law shows us the impossibility of justifying ourselves; that is, because the law shows “their damnation is just” (3:8). Therefore, Paul’s doctrine upholds the law. However, it is not Paul’s intention to “make void” the moral law, as becomes evident in chapter six. Thus, we also like Thomas’s explanation that faith is necessary to *fulfill* the law. Similarly, we are struck by Augustine’s idea that the letter of the law increases sin by making obedience a matter of drudgery while the Spirit gives us freedom to obey the law by writing it in our hearts. “The law was therefore given, in order that grace might be sought; grace was given, in order that the law might be fulfilled.”⁸ Justification by faith, far from voiding the moral law, makes it possible to obey the moral law. In Luther’s formulation, the will, having been subdued by conviction of sin, “needs grace to make it willing and cheerful toward the law.”⁹ And there is one more possibility. Justification by faith does not make void the law because we obtain it through the righteousness of God. We will explain in a moment.

In the meantime, having mentioned Luther, we feel a need to pause and note that we are not attempting to devalue his claim

8 Augustine, *On the Spirit and the Letter*, Chap. 34.

9 Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 134

that this part of chapter three is the soul of the Bible because of the doctrine of justification by faith; in other words, without any reference to the visionary church. Again, it is not our purpose to dismiss traditional interpretations of Romans. There is much to be said for Luther's contention because it is beyond doubt that justification by faith is an essential doctrine. Christ's righteousness enables us to be saved through faith in the power of his blood. He is the mercy seat for our sins. The importance of this doctrine cannot be overstated. We agree with Luther that the scheme of Romans is to annihilate holiness boasting and dreaming of our own righteousness based upon works.

No, all we claim for ourselves—and it is not much—is that these same verses and all of chapter three also reflect Paul's love of unity. The main impediment to unity was the rift between Gentile and Jew; therefore, he is eager to show that "the circumcision" and "the uncircumcision" are justified alike through faith in Christ and his righteousness. Luther's doctrine of justification "by faith alone" served as an important corrective to abuses that had piled up in the age of the Schoolmen, tilting the scales toward works-righteousness. We view the correction as important and necessary. The Trent theologians also thought it was important because they took Luther very seriously. At the same time, this doctrine has been used to divide the church, including by Luther himself in the incendiary rhetoric seen in his later years, which is something we would certainly like to see avoided. We believe it *can* be avoided but will undertake that challenging discussion later on.

Finally, we would like to point out that the verse we have been discussing—the final verse in chapter three: "Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid. Indeed, we establish the law" (3:31)—forms a bridge to the first verse of the next chapter,

which is about Abraham's faith. Paul is about to show that the only way for Abraham to obtain life was through faith in the promises of God. It was not his righteous obedience to the law of circumcision that saved him from oblivion and dying without an heir. It was his faith in the righteousness of God and his power to fulfill the seemingly impossible promise he made. And this takes us to chapter eleven. Why did the Jews fail to obtain the salvation for which they were longing? Because they did not seek it through faith in the promises of God. They were the people of the law, and the end of the law is to obtain life, according to Moses; but the only way sinners can obtain life is through faith in Christ. Paul's doctrine of justification by faith establishes the law rather than voiding it because Christ obtained life by fulfilling the law; and it is through his righteousness that we are made righteous too.

THE HIDDEN PURPOSE OF THE LAW

Under the old covenant, it was believed that the purpose of the law was to show us how to obtain life. Moses said, "Do this, and you shall live" (Lev. 18:5; Deut. 8:1); and Solomon: "He that keeps the commandment keeps his own soul; but he that despises God's ways shall die" (Prov. 19:16). Ezekiel 18 provides a clear picture of this way of thinking about the law. But according to Paul, the real reason the law was given was to show that we mortals *cannot* obtain life through the law—that "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (3:23)—and thus to point the way to faith in Christ. This is explained in Galatians 3:19: "Wherefore then serves the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made [i.e., Abraham]." The purpose of the law was to show us we are sinners. "Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the

knowledge of sin” (3:19).

Paul had a practical end in view with this radical new interpretation of the law. He was trying to create the visionary church. The reason for arguing that it is impossible to obtain justification under the law was to get the Judaizers to stop boasting in the law, specifically in circumcision, which is the subject of chapters three and four; and the reason for wanting them to stop boasting in circumcision was to make it possible for Gentiles to be welcomed into the church. Yes, God favored the Jews with the law, the glory of the ancient world, but they did not follow it. “But this thing commanded I them, saying: ‘Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people: and walk you in all the ways that I have commanded you, that it may be well unto you. But they hearkened not, nor inclined their ear, but walked in the counsels and in the imagination of their evil heart, and went backward, and not forward” (Jer. 7:23-24).

God put an exclamation point on this backsliding by causing all who had received the law to die in the desert and preventing them from entering the Promised Land. They did not “do this,” and therefore they did not obtain the promise. But then what if God did not give them the law so they could boast about their righteousness, as the Judaizers were doing? What if God had a more wonderful purpose in mind? Since the fall of man had come about through the desire to make themselves “like God,” to glorify themselves, what if the actual purpose of the law was to *humble* them so they could be shown mercy? According to their national narrative, those who received the law wandered in the desert for forty years, grumbling and sinning, until God lifted up a savior, Joshua, who finally led them over the Jordan River into the Promised Land. These are wonderful shadows of Christ and the

glory to come, but they do not glorify Israel or its righteousness; on the contrary, they indicate that Israel was incapable of obeying the law.

So, what exactly was Paul's attitude toward the law? He certainly did not despise it. In chapter seven, he calls it "spiritual," which is the highest compliment that can be given. And indeed, it is spiritual because it shows the path to life. Paul's comments about the law in Galatians are so negative that they seem to devalue it, which has led to a tendency to speak dismissively of the law in some circles. However, the negativity in Galatians has a very narrow scope. Paul was trying to stop the Gentiles from succumbing to the Judaizers and becoming legalistic themselves, which would result in their fellow Gentiles being cut off from the church. To this end, he uses some rather strong language regarding the law: "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is everyone that hangs on a tree: that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Gal. 3:13-14). The word "curse" is used in conjunction with the law in an attempt to wake up the Galatians to the machinations of the Judaizers. In itself, the law is not a curse. Indeed, Paul says that it is "holy, and just, and good" (7:12). But it is a curse to those who try to justify themselves under the law. The Judaizers who were making their boast in the law were laboring under the same curse as Adam, the curse of sin and death. Christ lifted this curse by allowing himself to become cursed and be hung upon a tree.

Some use these words from Galatians to discount the law, but this is counterproductive if the purpose of the law is to point us to Christ. Thinking again of Thomas's interpretation of the mercy seat, it is the law that convicts us and makes us conscious of

how much we need his gracious covering. This conviction is not something that happens once and for all, making it safe for us to dispense with the law. No, we need the law every day to remind us to put our faith in the righteousness of God and his salvation. The law is essential to the unity desired by Paul because it shows that we are all sinners and equally condemned in the eyes of a just God; equally objects of wrath without Christ, and equally blessed and protected by his covering. This equality makes us one.

The law is still a light upon our path, a guide to a better, more prosperous, and happier life. Those who try to follow the Ten Commandments will have a far better life than those who neglect them. But no one can *save* himself through the law. “Do this, and you shall live” is impossible for us because of our very nature, as will be shown in a little while. And this is Paul’s main point. If we cannot obtain life through the law, then we should not be boasting in the law and excluding others from the church. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians that Christ has eclipsed the glory of the law. He alone was able to fulfill the law, and by so doing, he became our glory. Therefore, if we must boast, as it seems human beings cannot help doing, we should boast in him, whose righteousness becomes our own through faith.

To recap, we agree wholeheartedly with the Reformers that Paul emphasizes justification by faith in chapter three and denies that anyone can make themselves righteous under the law. However, his immediate purpose in doing so was not to devalue the law but to bring unity to the church.

THE “LAW OF FAITH”

Religious Jews were in love with the law and its outward forms—not just with the law for its own sake, because it is perfect and holy,

but also with the distinctive cultural identity it conveyed, despite having been overrun by four successive pagan empires. The law was the basis of their boasting, of the parading righteousness seen in the Pharisee on the street corner in Luke 18. But now Paul announces a new kind of law they would not have heard of—the “law of faith” (3:27). The way to obtain righteousness through *this* law is to believe in Christ and his power to save. It is to “believe in the one who was sent,” as John puts it (6:29). And John tells us that the Jews did not obey this law: “He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not” (John 1:10-11).

It occurs to us that faith can be described as a law in other ways, too. Our most important duty is to believe. “Without faith, it is impossible to please him, for he who comes to God must believe that he exists” (Heb. 11:6). Faith has several characteristics of a law. Faith is something we must cultivate. We must make every effort to believe in God and trust in him despite all distractions and temptations to do otherwise. Christ is knocking at the door to our hearts, but we cannot simply lie there on our soft couches and ignore him. We must bestir ourselves and open the door if we want to taste his sweetness. When we break a law, there are negative consequences, and faith is a law based on this test as well. For instance, as research has shown, those who have faith tend to be happier and less anxious than those who do not. They have the scriptures, an inexhaustible source of comfort, instruction, and interest. They believe God is provident; they do not make themselves anxious, fretting about tomorrow. They have direction and purpose in life because they strive to seek the will of God. They have meaning because God is their means of living. They have the balm of forgiveness through the cross. They do not fear death.

For Paul's immediate purposes, however, the "law of faith" plainly says, "Do not boast." To boast of our righteousness in the law, as the Judaizers were doing by judging the Gentiles, is to break the law of faith in the righteousness of Christ, the only law through which we can be saved. Do we believe in our ability to save ourselves through the law, or do we put our faith in Christ to save us? We cannot have it both ways. And if we are justified by faith and not by works, then the Judaizers have no reason to boast in the work of circumcision. The same principle applies today, even though circumcision is no longer disputed. The law of faith requires us to "stop judging one another" (14:3) and "esteem each other better than themselves" (Phil. 2:3). This is the path to the visionary church.

We're not sure what to make of the subtle debate over what Paul had in mind by "boasting" in verse 27. As discussed, Paul saw the judgmental attitude of the Judaizers toward the Gentiles as holiness boasting. This is what he actually says in Galatians. And this is why he says, two verses later, "Is he the God of the Jews only? Is he not also of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also" (3:29). This whole section of the letter shows that "a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law" (3:28); specifically circumcision. Why? Because the Judaizers were claiming that the Gentiles had to be circumcised in order to be saved. Paul argued that the Gentiles were saved by faith in Christ without circumcision. Therefore, it seems clear that the boasting he has in mind is that of the Judaizers at their expense.

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

The Jews tried to justify themselves and their somewhat downtrodden identity through the most holy and spiritual law.

Hence, the tendency of the Judaizers to boast in the law. But now Paul announces a new kind of justification that had not been specifically articulated in the past. According to him, we can be justified in the eyes of God by believing in Christ and the power of his blood. We can be justified by faith—not merely in the sense of intellectual assent, but the kind of belief in the promises of God seen in Abraham. It is specifically in this faith that atonement occurs and not in any work we can do, since we cannot fulfill the law, as Paul has shown. And we obtain a sparkling new identity through this novel form of justification. We are the beloved redeemed. This is far more desirable than any other identity offered by the world.

For many, justification by faith is the most precious doctrine in Romans. But what does it have to do with the visionary church? Well, in fact, everything. Paul wants us to stop judging one another; and as it happens, the very thing we are looking for in our love of judging is justification. We use the power of judgment to justify ourselves. Adam and Eve desired it because they wanted to be like God—and that is also why we love it. Nothing seems more irresistible to us than knocking others down to size in order to lift ourselves up. But if we have already obtained justification through faith in Christ, then there is no longer any reason to “bite and devour” (Gal. 5:15) one another. We have a fully desirable identity as “sons of God,” clothed in our white robes that have been washed in the blood of the Lamb and standing among a great multitude of all nations, peoples, and tongues. Justification by faith makes our natural contentiousness obsolete. To say we are justified by faith and not works and forget to include “lest any man should boast” is like telling a story without the moral.

Justification by faith is what makes it possible for there to be unity between Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free. It

is the *basis* of that unity. No one earns justification by faith; it flows directly from God to those who believe. Therefore, justification by faith produces equality that cannot be found anywhere else, certainly not in any system of merit like Judaism. Paul says we are equally condemned under the law and equally justified through our faith in Christ. It is this equality that makes unity possible. “Is he the God of the Jews only? Is he not also of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also: seeing it is one God, which shall justify the circumcision by faith, and uncircumcision through faith” (3:29-20). When Paul thinks of justification by faith, he thinks of oneness. It is a valuable doctrine for its own sake but is also the cornerstone of his argument against holiness boasting and for unity between Gentiles and Jews in the church.

CHAPTER 4

AFTER ALL, IT WAS FAITH THAT MADE ABRAHAM A JEW

There is no break in continuity between chapters three and four. Paul is going to expand on the idea of the “righteousness of God without the law” (3:21). He is still trying to convince the Judaizers that circumcision is not as important to the Jewish identity as they think it is, still trying to get them to stop clinging to it and using it to pummel his Gentile flock. But he switches tactics. More than anything, the Jews rooted their identity in Abraham, whom God commanded to be circumcised as a seal of his covenant. Now Paul is going to challenge them and their assumptions about that identity. To quote Thomas: “After excluding the glory which the Jews took in the Law, on the basis of which they preferred themselves to the Gentiles, the Apostle now excludes their glory in regard to

circumcision.”¹

Paul has just articulated two powerful new concepts: the law of faith and justification by faith. The common denominator of both is faith. For the sake of unity in the church, he is going to try to elevate faith over the work of circumcision. He asks the Judaizers to consider whether it was the righteousness of circumcision that made Abraham the spiritual father of the Jews or his faith in the righteousness of God in keeping his promises. Which of these is more important to the Jewish identity in the end? True, Abraham showed righteousness in obeying God’s command, but the righteous work of circumcision could not give him a legal heir, a posterity, which was the desire he had expressed to God. For that, he had to believe in the promise of God, which made him laugh when he first heard it because of its seeming implausibility. Paul will argue that Abraham’s faith in God’s promise was more important to his identity—and thus to the Jewish identity—than having himself circumcised at God’s command.² Dodd calls this a digression that throws little light on the main theme, but it is far from a digression if Paul’s main purpose is to unite the church by stopping the mouths of the Judaizers, here by another appeal to identity.

Paul has just finished saying, “Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith” (3:27). From this, it seems clear that his purpose in articulating the “law of faith” was to stop the holiness boasting of the Judaizers. Now he applies his critique of holiness boasting to Abraham. “What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to

1 Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Romans*, 4:322.

2 Philippi spills a good amount of ink trying to convince us that Abraham actually believed in the coming of Christ and was, therefore, justified by faith in him. We do not dispute it.

the flesh, has found? For if Abraham were justified by works, he has something to boast of; but not before God” (4:2). He is still talking about boasting in the law, as at the end of the previous chapter. The Judaizers were proud of being circumcised, but they were even prouder of being children of Abraham, in whom they found their identity. So, Paul quizzes them. What has Abraham, the model of righteousness among the Jews, found pertaining to the flesh—that is, the righteousness of circumcision, which is literally in the flesh? He found that he had no reason to boast before God about this righteousness because God had already counted righteousness to him long before he was circumcised. “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness” (4:3). The righteousness counted to him by God cannot be superseded in God’s own eyes by the righteousness he obtained twenty years later by being circumcised. Thus, he was justified—saved—by a gracious work of God on account of his faith and not by the work of circumcision; by God’s righteousness and not his own.

This is an argument strategy used by Paul to stop the mouths of the Judaizers. Only faith in the promises of God could give Abraham an identity that outlasted the grave. Thus his faith is more important to the Jewish identity than his righteous work of circumcision. Only God’s righteousness in keeping his promise could give Abraham the posterity he longed for, not any righteousness “pertaining to the flesh,” for Sarah was barren, and his flesh was “as good as dead” (4:19). Because he believed in God’s promise, he received the free gift of righteousness *before* he was circumcised; the implication being that the uncircumcised Gentiles are also now the beneficiaries of this free gift because of their faith in Christ, as Paul said at the end of the last chapter. They have the same status as the Jews in the new church even though they are not

circumcised. Gentiles and Jews alike are children of the promise of the righteousness that comes through faith.

The problem Paul was dealing with in his longing for unity between Jews and Gentiles was that the ceremonial law was a separating power. The practical result of the circumcision mandate was to separate Abraham and his tribe from the surrounding nonbelievers so that they could become vessels for God's oracles and the Messiah. But Christ *was* the Messiah as well as the "word made flesh" (John 1:14). There was no longer any need for a separate revelation vessel. The wall established through the old covenant came tumbling down. A great "mystery" (Eph 3:3) had been revealed to Paul after his conversion. Through the work of the cross, uncircumcised Gentiles who believed in Christ had also now become part of God's family. There was no difference between circumcised and uncircumcised under the new covenant of grace, which superseded the old covenant with its separating power. But Paul's problem was this: how do you convince a people whose whole identity has been based on the ceremonial law and its separating power to stop clinging to circumcision and separating themselves from the Gentiles?

One way he did this was by trying to elevate faith in the minds of the Jews (perhaps this is the forward-looking meaning of "from faith to faith" [1:17] in the first chapter) by getting them to look at faith in a new and more exalted light, as he tries to do in his discussion of Abraham; to see faith as being far more valuable to identity than the old covenant of law to which they were clinging. Faith was terribly important in the Old Testament as well, but it implied obedience to the law. Therefore, faith takes on a new meaning with Christ and his act of redemption, since he fulfilled the law on our behalf. The name *Jesus* means God saves. Indeed,

the angel told Joseph to call him Jesus “for he shall save his people from their sins” (Matt 1:21). Because of him, obtaining salvation is no longer a matter of trying to earn justification under the law, which the Jews’ own history had shown to be impossible. Instead, it is a matter of having faith in Christ. Through him and the new covenant of his blood, we are able to obtain what could never be obtained through the old covenant: an immortal identity as sons of God. Judaism—the Jewish identity based on the separating force of the ceremonial law—is the old wineskin. A new wineskin is needed for the new wine of grace, which we obtain not through works like circumcision but through faith.

The notion of righteousness by faith presented in chapter three is important for its own sake and in the way it is usually discussed. But its immediate purpose was to promote reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles and unity in the church.

THE FREE GIFT OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

According to Paul’s interpretation of Genesis 15:6, God counted righteousness to Abraham as a *free gift* on account of his faith. He did not earn righteousness, as the Judaizers were claiming to have done through circumcision; it was graciously given to him even before he was circumcised. Paul’s position is that it is “by grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph 2:8-9). This idea of the purely gratuitous nature of grace is invoked in Romans by comparing a gift to what we can earn. “Now to him that works, the reward is not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that works not, but believes on him that justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness” (4:4-5). Evidently Abraham is “him that works not,” since righteousness was counted to him long

before he was circumcised, up to 22 years by rabbinical calculation. The gift of righteousness was graciously bestowed upon Abraham because he believed in the incredible promises God made. This is Paul's interpretation of the story. The reason for offering this interpretation is to stop the mouths of the Judaizers by elevating faith over the work of circumcision. They were claiming that circumcision was necessary for salvation. Paul's argument is that everyone who believes in Christ receives salvation as a free gift, just like Abraham, apart from works. God graciously gives it.

Everyone loves to get a gift, especially since they don't have to work for it. Paul wants the Jews to celebrate the free gift of righteousness that Christians have in Christ and not grouse about the presence of uncircumcised Gentiles in the church. To this end, he gives a new interpretation of Psalm 32: "Even as David also describes the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputes righteousness without works, saying, 'Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered.'" (4:6-7). Now, the psalm does not say anything about imputing righteousness without works or even about faith. All it says is that those who repent will be forgiven. But presumably Paul latches onto it because it says, "Blessed are they." He wants the Jewish hardliners to feel the *blessedness* of the gift of God's grace. He wants them to appreciate the gift of salvation and not be so obsessed with what they think they have earned through the work of circumcision. He doesn't want them to be like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son.

Grace is one gift that seems to rub some people the wrong way. Pride is the source of this irritation. The workers in Christ's parable who worked all day weren't happy when other workers came along at the end of the day and received the same wages as themselves.

They wanted credit for what they had done. They wanted a reward “reckoned of debt” and were opposed to the gracious gift that was given. This parable seems to be about the Jews and the Gentiles. The Jews had been working under the law throughout their long history, and then the upstart Gentiles came along and received justification and righteousness simply by believing in the one who was sent. This did not sit well with them. And there is still uneasiness about the parable today among the faithful. It seems we still want to have some debt reckoned to us for being “good people” and attending church.

But the point of the parable is to glorify God and the “exceeding riches of his grace” (Eph 2:7), not to devalue work. There is no other God who can compare; no other God who is generous to a fault; no other God who longs for the salvation of the lost sheep, who rejoices when they repent and return to the fold no matter how late in the day; who has forbearance and overlooks much in human behavior and continues to smile on us as his children even when we act like vipers; who gave his own Son to die for our sins. Paul wants the Judaizers to appreciate God’s graciousness, as seen in the free gift of righteousness that we have in Christ when we believe; the same gift given to Abraham, according to his interpretation. He wants them to seek their identity in faith in such a gracious God and not spend so much time worrying about who was and who wasn’t circumcised.

FAITH IN CHRIST IS SEEN IN GENTILES AS WELL AS JEWS

“Comes this blessedness then upon the circumcision only?” (4:9). Is it only circumcised Jews who enjoy the gracious gift of righteousness Paul has just described, a righteousness imputed to

Abraham on account of his faith, or the forgiveness of sins rejoiced in by the psalmist? In short, was it really true, as the Judaizers were claiming, that the Gentiles had to be circumcised to be saved? No, says Paul, because Abraham received the free gift of righteousness without the work of circumcision. Indeed, this work was added later as “a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised” (4:11).

Abraham was circumcised to show that he put his faith in God’s promises and not in the flesh. God had imputed righteousness to him many years earlier because of his faith in his promises, but Abraham seems to have lost some of his faith when he attempted to obtain a posterity through Hagar. After he had been sufficiently chastened by the tragic results of this liaison, God made the promise again, but this time he commanded Abraham to seal his faith in the promise with circumcision, a sign in a significant place, indicating that he would never again attempt to depend on the flesh to obtain an heir. This seal came long after God counted righteousness to Abraham on account of his faith. Therefore, according to Paul, Abraham is the spiritual father of all who believe in God’s promises, including uncircumcised Gentiles, “that righteousness might be imputed to them also” (4:11). The Jews called Abraham their father; now Paul declares that the Gentiles have the right to do the same because they have faith in God’s Son, in the one who was sent. Abraham has become the “father of circumcision” (4:12), as the Jews liked to call him, not just to the Jews but to all who have faith in the promises of God. “Know you therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham” (Gal 3:7).

Paul continues his assault on the Judaizers’ claim that circumcision was required for salvation: “For the promise, that he should be the heir of the world, was not to Abraham, or to his seed,

through the law, but through the righteousness of faith” (4:13). This is literally true. God did not make the promise of posterity contingent upon circumcision, which was the only law Abraham was given. He made the promise without conditions; literally, all Abraham had to do was believe it. “For if they which are of the law be heirs [circumcised Jews], [Abraham’s] faith is made void, and the promise made no effect” (4:14). Paul claims the legalists were *devaluing* Abraham’s faith by insisting on circumcision. As Chrysostom puts it, “He who clings to the law as a saving force does so to the disparagement of faith.”³ If it had been possible for Abraham to obtain a posterity by obeying the law, he would not have needed the promise at all. The faith that was counted to him as righteousness would have been made void. But the righteousness of his faith was of *greater* value to his identity than the work of circumcision, since this work could not preserve it.

In the background of this highly involved reasoning is the contrast Paul has been developing all along between the righteousness of God and the righteousness of man. God’s righteousness was seen in the miraculous birth of Isaac and the fulfillment of the promise he made. Abraham’s righteousness was seen in his obedience to the law of circumcision. But this work could not give him the thing he longed for most: an heir. The only way he could have a posterity was through the promise of God, since he and Sarah were too old to have children. The Judaizers were insisting on circumcision for salvation, the righteousness of Abraham “pertaining to the flesh,” but this work cannot give anyone life. Only faith in the righteousness of God can lead to deliverance from the grave.

We will also note that faith is the most *lovable* thing about Abraham. He came to a strange land when he was called. He

3 Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Epistle to the Romans*, 4:14.

brought his son to the altar at God's command; a test of his faith. It is his great faith that continues to make his identity appealing down through the ages, not circumcision. His faith was winsome because it is right to believe in God and his promises despite the opposition of the world. Unlike Abraham, the Gentiles did not have righteousness pertaining to the flesh; they were not circumcised, as the Judaizers wanted them to be. But they had the righteousness of believing in Christ and his promises. They were righteous according to the "law of faith" because Christ is indeed the Son of God as proven with power by the Resurrection, to return to what Paul said at the beginning. By the same token, those Jews who did not believe were unrighteous. Christ makes this clear. "Woe unto you, Chorazin! Woe unto you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say unto you, it shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you" (Matt. 11:21-22).

A MATTER OF MERIT?

But then, were the rabbis right when they interpreted Genesis 15:6 to mean that the faith of Abraham was a righteous work—a merit? Faith in God is meritorious; the Bible makes this perfectly clear. It was meritorious of Noah to believe in God even when he was ridiculed for his belief. It was meritorious of Abraham to believe when it caused him to leave his home. It was meritorious of Rahab to have faith in spite of the danger to her family, and of Ruth to have faith to follow Naomi wherever she went, through which obedience a Savior was born, and of Ester to have faith to approach her despotic husband at peril of her own life in order to save her people. It was meritorious of Jeremiah to believe in God and to

boldly proclaim the prophecies with which he was entrusted even when this belief caused persecution and abuse and the shame of a mud pit. It was meritorious of Daniel to cling to faith even when it put him in peril for praying at his window. The faith of these men and women is lifted up in the Bible as summarized in Hebrews: “By it, the elders obtained a good report” (Heb. 11:2).

However, the *merit* of faith is not what Paul has in mind in Romans 4. Instead, he wants us to focus our attention on the thrilling idea that God imputes righteousness as a *free gift* to those who have faith in his promises. Genesis 15:6 might be translated something like this: “Then he believed the Lord [i.e., believed his promise], and he accounted it righteousness [to him].” This statement is ambiguous enough to admit of various interpretations. Perhaps the mainstream Jewish interpretation is seen in Rashi, who says that the Lord counted Abraham’s belief in him as a merit. This seems like a fairly straightforward reading of a verse that can accommodate many readings. Since the antecedent of the second “he” is unclear, it has also been proposed that Abraham reckoned righteousness to *God*—that this verse is actually about the faithfulness of God in keeping such an astonishing promise.

The most creative interpretation, however, belongs to Paul, perhaps influenced by Gamaliel. According to him, righteousness was imputed to Abraham as a free gift on account of his faith, without any works. Paul seems to be reading a great deal into the verse. First, the idea that righteousness was imputed to Abraham seems to imply that he was not previously righteous. Paul’s contrast between him who earns his reward and “him that works not, but believes on him that justifies the ungodly” (4:5) also seems to imply that Abraham did not have godly works. But the verse does not actually say this, and elsewhere God says, “Abraham obeyed my

voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws” (Gen. 26:5). Second, the verse does not say Abraham received righteousness without works. This idea can be read into the verse but is not found in the verse itself. For that matter Abraham’s righteous works before the promise were recorded and accepted by devout Jews. The only righteous work he did not have was circumcision, which had not yet been commanded. Third, Paul equates righteousness with justification, or being made right with God. There is a difference between being righteous in a general sense—doing what is right and merits favor in the eyes of God—and justification, which is a state of perfect righteousness. Paul conflates these two things.

In our view, these interpretation novelties all point to the same conclusion. Paul is not thinking of “works” in general. He is thinking about one specific work. He is not making an argument against the saving merit of works per se, as this passage is often interpreted to indicate; he is debunking the claim of his adversaries that Abraham was justified by the work of circumcision, which is the subject of chapter four. It was Paul’s contention, and also the Jerusalem Council’s, that the Gentiles belonged in the church in spite of being uncircumcised. But the Judaizers were still arguing that circumcision was required for salvation and, presumably, pointing to Abraham as proof. Therefore, Paul uses Gen. 15:6 to demonstrate that God imputed righteousness to Abraham *before* he was circumcised. Paul’s interpretation reflects his desire to prove that Gentiles had the same righteousness that comes through faith as Abraham without the work of circumcision that the Judaizers were trying to impose on them. “Comes this blessing upon the circumcision only?” (4:6). Is it only circumcised Jews who enjoy the righteousness that comes as a free gift by faith? No; uncircumcised

Gentiles have this blessing, too, if they believe in Christ, just as Abraham enjoyed it before he was circumcised.

It is not the saving merit of works that Paul has in his crosshairs; it is the boasting of the Judaizers over circumcision, which they considered a saving work. As he said at the end of the last chapter, “Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith” (3:27). The same idea is seen in Ephesians: “For by grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:9). It was not works that he was trying to devalue, as we know from Ephesians 2:10 and from Romans 6, 10, and 12-15; it was the Judaizers’ insistence on the work of circumcision, as described in Acts 15:1: “And certain men who came down from Judaea taught the brothers, and said, Except you be circumcised after the manner of Moses, you cannot be saved.” Paul uses Genesis 15:6 to exalt Abraham’s faith at the expense of the work in the flesh that is circumcision. His argument is that faith in Christ is the route to the righteous identity seen in Abraham, to salvation and being called sons of God, as well as to peace and harmony in the church. None of these wonderful things can come from walking in the flesh and the old covenant of law. They come only from walking in the spirit of Christ, the spirit of love and reconciliation.

The arguments in Romans 4 are similar to those found in Galatians 2 and 3, where it is even clearer that Paul is specifically critiquing the Judaizers’ insistence on circumcision. “But neither Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised: and that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in secretly to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage” (Gal. 2:3-4). Paul was the apostle to the Galatians, the founder of their church,

but subsequently (in 49 AD) an outside group of Jewish agitators came in behind his back and subverted him by preaching a gospel that was different from his own—in short, by claiming that Gentiles had to be circumcised to be saved. There is a tendency to discuss such passages as if Paul were sitting in an ivory tower, composing immaculate doctrine, but in fact he was involved in a war of words, a battle of wills, like Jeremiah in Egypt. He was suffering greatly on account of it, as he indicates when he says we “glory in our tribulations” (5:3). The primary source of his suffering was the circumcision controversy. There was an intense battle for the soul of the church right at the beginning, as seen in Jude, involving not just circumcision but angel worship, Gnosticism, and many other things, and Paul was in the thick of it, as is evident from 2 Timothy 3. This fierce tempest provides context for his comments on Genesis 15:6. He wants to use this verse to support his effort to have the Gentiles welcomed into the fellowship without circumcision. It is not his intention to claim that works have no merit.

While his interpretation of Genesis 15:6 doesn’t necessarily seem quite as bulletproof to us as it does to the commentators—Murray has a lengthy discussion of this—he is on very solid ground regarding what Abraham found pertaining to the flesh. Abraham had no hope for release from the bondage of death and nothingness in himself or in circumcision. He had no hope for obtaining the enduring identity he craved through the righteousness of the flesh. For that, he had to rely on the promises of God, which is why his story is still relevant today. God makes wonderful promises to those who believe and follow him. Nothing could have been more precious to Abraham than the promise of a legal heir in his old age, just as nothing can match our joyful promise of eternal life in Christ. So where should the Jewish Christians seek identity

regarding the time-honored story of “Father Abraham”? In his willingness to believe the astonishing promises of God, through which he became the father of many nations—in his faith—or in his work of obedience in being circumcised?

THERE IS NO TRANSGRESSION

Now Paul reiterates an idea that, unfortunately, seems to have captured his imagination. “Because the law works wrath: for where no law is, there is no transgression” (4:15). The point he’s trying to make is entirely contained in the first part of this statement. We should not boast in the law, as the Judaizers were doing by insisting on circumcision, because the law works wrath by showing us our sin. It is possible to obey the ceremonial law, but by the light of the moral law, we all fall short of the glory of God. Thus the Judaizers would do well to seek identity in Abraham’s life-giving faith rather than the fact that he was circumcised.

Paul then bolts on the second part of the statement in an attempt to bolster the first. Where there is no law, there is no transgression (and therefore no divine wrath). We know what he’s trying to say because we have skipped forward and read chapter seven. The idea is that the law makes us conscious of our sin, not our holiness. But one might wish he had not said it here without explanation because it causes confusion and even consternation, as can be seen among the commentators. How can there be no transgression where there is no law when there was sin before the Mosaic law and explicit punishment for sin? Paul is implying that the Gentiles were less culpable than the Judaizers because they did not have the law to condemn them. They cannot transgress a law they do not have, which would include circumcision. He has been arguing that the Judaizers should not boast in the law by judging the uncircumcised

because the law shows them their transgressions. According to Origen, he is talking about the transgression of divinely ordained law, which is different from sin, which exists even where there is no such law. In the same vein, Schreiner proposes that the word translated as “transgression” (*parabasis*) refers exclusively to sinning against the Ten Commandments.

In any case, everyone seems to be in agreement over what Paul is *not* saying. He cannot mean that there is no sin where there is no revealed law. As Calvin points out, it is not true that those who lived before the Mosaic law were not sinners or held accountable for their sins. In that case, the Flood and destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah would have been patently unjust. Sin is sinful regardless of whether there is a written law against it because the law is based on the value of life. We do not need Moses to tell us stealing and murder are sinful. The Jews were not the only ancient culture to recognize this. But it is also true, as Thomas says, that God’s law makes our lot a lot worse because it is more perfect than any other law. The tenth commandment looks not only on the outside but into the heart, by which standard all are condemned, as Paul will demonstrate in chapter seven. In short, the law does not make anyone righteous.

The only way to obtain righteousness, based on the argument presented in chapter four, is through faith in the promises of God. “Therefore it [righteousness] is of faith, that it might be by grace [a gift of God]; to the end that the promise [of adoption into the immortal family of God] might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law [i.e., Jews], but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham [i.e., Gentiles who believe in Christ]; who is the father of us all” (4:16). This statement tells us what the entire chapter is about, including the confusing statement that where

there is no law there is no transgression. Abraham's righteousness was reckoned to him on account of his faith, not the law of circumcision, so that he could become the father of many nations, as promised by God, who gives life to the dead as he gave life to Abraham in Isaac, and who calls "those things which are not"—the adoption of the Gentiles into the family of God—"as if they were" (4:17). The arguments Paul uses are profound, the language often unfinished and obscure or just plain puzzling, but the overall thrust seems clear. Gentiles who believe in Christ are also now children of Abraham. They, too, have a sure salvation. Therefore, the Judaizers must stop tormenting them with their insistence on circumcision.

In hope against hope, Abraham believed he would become the father of all who believe. He "staggered [wavered] not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; being fully persuaded that, what [God] had promised, he was able also to perform. And therefore it [his unwavering faith] was imputed [reckoned] to him for righteousness" (4:20-22). Abraham did not waver in his belief that God would righteously fulfill his promise of a son even though he was old and Sarah was beyond childbearing years. The Gentiles who believe in Christ are like Abraham in the sense that they also believe in God's staggering promises and in his power to grant them eternal life as a free gift through the cross. Just as Abraham's unwavering faith was reckoned to him as righteousness, so righteousness is reckoned to them through their faith in Christ. And the Judaizers? They are the ones who are staggering at that promise. Their lack of faith is shown in their continuing desire to justify themselves through circumcision. "Now it was not written for his sake alone [Abraham's] that it [righteousness] was imputed to him" (4:23); no, it was "for us also, to whom it [righteousness] shall be imputed, if we believe on him

that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead” (4:24). God reckons righteousness to all who believe in Christ and the fulfillment seen in him of God’s promises of salvation—Gentile as well as Jew.

As an aside, some rabbinical teachings on this passage suggest that the righteousness counted to Abraham was not a static or one-time event. Origen notes this, too. Abraham righteously believed *before* God made the promise, as he showed by obeying God’s call to leave his homeland and settling where God told him to settle, by building God an altar, by tithing to Melchizedek after the successful rescue of Lot, and by refusing to take the reward offered by the king of Sodom for this action, thereby fulfilling his oath to God. Indeed, it was after these last two things that God said to him, “Fear not, Abram: I am your shield, and your exceeding great reward” (Gen. 15:1), his reward for righteousness, and made him the promise of an heir. And his righteousness was sorely tested *after* righteousness had been counted to him when he was called upon to sacrifice this same heir, his joy, on the altar. Paul describes himself as having been steeped “in the perfect manner of the law of the fathers” (Acts 22:3). The cultural given for his interpretation of the Genesis passage, then, may have been the rabbinical teaching that the righteousness counted to Abraham was part of an ongoing process. Origen says his faith was “declared perfect”⁴ when God counted it to him as righteousness, which does not discount any perfection he might have obtained in his works. In any case, the emphasis in Paul’s interpretation does not seem to be on the *nature* of justification but rather on the idea that Abraham received it as a *free gift* on account of his faith. Gentiles who believe in Christ can also have this gift, even if they are not circumcised.

4 Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 241.

CHAPTER 5

THEREFORE WE HAVE PEACE

Now begins what we like to think of as the “Christ is our hero” section of the letter, beginning with Paul’s statement at the end of chapter four that, just as Abraham was justified by believing in God’s promises, so we are justified “if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; who was delivered [over to crucifixion] for our offenses [transgressions], and was raised again for [or because of] our justification” (4:24-5). The first part of this statement affirms the foundational teaching that Christ paid for our sins by dying on the cross, but the second part is not so straightforward. From the beginning, Paul has been hammering out a contrast between the righteousness of humankind—as seen in those who insist that circumcision is necessary for salvation—and the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ, which was demonstrated by the Resurrection. Moses said, “Do this, and you shall live” (Lev.

18:5), but only one person actually obtained life by fulfilling the law. Through the Resurrection, Christ was declared to be righteous, and his righteousness is reckoned to us if we believe in him as our Savior, just as righteousness was reckoned to Abraham on account of his belief in the saving promises of God. Boasting about the righteousness we have in circumcision will not save us. We *can* be saved, however, through the righteousness we have through faith in Christ. “Do this, and you shall live” obtains an entirely new meaning. The way to have life is to obey the law of faith in Christ. Those who believe God raised Christ from the dead are saved by this faith, as Paul says more plainly in chapter ten. The point is that there is no difference between Gentiles and Jews when it comes to the righteousness obtained through faith.

“Therefore, being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (5:1), the Semitic notion of peace being “the fullness of salvation realized on earth,”¹ according to Käsemann. Time has obscured it somewhat, but Paul is saying something radical here. The Jewish religion was based on Mt. Sinai and the terrifying God of thunderous trumpets and lightning. This is how we entertain God if we depend upon ourselves to obtain righteousness. We are sinners and at enmity with God and his uncompromising holiness. But Paul proposes something wonderful and new in the age of grace. Christ made *himself* our righteousness, as Jeremiah prophesied; therefore, we have peace with God if we call upon his name. We have the very thing we could not obtain by our own righteousness: the “peace that passes all understanding” (Phil. 4:7).

We have access to the “grace wherein we stand” (5:2) through Christ and his sacrifice of love, something much more desirable

1 Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, 132.

than we ever had before or were capable of even imagining; and note, *standing* in it; that is, not lying prostrate on the ground in quaking terror like the Israelites at Mt. Sinai. As Fitzmyer puts it, “God’s wrath marked the old age, but now God’s uprightness marks the new.”² God’s wrath marked the age of the Old Covenant when righteousness depended solely on us, but we are now living in the glorious age of peace with God because of the cross. We can approach the throne of grace with confidence and freely say “Abba,” father, like Christ himself. Philippi, Cranfield, and others contend that this peace is objective and not subjective—it’s not just a matter of feelings. This is true, but a sense of peace is also something we long for, and the only way to have it is through Christ. So, we tend to agree with Schreiner: “It is quite unlikely that Paul would have contemplated separating the objective and subjective sides of peace.”³

The fact that we have peace with God through Christ is the best news we can possibly have. Millions derive inexpressible comfort from these words. Christ is their hero. He has gone ahead and taken all of their sins and the due punishment on himself and thereby given them peace with God, peace in their minds, relief from the debilitating pain of sin-consciousness and the fear of death. Every sincere Christian thanks God for this peace with tears of joy. But the notion of Christ as our peace-giving hero also means something else. It means the Judaizers must stop insisting on circumcision as if it could give them peace and save them; as if *they* were heroes of righteousness on account of something they did not even do themselves. In fact, by fighting for circumcision, they are bringing the opposite of peace to the church. If we want the peace and grace

2 Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 343.

3 Schreiner, *Romans*, 254.

that are in Christ, then we must give up all holiness boasting. He is the one who made peace for us. Who are we to boast? This is the message of Romans.

It seems we may indulge our love of boasting in a very specific way. We are encouraged to “rejoice in hope of the glory of God” (5:3), the word translated as “rejoice” (*kauchōmetha*) being the same as the one used for boasting elsewhere, for instance in 2:23, 3:27, and 4:2, and the “glory of God” having already been identified as his mercy. Paul does not want us to boast about our own righteousness, as the Judaizers were doing with circumcision, but he does encourage us to boast about the righteousness we have through faith in Christ. He wants us to boast in Christ and his merciful salvation. This is the key to obtaining unity. The way for Christians to have one mind is not to boast in themselves and their claims to righteousness but to boast in the glory of God, which is his mercy and his righteousness in fulfilling his promises of salvation. It was always the righteousness of God that was going to save his chosen people, according to the prophets, since they could not save themselves. But now our hero has come and redeemed us. He is our peace. And boasting in him and his righteousness makes us one.

PEACE AS A HIGH CALLING

The peace we have in Christ is wonderful and highly desirable for its own sake, but it is not passive. Christ gives us peace. Christ gives us rest. But it is not yet time to rest in peace. Paul says the following in Colossians: “Let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also you are called in one body; and be thankful” (Col. 3:15). From this, it would seem that the church has been *called* to pursue unity and peace, as Paul also says in 1 Corinthians 7:15: “God has called us to peace.” Peace is a high calling. And this calling will lead

to “tribulations” (5:3) like those Paul himself has experienced.

Hebrews 12:14 says, “Pursue peace with all.” We must actively be in pursuit of peace in the visionary church, not simply passively receiving it. How do we do this? First, we must take up our cross and deny ourselves. By the reckoning Paul has made, the reason we have peace with God is that Christ was crucified for our sake. That is a hard-win—peace accomplished with great suffering. Since he sacrificed himself and suffered for our peace, we, too, should be willing to sacrifice and suffer for the sake of peace in the church. Since he reconciled us to God through his blood, we, too, have a “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18) that requires us to take up our cross and follow him. The road to peace is imitating Christ and being a sacrificial peacemaker like him.

As it happens, we have an extensive description of the peace Paul has in mind in Ephesians. “At that time you [the Gentiles] were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: but now in Christ Jesus you who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who has made both [Jews and Gentiles] one and has broken down the middle wall of partition between us; having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of two one new man, so making peace; and that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby; and came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh. Through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father” (Eph. 2:11-18). This says what we have in mind so perfectly that we don’t know if there is anything to be gained by trying to comment on it. But we will note one thing. The famous

argument immediately preceding it, that “by grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9), is specifically about reconciliation between Jew and Gentile. It is about peace in the visionary church.

“Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matt. 5:9), so said the King of Peace, but with this exalted identity comes suffering, as in his own case. And Paul certainly suffered. “For we would not, brothers, have you ignorant of our trouble which came to us in Asia, that we were pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life” (2 Cor.1:8). This refers in part to the physical afflictions Paul endured during his ministry, as described in 2 Corinthians 11:23-27, but 2 Corinthians and 2 Timothy leave little doubt that it also refers to the constant upheaval in the churches; to the infighting and false apostles and other meddlers, seemingly well-meaning; to the pusillanimous legalists who crept in the moment Paul left to cause misery and upheaval, the opposite of peace; to all the slander and jocularly aimed in his direction when he was not on the scene.

In such a roiling environment, peacemaking can be challenging. It often entails suffering just as Christ suffered on the cross. But Paul says we “glory (*kauchōmetha*, boast) in tribulations” (5:3) because we know that tribulations produce patient endurance, and patient endurance produces approval or proven character, which in turn produces hope, perhaps based on the suffering endured by Christ on the cross; and hope will not put us to shame. Why? Because the love of God is poured into our hearts from the cross by the Holy Spirit. We cannot be put to shame because we know how great God’s love for us is by the cross. At the right time, while we were still helpless, Christ died for the ungodly. Rarely will someone

die even for a righteous man—although someone might be bold enough to die for a good man. But God demonstrates the glory of his love in that Christ died for us while we were still sinners. He obtained life through his suffering, and his suffering gives us hope in our suffering. No one who has this hope can be put to shame—including the Gentiles.

“My hope is built on nothing less/Than Jesus’ blood and righteousness,” as the wonderful old hymn would have it. The underlying theme of this chapter is the contrast between the righteousness of God and the righteousness of man touted by the Judaizers. Christ is our hero, our righteousness, our one true foundation for justification and peace with God. The righteousness of men is sinking sand. But does this cold historical reading cancel out the joy of the hymn? Are we saying the only way to read these passages is with the Judaizers in mind? Not at all. We heartily embrace the personal sentiment of the hymn. However, there is something to be said for the historical view as well because it shows us the road to unity. Paul has outlined the steps. We begin by confessing our lack of righteousness, as shown by the law. Then, we confess our faith in Christ as our Savior and place our hope in him. He is our hero, the one who has given us peace with God through his righteousness. But if it is *his* righteousness that saves us, then we must stop boasting about *our* righteousness. We must stop judging one another. This is the only path to unity within and between churches.

Of course, we should also acknowledge that “tribulations” might include the persecution of Christians, as some commentators claim, although the Neronian persecutions had not yet begun at the time the letter was written. It’s important to be mindful of the suffering upon which the church was built and the blood of

the martyrs, the seed of the church, as Tertullian put it. Nor is the question of persecution dead today by any means. Christians are persecuted in many places in the world; more and more, it seems. Meanwhile, we appear to be living through a transition to a post-Christian age. It is not known whether future empires of various kinds will once again deem persecution of Christians to be societally necessary, as did the Roman emperors.

However, we believe the “tribulations” Paul had in mind also included his own passionate efforts to bring peace to the church. In Romans, he takes on the holiness boasting of the Judaizers, as he characterizes it, which could not have made him very popular with his fellow Jews. Similarly, he would not accept a sham peace with Peter when they disagreed about Peter separating himself from the Gentiles based on circumcision. Peter was a giant in the early church. To cross him could not have been easy. There are times when peace must be purchased at a heavy price. There may be suffering for the sake of peace, but Paul assures us that such suffering leads to hope, perhaps referencing his own experience. And in our own lives and our own congregations we may experience times of suffering when we strive to make peace.

JUST AT THE RIGHT TIME

There are many explanations of what this means. For instance, Cranfield suggests that God did not wait for us to make ourselves strong through works, which is an interpretation we like very much. But we also wonder if the time was right because the pride of Israel had been broken. Daniel prophesied it would not be until the power of the holy people had been shattered that “these things” (Dan. 12:7) would be accomplished. Israel’s power as a nation was at a low ebb under Roman rule. She could not justify herself in

comparison to the nations around her—indeed, she had become just like them, as Paul says in chapter two—and therefore, God would no longer give her special favor. “And you shall become an astonishment, a proverb, and a byword, among all nations where the Lord shall lead you” (Deut. 28:37). Perhaps in her complete humiliation at the hands of the Romans, the time was ripe, psychologically speaking, for a new kind of Joshua who brings a new kind of peace, not through the sword but through the cross.

“For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life” (5:10). Christ reconciled us to God by dying on the cross and paying for our sins. Still, this crucified Christ, this pitiable object, is not the end of the story. No, he was raised again to life with power to our justification. That is, our faith in him is justified by the Resurrection, which showed he was righteous, as indicated all the way back at the beginning of the letter. This statement may be for the benefit of Paul’s fellow Jews, for whom the cross is a “stumbling block” (1 Cor. 1:23). The risen Christ really is the Messiah they have been waiting for, a mighty deliverer from the grave. However, the central theme is reconciliation, which is relevant to the situation between Jews and Gentiles. “We also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement” (5:11). The word translated as “atonement” is the same as “reconciliation” above (*katallagentes*). This joy comes only through Christ. Without him, God is still an object of terror. As he has reconciled us to God, so we should be reconciled to one another. Some commentators prefer “glory” or “boast” to “joy” since it is the same word used for “boast” elsewhere (*kauchōmenoi*). In that case, Paul is encouraging us to boast in Christ and his righteousness and not in ourselves; which, as we have

said, is the path to unity.

ONE MAN

Paul now launches into a series of “one man” comparisons between Adam and Christ to vividly illustrate his conquering power. And we will note that Fitzmyer considers this the most important part of the letter, along with 3:21-26. It seems Adam is a type or “figure” (5:14) of Christ in one sense, anyway. Through him—just one man—sin and death came into the world, in the same way that through Christ—just one man—grace and life have come to all who put their faith in him. First, the comparison firmly establishes the Pauline principle that there is none righteous. All children of Adam are sinners; therefore, a Savior is needed. Accordingly, Christ is glorified as the one man who can save us through his righteousness, which is set in opposition to Adam’s transgression. Christ is the mighty conqueror of sin and death, which rules out all holiness boasting. Augustine comments that Paul extols Christ’s grace lest the Jews be too proud of the law. This is our impression as well. And perhaps Paul was also dealing with some caviling in the camp about how one man could save everyone.

Sin and death came through the one man, Adam, to all his descendants (5:12). This statement reminds Paul of his potentially mystifying assertion in the last chapter that “where no law is, there is no transgression” (4:15). The argument Paul has been making is that the law in which the Judaizers were boasting cannot be used to justify their identity because it exposes their transgressions. But this raises a theoretical question. Since there was no divinely revealed law between Adam and Moses except the law Adam disobeyed, how could Paul say there was “death by sin” (5:12) during that time—in other words, that sin was being judged and punished? Perhaps with

this potential objection in mind, Paul now reiterates his puzzling claim in a new and even more puzzling way: “Sin is not imputed where there is no law” (5:13). This time, however, he qualifies it by saying sin and death reigned over humankind nonetheless.

Again, the explanation for these puzzling statements is not fully apparent until chapter seven and his confession. Paul is simply trying to convince the Judaizers that the same law in which they loved to boast in fact condemns them and shows them they are sinners. To this end, he has been making the argument that the law was given to increase our sin, not to justify us. In terms of guilt consciousness, things actually got worse for us under the law because the law shows us where we have sinned. Paul now adds the important qualifier that those who lived before the Mosaic law were also under condemnation. They did not sin “after the similitude of Adam’s transgression” (5:14)—that is, they did not violate a divine commandment, since the law did not yet exist—but they sinned against the law of nature and conscience and were punished for their sin. As discussed, the law exists even when it has not yet been divinely published because it is based on the value of life. This value determines what is right and wrong, if imperfectly before Moses.

“Death reigned” (5:14) not because death is personified but because all children of Adam are mortal because of sin. This is a major Biblical principle. Adam sinned and became mortal through his sin; therefore, death reigned over everyone born of Adam because all have sinned like Adam and the mortal cannot give birth to the immortal. But the “free gift” of grace is “not [like] the offense” (5:15). Adam’s offense or lack of righteousness brought death into the world, but the free gift of righteousness that we have in Christ brings life. The point is that the righteousness of men cannot avail us. Circumcision cannot bring us salvation, as the Judaizers were

claiming. Salvation can be found only in the righteousness of Christ, our hero, our deliverer. The bondage of death causes us to boast about our righteousness and attempt to raise ourselves up at the expense of others; but in Christ, we are conquerors of death through grace. Therefore, we no longer need holiness boasting. We have obtained the transcendent identity we long for by unexpected means. Christ is our hero; thus, we should not boast in the law. This is the meaning. And it isn't just theology. It is very practical. Only the Son of God has the power to do what Paul is describing. He alone can recreate the creation he created. Sons of God with a small "s" do not have this power. There are many sons of God, but only one has the power to save us.

"Therefore, as by the offense of one, judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life" (5:18). This is still about the contrast between the righteousness of God and men, which Paul has been using throughout the letter to shut the mouths of the Judaizers. We cannot justify ourselves by our own righteousness because we are under condemnation as children of Adam—the same condemnation as Adam himself. We are all mortal. But the righteousness of Christ, as demonstrated by the Resurrection, provides the justification that we cannot obtain under the law. "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous" (5:19). The righteous act referred to in verse 18 is Christ going to the cross. But then which is more desirable—the righteousness we obtain as a free gift through faith in him and the power of his blood, or our own putative righteousness as seen in circumcision, which is like filthy rags? This is the point Paul is trying to make. When we judge others as the Judaizers were judging the Gentiles, we are

attempting to justify ourselves on the basis of our righteousness under the law. But since we are sinners, the only way to obtain salvation is through the righteousness of Christ. Therefore, we should put our faith in the one man who can save us and give up all boasting about righteousness that separates us from our fellow Christians.

One more thing worth noting in the “one man” comparisons: If sin and death came to all through one man, Adam, then that includes Jews as well as Gentiles. There is no difference between them on that basis, regardless of circumcision. Similarly, the free gift of grace and life that come through Christ is granted to all who believe in him as their Savior—again, not just the circumcised. Adam is a type of Christ in the sense that his disobedience put all of his descendants in bondage to the grave, just as Christ’s obedience effected a release for all believers from this same slavery. Jews and Gentiles were both under condemnation under the law before Christ, regardless of circumcision, because they were incapable of fulfilling it; and both were beneficiaries of his obedient sacrifice. Therefore, let there be peace in the church and no more judging.

Having shown repeatedly that the law only serves to increase our consciousness of sin, Paul now attempts to glorify God’s mercy by introducing the idea of the infinite dilation of grace. “The law entered, that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound” (5:20). The purpose of the law was to show us we are sinners, according to Paul. Still, the same God who gave the law so that knowledge of sin might increase also kindly intervened in Christ so that sin should not rule over us (as Augustine puts it). God’s grace in Christ is so wonderful that it abounds even more as our consciousness of sin is increased through the law. Christ’s sacrifice washes us clean of all our sins, clean in

our hearts and souls and minds. But then, which should we cling to—the cross and the glorious mercy of God, which is the only way that the word “righteous” can ever be proclaimed upon poor, miserable sinners like us, or the law and circumcision, by which no one can call himself righteous? Our bondage to the grave caused sin to increase through the law of sin and death, as will be explained in chapter seven. But now grace reigns through the righteousness of Christ to eternal life. In short, we can either remain servants of sin by clinging to our own righteousness like the Judaizers, or we can obtain eternal life and become sons of God by making ourselves servants of Christ.

Throughout his letters, Paul exhibits a desire to glorify God’s mercy. We wonder if this was because he himself had once been the worst of sinners, persecuting innocent Christians to the death.

CHAPTER 6

GRACE MUST NOT BE ABUSED!

This chapter is about “obedience to the faith” (1:5). For now another possible irksome cavil occurs to Paul. In praise of God’s transcending graciousness, the enumerated principle is that grace abounds in us as sin increases through the law. God’s grace is superabundant, as the theologians say, which seems necessary if the purpose of the law is to convict us by increasing sin. Paul has been glorifying “the riches of grace” (Eph. 1:7) to stop the mouths of those who are in love with the law and judging: “To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he has made us accepted in the beloved” (Eph. 1:6). He wants the Judaizers to choose grace over judgment for the sake of unity. To this end, he has glorified grace by saying it is so great that it literally swallows up judgment.

But now it occurs to him that this extravagant way of extolling grace may lead to a tickle in the irreverent mind. As Augustine puts

it, "He saw, indeed, that a perverse use might be made by perverse men of what he had said."¹ If the transcendent quality of grace can be seen in its capacity for infinite dilation, then why not sin more so that grace might abound? Or even more simply, why stop sinning at all if grace will increase to meet the demand? And it can lead to more than a tickle. Christianity was beset almost from the beginning by various forms of Gnosticism, which flatters its followers by purporting to endow them with esoteric wisdom. One such form was antinomianism, or the claim that the way to obtain freedom from the burden of the moral law was to resist it through frank immorality. Indeed, according to Augustine, the antinomians claimed to have taken their debased doctrines from Paul.

Paul, no doubt horrified by the thought that his teaching might be abused in this way, or indeed already was, clarifies in no uncertain terms that his notion of the dilation of grace does not justify sinning. "Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?" (6:1-2). Paul uses this notion of being "dead" with Christ in several of his letters. The basic idea is that if we are willing to die with Christ (not literally, of course, but in our minds, our imaginative selves), we will rise through the same resurrection power that gave him life. From 2 Corinthians 4:11: "For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh." Here, he uses the notion of dying with Christ to ennoble our afflictions for the faith. The same idea is used in Galatians 2:20, but with a different purpose: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself

1 Augustine, *On the Spirit and the Letter*, chap. 9.

for me.” In this case, Paul uses the idea of dying with Christ in an attempt to convince the Galatians not to “rebuild” the burden of the ceremonial law, as they were being encouraged to do.

Since the idea of dying with Christ is used in different places for different rhetorical purposes, it seems likely that we are dealing with an argument strategy, not necessarily with doctrine per se or a literal description of being, as commentators often view the corresponding verses in Romans. Paul connects the idea of dying in Christ to baptism in two letters; again, each time for a different purpose. In Colossians, he uses it to reassure the Gentiles that they do not have to be circumcised: “In whom also you are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: buried with him in baptism, wherein also you rise with him through the faith of the operation of God, who has raised him from the dead” (Col. 2:11-12). The idea is that they have died with Christ through baptism and been reborn without sin; therefore, circumcision, the sacramental cutting away of original sin, according to Origen and Thomas, was unnecessary. However, in Romans, he uses the idea of dying with Christ in baptism to discourage antinomianism. “Know you not that so many of us who were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore, we are buried with him by baptism into death: as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so, we also should walk in the newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we will also be in the likeness of his resurrection, knowing this: that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin” (6:4-6).

What does it mean to be “baptized into Christ” in Paul’s mind? “For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put

on Christ” (Gal. 3:27). In baptism, we put on Christ as if putting on a cloak. We are clothed with Christ as “Christians”; therefore, we are clothed with his life, death, and resurrection all at once. In Romans, it is the second of these that Paul is interested in as an argument against antinomianism. If we have been baptized into Christ, then we have died with him figuratively; we have put on his death as a cloak. And if we are dead with Christ, then we have also died to sin. Paul is urging the Gentiles to engage in the act of putting on the death of Christ in their minds and considering themselves dead to sin. And that’s because he wants them to stop sinning and perverting his gospel.

The commentators often look at these verses as baptism doctrine and a literal description of a change in being. However, there was no need for Paul to create such a doctrine. The significance of baptism is perfectly self-evident. To be baptized is to have our sins washed away and our souls purified in the same way that a bath cleanses the body. The meaning of the sacrament is not in any sense obscure, as it is with circumcision. This meaning had a firm footing in historical Judaism in the ritual washing of priests and proselytes, the bronze sea, and washing basins outside Solomon’s temple. Paul had no reason to attempt to add anything to the obvious significance of baptism with his teaching about dying with Christ. Instead, he seems to be using one of his favorite argument strategies to discourage the misuse of his doctrine of salvation by grace. Note that the argument is about *likeness*. We are planted together in Christ’s death to be planted in the likeness of his resurrection—that is, to obtain an immortal identity. But that which is “like” is not literal; and accordingly, we suspect that these verses were not intended to be taken too literally. Paul is permitted to use baptism as part of an argument strategy to discourage the

abuse of his gospel, which is what he seems to be doing here.

His discussion of baptism has a specific frame: the need for a rebuttal to the lure of antinomianism and to those who were actively spreading this pernicious pseudo-doctrine in the church. Paul offers a value proposition. We can have the resurrection identity of Christ, the immortal identity all men and women desire, if we are willing to die with Christ to sin. Just as he died and was raised again to life, so too we must die to sin in order to put on a shining identity like his. You can't have one without the other. If you want to be a Christian, you have to die like Christ in a figurative sense: die to sin. The urgency seen in these arguments may be due to concern about the behavior of his Gentile flock. Gentiles were coming into the church out of a pagan lifestyle. Paul wanted them to stop sinning and living in the old ways. First, this was for their benefit. We may be living under grace and not under the law, but it is still true that the light of the law is the path to life, and to deviate from that path—to go on sinning—is death, as Paul himself will say at the end of the chapter. However, the eagerness he shows to get the Gentiles to stop sinning may also reflect his passion for unity. It is not hard to imagine Jewish Christians looking askance at them on account of their exotic ideas and lack of attention to religious comportment.

Now Paul ups the ante on his value proposition: “Sin shall not have dominion over you: for you are not under the law, but under grace” (6:14). We have seen descriptions of this verse as an actual doctrine of grace with regard to the renewed life we have in Christ. They tend to be complicated and opaque; see for instance, Philippi. However, the passage does not seem complicated at all if Paul is simply trying to discourage antinomianism. He has been making the argument that the law has the unexpected effect of increasing

sin; that those who put themselves “under the law”—that is, the Judaizers—wind up sinning more, as he will explain with a personal illustration in a moment. But those who put themselves under grace are freed from the *sin-enflaming* effect of the law. Sin has dominion “under the law” because the law causes sin to increase, but sin loses this dominion “under grace,” which takes away the condemnation of the law. Paul has imported a talking point from his debate with the Jews about boasting in the law into his attempt to get the Gentiles to stop sinning.

But what about the many very estimable commentators like Thomas who take the idea of baptism as dying with Christ quite literally—that is, as baptism doctrine and a description of a change in being? In their view, we literally are buried somehow with Christ through our baptism into his death. The body of sin has been destroyed in this death, and we are now free from the dominion of sin, free to obey the moral law. We are not so sure this is what Paul had in mind. We are not literally the same as Christ. No one dies to sin as he did or rises in a sinless body through baptism. If only that were so! Paul had been baptized, but he is about to make it very clear that he is not the same as the resurrected Christ; he is not without sin; far from it. But what Thomas has to say makes us take baptism more seriously. If we think of ourselves as having died with Christ in baptism, then it obtains more gravity in our minds, just as to die is a more profound and sobering thing than to be washed. Baptism becomes our butterfly rebirth from the bondage of death into the glorious freedom of a new life. But we who are free must not make ourselves slaves again to sin. If we do, our new wings will turn to lead.

Or it may simply be that Origen, Chrysostom, Augustine, Thomas, and so many of the other commentators we love and

admire are right. It may be that we really do die with Christ through baptism and are reborn into a new and more spiritual state of being. These verses from chapter six may indeed be baptism doctrine and not merely an argument strategy meant to discourage the Gentiles from using Paul's doctrine of grace to endorse sinning. When the weight of so much distinguished commentary is against us, perhaps we would be wise to submit. Still, it is clear that the *occasion* for the argument—Paul's reason for making it at all—is to discourage antinomianism. We believe everyone can agree on this. And we will say something for the sake of the visionary church: the freedom from sin we are said to obtain by dying with Christ does not mean we are capable of becoming righteous under the law. That would undermine the argument of the entire letter by which all are condemned under the law and saved by grace. And it would undermine the remarkable confession Paul is about to make, which annihilates any boasting in the law for the sake of unity in the church.

BUT WHY BE “BURIED WITH CHRIST”?

You may be asking yourself, why in the world would anybody want to be “buried with Christ”? What's in it for me? Much indeed: “Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him” (6:8). Christ's identity was transformed by the Resurrection. Up to that point, many believed him to be merely human, or a prophet. Never did he seem more human than when he was hanging on the cross. But this blood sacrifice did not lead to the annihilation of identity, as would be expected in the natural order of things. Instead, it led to a glorious new identity of resurrected life, the “firstborn among many brothers” (8:29). *That's* our motivation for being “buried with Christ.” We obtain a

living identity like his when we take up our cross and put to death the flesh and its sinful desires. While the Resurrection may seem old-hat to us today, when Paul was writing Romans it was the most astounding thing anyone had ever heard of. The Resurrection drew people to Christ, and Paul drew on this drawing power to strengthen his argument against antinomianism.

The main point is this: if we, in our desire to obtain a living identity like Christ's, have died with him to the world, then we must also die to sin. Paul restates this idea in several ways, which suggests he was more than a little rattled by the thought of people using his doctrine of superabundant grace to justify sinning. The purpose of glorifying God's grace at the end of the last chapter was to encourage the Judaizers to be gracious themselves and welcome uncircumcised Gentiles into the church. But it was too easy for antinomians to twist Paul's enthusiasm for grace to destructive purposes. Not only would this have been abhorrent to Paul himself, but it would also have drawn him into conflict with the other apostles, like James, who, according to Augustine, wrote his epistle specifically to counteract antinomianism. This may explain the amount of ink spent on the rebuttal.

However, given that it is a rebuttal, it can also be considered good practical advice in our ongoing struggle against sin. Just as a psychotherapist tries to provide thought tools that might prove helpful in improving mood and behaviors, so Paul seems to be giving us a thought tool for seeking a more abundant life. "For he that is dead [with Christ] is freed from sin" (6:7). This is the encouraging thought he wants us to keep in the front portal of our mind when sin assails us. As Origen puts it, "For whoever thinks and considers with himself that he is dead does not sin."² Origen has an excellent

2 Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 319.

discussion of this, which we wish we could quote in its entirety. The idea is that identifying with Christ in his death—putting him dead on the cross in our active minds and imaginations—helps us to turn off the dopamine spike or whatever it is that sin seems to initiate. It allows us to put sin out of our minds and strive for life and freedom from the bondage of the grave and things that destroy us. “Sin shall not have dominion over you,” says Paul, “for you are not under the law, but under grace.” Even when talking to the Gentiles, he manages to get in a little dig at the Judaizers. Sin *will* have dominion over you if you put yourself under the law because the law increases sin. But it will not have dominion over you if you are under grace because grace delivers us from this very bondage (according to Augustine).

If Paul intended this teaching about dying with Christ to be systematic doctrine, then it runs headlong into contradiction with what he says in the next chapter. Here, he says we have been made free from sin by dying with Christ; but there, he claims we are “sold under sin” (7:14) and still need the forgiveness and reconciliation found in Christ. This seeming contradiction leads to division in our doctrines when an attempt is made to interpret what he says systematically. But we don’t know that he was *trying* to create a system of doctrine in 55 AD. It seems more likely that he was trying to protect the church in Rome that he was striving so valiantly to buttress with his letter. There were two different audiences in these chapters, Gentiles and Jews, and he is in the habit of adapting his arguments to each, abruptly and without warning. In chapter six, he encourages the Gentile Christians to stop sinning by trying to convince them that they have died to sin by putting on Christ. But in chapter seven, he tries to get the Jewish Christians to let go of their love of judging by telling them they are still sinners despite

being circumcised. Maybe the reason he feels no need to reconcile these seemingly contradictory ideas is that he is not trying to create a logical system of thought. He is trying to address two distinct problems in the church.

The idea of dying with Christ strikes us as practical advice for the Gentiles. For one thing, it is figurative. “Likewise reckon you also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (6:11). The death we have with Christ is not literal since we are not in fact dead; but Paul wants the Gentiles to *reckon* themselves dead to sin. To reckon yourself something is not the same thing as being something. It is not our state of being that has changed—we are still sinners, as he will make clear in a moment—but he is looking for a change in how we *think* about our being. His plea to stop sinning reminds us of the plea Moses made to the Israelites to pay attention to the warnings that had been set before them, to “take them to heart” (Deut. 32:46) and affix them “as a frontal on your forehead” (Deut. 6:8). Moses and Paul are both trying to get us to think about these things, to keep them active in our minds.

Like the Israelites, we will often fail. But Paul wants his flock to *struggle* against sin—not embrace it, as suggested by the question posed at the beginning of the chapter and as the antinomians were recommending. “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in the lusts thereof” (6:12). The “let not” indicates that sin really will reign if we let it because our body is mortal. We have not literally died to sin by being baptized into Christ—we are still mortal, we are still tempted, we still sin—but this unfortunate fact does not negate the value of using the idea of dying with Christ to *reckon* ourselves dead to sin, striving with every weapon at our disposal to be holy; most of all, faith. Chrysostom

says sin reigns not so much through its own power as through our listlessness. Amen.

Now we have one of the famous reversals that caused Origen so much grief. Paul says sin will have no dominion over us because we are not under law but under grace, which has been explained. But then he catches himself and realizes what he has just said. He has effectively brought us back to where we started. “What then? shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid” (6:15). He has just spent thirteen verses attempting to foil this perversion of his gospel, but instead of plowing over the same ground again, now he abruptly shifts tactics. “Know you not, that to whom you yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants you are to whom you obey; whether of sin unto death or obedience unto righteousness?” (6:16). The Gentiles were sinners who were made free from their slavery to sin by conforming to the doctrine they were taught—in short, by the “obedience to the faith” (1:5)—thus becoming servants of righteousness. Paul reminds them that their lives are much better now that they have come out of the pagan lifestyle. “What fruit had you then in those things whereof you are now ashamed? for the end of those things is death” (6:21). He wants them to put “those things” aside for their own good. They may be under grace and not under law, but he is not devaluing the moral law to any degree. Following the Ten Commandments is still the way to have a better, happier life. “But whoever looks into the perfect law of liberty, and continues therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed” (Jas. 1:25). Paul insists on the obedience of faith among his Gentile flock, not because he wants them to justify themselves through works, but for their own good, because the Ten Commandments are the law of liberty. “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of

God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (6:23).

Some commentators are embarrassed by the “slave to sin” or “slave to righteousness” dichotomy. Personally, the slavery language doesn’t trouble us much, if at all, perhaps because we are not sensitive plants, or because we know that slavery was a simple ubiquitous fact of existence in Paul’s time and place, or because the particular form of slavery Paul has in mind seems very real to us. Paul is simply saying you will serve what you choose to serve. Christ said, “Truly, truly, I say unto you, whoever commits sin is the servant of sin” (John 8:34). Origen says that being a slave to Christ is better than any freedom because it is in the spirit of adoption, but Origen lived in the same slavery culture as Paul and would not have been shocked by such imagery. Besides, it’s not as if we can avoid slavery. We will serve either righteousness or sin; this much is certain. And if you serve sin and cannot stop serving it, then that is slavery.

The question is, which master do we choose to serve? If we *choose* to go on sinning—as the Antinomians were encouraging the Gentiles to do—then the wages we receive for our service is death. But those who serve righteousness obtain life. And by the way, we think “death” here means not just the grave but death in the living of our lives—that is, pain and misery and emptiness—and similarly, “life” means a more abundant life—happiness and prosperity and peace in our hearts. After all, Paul was a Pharisee. The Old Testament, with its deep wisdom about what is good and what leads to life was not dead to him, as it seems to be to many Christians today.

CHAPTER 7

THERE IS FREEDOM IN (FIGURATIVELY) DYING WITH CHRIST

Having just taken an impassioned detour to tell the Gentiles they have died with Christ through baptism and therefore cannot go on sinning, Paul realizes that this notion of dying with Christ can also be used to good effect with his fellow Jews to get the letter back on track. He is going to argue that the old covenant based on the letter of the law is dead, having been replaced by a new and better covenant based on the Spirit. And the reason for making this argument, presumably, is to encourage the Judaizers to stop using the law to lash their fellow Gentile Christians, which, as we have shown, has been the subject of the letter up to chapter six. Paul carries over the slavery/dominion theme just discussed, but now he applies it not to sin but to the old covenant with its outward sign

of circumcision. “Know you not, brothers, (for I speak to them that know the law,) how that the law has dominion over a man as long as he lives?” (7:1)—the implication being that it does not have dominion over him after he dies, which is obviously true. Death provides freedom from the burden of having to try to live up to the law, from the bondage of the old covenant of law.

In chapter six, Paul used the idea of dying with Christ in baptism to get the Gentiles to consider themselves dead to sin; now he uses the idea of dying with Christ to encourage the Jews to consider themselves dead to the old dividing force of the law that separated them from the Gentiles. He uses an analogy. A woman’s husband has died. While he lived, she was bound to him and could not be married to another without being unfaithful to the covenant she made. But if he dies, she is released from her prior commitment and is free to marry another, a thought he also expresses in 1 Corinthians 7 in a very different context. His comment: “Wherefore, my brothers, you also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ [who embodies the law]; that you should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God” (7:4). Jewish Christians are not married to the law anymore but to Christ. Consequently, they don’t have to keep on clinging to circumcision as a sign of righteousness.

Paul’s explanation of this illustration has caused a good deal of confusion. He seems to have mixed up two deaths in one analogy, as Chrysostom observed. First of all, there is an old husband who dies, which appears to be the old covenant of law, and then there is the Jewish Christian, who is the woman who lives but also at the same time dies, presumably through baptism into Christ, the same idea presented in the last chapter; only in this case she dies not to sin but to bondage under the law, as we learn two verses later: “But now we

are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held” (7:6). This indicates that “the law” is somehow “dead” to Jewish Christians (will be discussed in a minute). We can infer from the death figure in the last chapter that the baptized Jewish Christian is also somehow dead to the law. Hence, two deaths creeping into one analogy.

Apparently, both deaths indicate freedom of some kind with regard to the law. But what kind of freedom did Paul have in mind? Is the law actually dead? Are we really dead to the law? Following Augustine, some useful background information may be gleaned from 2 Corinthians. There, Paul says of himself that God “has made us able ministers of the New Testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter kills, but the spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6). It appears that the Old Testament, which is based on the letter of the law, is “dead” in the sense that it has been replaced by the New. Comparing this with the wedding analogy in Romans, the old husband appears to represent not the law itself but the old law covenant, the Old Testament relationship with God that was based on the letter of the law and sealed with circumcision, which became an intolerable burden because no one can obey the law perfectly. Paul is not dismissing the law in 2 Corinthians. In fact, he calls it “glorious,” recalling that the face of Moses shone when he came down from Mt. Sinai. But “even that which was made glorious had no glory in this respect, by reason of the glory that excels [he means the righteousness of Christ]. For if that which is done away was glorious [the old law covenant of obligation], much more that which remains is glorious [the New Testament with its covenant of justification by the law of faith]” (2 Cor. 3:10-11).

The old law covenant was glorious because it showed us the path to life. But it was also onerous because it was based on an

impossible burden—"Do this, and you shall live." Seemingly, it is the worn-out old husband in the wedding analogy whose death comes as a bit of a relief to his beleaguered wife. The glory of the old covenant has been superseded by the glory of Christ and his grace—a new covenant based on faith instead of obligation. The old covenant was a burden in the sense that no one except Christ himself could fulfill it. Paul says it is "dead" not because it was without value—far from it—but because it has been superseded by a better one, based not on the paltry righteousness of man but on the perfect righteousness of God, and bringing not condemnation and death but life; because, as he will tell us in a moment, "there is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death" (8:1-2). Christ sets us free from the impossible burden of the law by giving us life as a gracious gift.

"Wherefore, my brethren, you also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ [by baptism into his death, if we carry over the argument from chapter six]; that you should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God" (7:4). The Jews were married to the old covenant of law that brings death, but now they are free to marry Christ, who brings life. The law itself cannot be literally dead. Paul is about to make it quite clear that the law is very much alive and still stinging him in particular. But according to Augustine, it is the *burden* of the law that has died, the fear of condemnation. Christ takes away this burden through the cross. "Think not that I come to destroy the law or the prophets: I am not come to destroy but to fulfill" (Matt. 5:17). Those who put on Christ through baptism have fulfilled the law in him. Since the obligation of the law is

dead to them, they are free to serve the risen Savior out of love—according to Augustine, who notes that no true fruit can be borne except through love.

While we were still “in the flesh”—mired in the old covenant of obligation, which was marked in the flesh by circumcision—the law aroused our sinful passions to bear fruit unto death; that is, to sin (as Paul will illustrate in a moment). But having died in Christ to the old covenant in which we were held, we are now free to serve the bridegroom in the newness of life. “Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty” (2 Cor. 3:17). By dying with Christ through baptism, we are filled with the Spirit, the lord and giver of life, and thus obtain liberty from the bondage of trying to obtain life through the law. We are no longer laboring under the heavy burden of trying to do the impossible (fulfill the law) because Christ has done the impossible for us.

The Israelites were married to the law throughout their long history, as the wedding analogy indicates. They had a covenant of faithfulness very much like the one between man and wife, the sign of which was circumcision. This covenant was a burden to them because they could not obey the moral law perfectly and because the ceremonial law is onerous. But now they have been set free by the power of the cross and the Resurrection to marry Christ, echoing the old idea of God’s love of his flock being so great that he desires to make himself their bridegroom, alluded to by Paul in his discussion of marriage in Ephesians. Christ is the bridegroom now, not the law, and they are free to serve him out of love instead of fearful obligation. They have this freedom for two reasons. First, the old covenant of law has been superseded in Christ, as indicated in 2 Corinthians. It has “died” in the sense of being replaced by a new and more glorious covenant of grace. Second, by putting on Christ

in baptism, they have died to the bondage of the old covenant, including circumcision, which was its seal. The seal of the old covenant in the flesh—the sign of this bondage—has been replaced by a new seal of life in the Spirit, the mixing of the two deaths in the analogy creating a somewhat awkward bridge between the sixth and seventh chapters, which are about two entirely different things.

The debates over the marriage analogy tend to make it seem rather complicated, but it seems quite simple if we view it through the lens of the visionary church. If unity was what Paul had in mind, then the old husband is the old covenant with its seal of circumcision, the purpose of which was to divide Jews from Gentiles, while the new covenant is grace and the seal of the Spirit, which unites them. In fact this is just what he says in Ephesians. Christ has “abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of two [Jew and Gentile] one new man, so making peace” (Eph. 2:15). The “enmity” referenced here is that between Jews and Gentiles, which is enforced by the old law with its separating power. It is this enmity that is now dead. The sting of condemnation that this law produced has been abolished on the cross. The Jews are now free to give up the covenant of separateness to which they were bound and welcome those who formerly were considered unclean into the church.

And what is the “fruit” or offspring that they are now free to bring forth unto God through the new marriage covenant? The commentators say it is “holiness and good works” (Eph. 3:6), and 2 Corinthians certainly supports this interpretation. But Paul is talking to Jews, not to Gentiles, and while holiness and good works are very good things, the Jews probably did not need to be reminded of them, since Judaism was entirely focused on producing them.

It occurs to us, however, that “fruit unto God” may have another meaning for Paul. A great mystery has been revealed to him. In Christ, Gentile believers have become “fellow heirs and of the same body” (Eph. 3:6) as the Jews. Therefore, it may be that the fruit he has in mind is living a life of love and welcoming the uncircumcised into the church; it is unity between Jews and Gentiles. The fruit of the old covenant was enmity and separation; the fruit of the new covenant is reconciliation and love. From Galatians: “For, brethren, you have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another.” (Gal. 5:13). Serving one another in love is fruit unto God, the fruit God desires and bore in the Suffering Servant.

TWO DEATH ANALOGIES

The idea of dying in Christ in the wedding analogy is obviously linked to the same idea in chapter six. There, the Gentiles have died to sin by dying in Christ—but what exactly have “those who know the law”—the Jewish Christians—died to? The old husband cannot be the moral law because then they would be free to sin, which is not the kind of liberty Paul had in mind, as we know from the previous chapter. But then what if he has the law of circumcision in mind—the old sign of righteousness the Jews loved so much, which he has been steadily deconstructing since chapter two? This seal in the flesh would be dead to the Jews because they have died with Christ through baptism and are now sealed with the Spirit. Its significance has been replaced with something far more glorious. In fact, the entire ceremonial law was dead. There would be no more sacrifices because Christ made a complete and sufficient sacrifice on the cross. There would be no more feast days of obligation because they pointed to him. There would be no more ceremonial washing

because his blood washes away our sins, as foreshadowed by his first miracle. There would be no more circumcision for the rolling away of sin because sin is taken away in baptism. Origen has a much better discussion of this than we can conjure because he was closer to the fact. In him, we see actual living history that the ceremonial law was quite dead, like the old husband in the analogy.

But then why does Paul say, “For when we were in the flesh, the motions of sins, which were by the law, did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death” (7:5)? Isn’t this the same thing as saying “the wages of sin is death” (6:23) at the end of the previous chapter? Yes and no. In chapter six, Paul refutes any hint of antinomianism based on his notion of superabundant grace. He tells the Gentiles they have died with Christ because he wants them to stop sinning and doesn’t want anyone claiming that he is encouraging sin with his doctrine. But the argument in chapter seven harkens back to the one he has been making since chapter three: “Now we know that what things soever the law says, it says to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law, there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin” (3:19-20). For the sake of unity, Paul has been arguing that the law, far from making anyone righteous, actually increases sin. The purpose of this argument, as indicated in the quote above, is to stop the mouths of those who were boasting in the law. He wants the Gentiles to be welcomed into the church without circumcision, and this is his way of silencing the loyal opposition.

We realize this interpretation runs against the grain of traditional commentary. But in its defense, it unravels the tangled skein of explanation that becomes necessary when we try to make the death analogy in chapter six consonant with the two deaths

in the wedding analogy—as seen, for instance, in Luther, whose explanation is so convoluted as to be almost incomprehensible. We don’t think Paul was trying to confuse anybody. After all, the point of an analogy is to clarify things. But his reasoning becomes very confusing if we try to blend the death analogies together. In chapter six, he said we are free from sin under grace; but in chapter seven, he says that even under grace, we are still “sold under sin” (7:14). These two ideas contradict each other, and efforts to reconcile them result in multiplication of words without resolving anything. The knot can be untied, however, by separating the death analogies by audience. The first one, in chapter six, is for the benefit of the Gentiles, to encourage them to stop sinning. But the two in the wedding analogy are for the benefit of those “who know the law”—i.e., the Jews. For them, the death analogy indicates that the burden of the old covenant of obligation to the letter of the law is dead, having died with Christ, who took this burden on himself and did all that was required; who fulfilled the law. The condemnation experienced under the law is dead to them because of the atonement accomplished by Christ. “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (8:1). The practical meaning is that Jewish Christians are dead to the tribal condemnation experienced in the past by anyone who dared even to think of mingling with uncircumcised Gentiles. Why? Because they have died in Christ to the old covenant of law with its seal in the flesh.

Peter’s vision of the animals opened a new vista for the Jews. In Christ, they were now free to eat meat that had been strictly prohibited under the ceremonial law—prohibited primarily to separate them from their idol-worshipping neighbors. But for that very reason, the vision meant much more to Peter. It meant he

was free to accept the invitation to go into the house of a Gentile, which was strictly prohibited under the ceremonial law. He was free to preach the good news to Cornelius and his household, free to witness the outpouring of the Spirit on them, which changed the whole course of the church and human history, and free to offer them the water of baptism for the forgiveness of sin. Perhaps this is the same freedom Paul has in mind with the wedding analogy. The old covenant is dead; therefore, Jewish Christians are free to do something that was previously unimaginable—be reconciled to uncircumcised Gentiles.

NEWNESS OF SPIRIT

The verses that follow elaborate on the wedding analogy and go together. Paul is asking his fellow Jews to choose between the burden of trying to make ourselves righteous under the law with its 613 commandments and the freedom found in putting our faith in Christ and his righteousness. The burden: “For when we were in the flesh, the motions of sins, which were by the law, did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death” (7:5). The freedom: “But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter” (7:6). The first statement reflects the argument Paul began making in chapter three that the law increases sin and therefore the Judaizers need to stop boasting in the law and in “the flesh.” The repetition of it here serves three purposes: it fleshes out the wedding analogy; it lays out the choice Jewish Christians have between the burden of the law and the freedom found in Christ; and it sets the stage for the astonishing confession Paul is about to make, in which he demonstrates why absolutely no one should ever think to boast in the law.

Why should the Jews be happy that the old husband, the cherished covenant of obligation in which they rooted their national identity, has been superseded by a new covenant of grace, as the wedding analogy indicates? Because marrying themselves to Christ through faith is the only way they can obtain freedom from condemnation under the law. The law says, “Do this, and you shall live.” They were trying to obtain life through the flesh and its deeds, including the little mark in the flesh of which they were so proud. But the flesh is mortal. As long as they were mired “in the flesh” and the old covenant of obligation, sin was set in motion by the law of life to bring them death, according to the argument Paul is now making, which will be discussed in a moment. Therefore, they should be happy to give up insisting on circumcision, which was a sign of their bondage to the flesh under the law.

The law shows us how to obtain life, but we are trapped in mortal bodies, making it impossible to fulfill the law. This is Paul’s argument against holiness boasting in chapter seven. We could not fulfill the law because, as he says elsewhere, “the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that you cannot do the things that you would” (Gal. 5:17); that is, the mortal strives against the immortal in us. But now Christ has fulfilled the law on our behalf. He has “become our righteousness” (Jer. 33:16). Through faith in him, we have the freedom of the Spirit instead of the bondage of the flesh. But in order to enjoy this freedom, we must walk in the Spirit. We must stop judging one another and boasting in the law.

It can be challenging to understand what Paul is saying in these verses, first because what he is saying is challenging, and also because he still seems to be developing his ideas as he dictates on the fly, which results in a certain lack of clarity. However, they

become a little clearer when we realize that one thing he is *not* doing is devaluing the law. He is not attacking the thing his fellow Jews prized so highly. The law is “holy, and just, and good” (7:12), just as it is portrayed in the Old Testament. What he *is* critiquing is the unfortunate tendency of some Jews to boast in the law. If we make ourselves a debtor to a part of the law, like the Judaizers who insisted that circumcision is necessary for salvation, then we become debtors to all of the law. And under the law, we are all condemned.

This is the same critique of the “righteousness of the Pharisees” that we see in Christ. No one should boast of not literally committing adultery or murder, which is the letter of the law, because no one is capable of fulfilling the spirit of the law—of not looking at a woman lustfully or being angry with our brother in our heart. “He spoke this parable unto certain [men] who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others” (Luke 18:9). In other words, his critique was not of the law itself but of the hurtful behavior seen in scribes and Pharisees who were clinging to the law to glorify themselves. And the same is true of Paul. It is not the law he is critiquing but the Judaizers, who were clinging to it for identity. He did not want to see his Gentile flock harmed by those who were boasting in the flesh and insisting on circumcision. And we suspect he was probably also thinking of the faith. Boasting in the law makes it look small and ridiculous since we ourselves are mortal.

To dwell on this for a moment, Christianity is a uniquely soulful religion. It is based on the value of life—that is, the soul—and on love, which preserves life and builds it up. Christ was born in a stable with rude beasts and worshipped by shepherds. He washed the feet of his disciples and submitted to the cross. “The Greatest

Story Ever Told” is soulful because of his humility. “Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and you shall find rest for your souls” (Matt. 11:29). But this great soulfulness cannot be seen where there is holiness boasting. This is why Christ was driven to distraction by the religious leaders of his day who were using the law to glorify themselves. He protected God’s soulfulness. And this same protective instinct may be in play in Paul in Romans 7.

In a moment, Paul will discourage holiness boasting by showing that it is impossible to fulfill the law. But here, his point is that we are no longer in bondage to a covenant that depends upon the flesh. We no longer have to shoulder the impossible burden of trying to justify ourselves through the law. Because of Christ, we have a new covenant that leads to life and victory, not death and the grave. The Judaizers were still clinging to circumcision when something much better was within reach. Paul is trying to get them to lift up their eyes and see that it is greatly to their advantage to be delivered from the old covenant of law and its bondage and impossible burdens; free to marry a beautiful Savior and the freedom he brings. Through him, they have received the freedom of the Spirit—they have received life—but in order to enjoy this freedom, they must also walk in the Spirit.

What does he mean by walking in the Spirit? He explains it elsewhere: “If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. Let us not be desirous of vainglory, provoking one another, envying one another” (Gal. 5:25-26). To walk in the Spirit is to put an end to holiness boasting and the contentiousness and hurt it causes. This appears to be the hidden meaning of all these complicated verses, the unifying theme. Reading them without Paul’s desire for unity in mind is like trying to open a door without the key. We are

attracted to them because we can sense that they are profound, but we cannot put our finger on his meaning. We find ourselves arguing about things like Justification and Sanctification, but Paul does not seem to have had any interest in abstractions. He was trying to get Jewish Christians to walk in the Spirit—walk, not talk; walk the way of love and peace.

He has good news for his fellow Jews. Having been liberated from the chains in which they were held, the bondage of trying to obey the law in the flesh, they are free to serve in the newness of the Spirit. The commentators think this means they are free to serve God, which is a profitable reading. But we believe the newness he has in mind may be the new commandment to love one another. Since he simply says “serve” and not “serve God,” we believe he may have the following type of service in mind: “By love serve one another” (Gal. 5:13). Do we want to know what it means to be like Christ? “Whoever will be great among you shall be your minister: and whoever of you will be the chief shall be servant of all. For even the Son of man came not to be ministered to, but to minister, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:43-45). If we are boasting in the flesh, we are serving ourselves, but to be “in the Spirit” is to boast in Christ and his righteousness and serve one another in love, just as he served us, going all the way to the cross to show that sacrificial love is the path to resurrection life.

“Is the law sin?” (7:7). Again, is Paul trying to devalue the law that the Jews loved so much with the argument that the law increases sin? On the contrary, it is the law that *shows* him his sin. It is not the law that is responsible for the increase in sin that occurs “in the flesh” on account of the law. It is the flesh and its frailty; it is sin. “But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence.” He himself is a Jew with

the highest opinion of the law. But it seems we cannot justify any holiness boasting we might want to do under the law because there is “another law” (7:23) at work in our members that has a hidden dominion over us through sin and death. Before Christ, we were dead in the law that brings life because our obedience to the law was based on the flesh, which is mortal. But now we are alive in Christ, the living Savior, and the new age of the Spirit of life.

This change from flesh under the old covenant of law to Spirit under the new covenant of grace is immense in Paul’s mind—a change of eons, as Käsemann calls it. The whole world lived in the bondage of death until Christ—under a veil, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians, and as Isaiah 25:7 also says. But Christ conquered death and sent us the Spirit, transforming what was old into something completely new. There is a prophecy of this wonderful new age in Zechariah. The “stone” that is a “branch”—that is, Christ, the branch of Jesse—is put before the high priest. This stone is the spiritual cornerstone upon which the second temple is to be built. It is engraved with seven living eyes, but even more marvelous are the seven lampstands seen on it, which are fed from a bowl from above and continuously furnished with fresh oil from two olive trees on either side. The prophet tells us the meaning of the vision: “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts” (Zech. 4:6). The second temple, which prefigures the church of Christ, is founded on this all-seeing, all-provident cornerstone, and powered by the Holy Spirit. This vision of the power of the Spirit was intended to encourage Jews returning from exile in a state of despondency over their ruined city and culture. It still encourages us today when we experience the despondency Paul is about to describe of being incapable of being good, the ruined city being ourselves.

Here is a more familiar prophecy regarding this new age: “And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions: and also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my spirit” (Joel 2:28-29). When Christ breathed on the believers in Jerusalem, everything changed. Now all who believe are filled with the power of the Spirit, not just a select few. This contrast of “oldness of letter” and “newness of spirit” is highly relevant to the visionary church. Just as Christ prayed fervently for the unity of his flock, so Paul wants the Judaizers to choose the newness of the Spirit of life over the dead letter of circumcision that was dividing the church; literally dead like the old husband in the wedding analogy in the sense that the apostles had deemed it unnecessary at the Jerusalem Council. But from the ashes of the old covenant rises the new spirit of Christ, the Spirit of life.

THE LAW BRINGS DEATH, NOT LIFE

Now Paul will show that it is far, far better to be “under grace” than “under law,” far better to have the power of the Spirit than to depend on what the flesh can do to justify itself. As we have said, he begins this demonstration by making it clear that his remarks are not intended to devalue the law. “Is the law sin?” (7:7). Is he saying there is something *wrong* with the law? “God forbid.” But the Jews had an unfortunate tendency to boast in the law, to embellish their résumé with the glory of the law as if they themselves were glorious. In Paul’s mind, the Judaizers were boasting of their righteousness in the law by insisting that the Gentiles be circumcised. Against this, he argues that no one should boast in the law because the law shows us our infirmities. “I had not known sin, but by the law” (7:7).

When Moses gave the law to the Israelites, he told them, “Do this and you shall live” (Lev. 18:5). If they had “done this”—obeyed the law—then they might have had something to boast about. Or as Paul puts it in Galatians, “If there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law” (Gal. 3:21). But their own histories and prophets showed that they were unable to fulfill the law. God marvels at this in Isaiah. He had liberated them from slavery and planted a choice vineyard for them in the Promised Land, where he enabled them to defeat their enemies with ease, showering them with kindness and prosperity and favoring them in every way imaginable, just as Moses promised he would—and still, they were unable or unwilling to follow the law.

These facts led Paul to a startling conclusion. Contrary to all expectations, contrary to strongly held beliefs in the Jewish community and the dialogue of the rabbis regarding the law as reflected in the Talmud, it was never the purpose of the law to make mortals holy, certainly not to justify any boasting in the law. No, the purpose of the law was to show them that they were *not* holy; to stop their confounded boasting; to stupefy their pride, which was the first sin and first in all our sinning. Lest Paul appears to be on an island here, this was also the view of Christ, Peter, James, and John. The law that promises life teaches us that we cannot obtain life through the law. We need a Savior to obtain it. The law was written in unyielding stone to drive us back to God, who promised to write it on our hearts; to write it, as Augustine and Thomas point out, through the Spirit and not the letter. Paul puts it this way: “The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (Gal. 3:24). In Paul’s day, the schoolmaster carried a rod, which was very liberally applied, like Mr. Creakle’s.

The meaning is that the law was written to chasten us, not to make us boast, as the Judaizers were in circumcision.

The law was supposed to show us the path to life. This was what made it glorious. But Paul notes a terrible irony from his own experience. “I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died. And the commandment, which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me” (7:9-11). At one time, he was alive in the sense of not feeling the condemnation that the law brings when we consider it deeply. “I had not known lust, except the law said ‘You shall not covet’” (7:7). The tenth commandment shows him that he lusts—covets things that are his neighbor’s—and therefore, it convicts him and makes him thoroughly ashamed of himself. The law that was ordained to bring life actually brings him death because it makes him realize he is a sinner. Thomas observes that covetousness is forbidden by God’s law but not man’s law, thus illustrating how God’s law occasions an increase in consciousness of sin over the law revealed in nature. And covetousness is a sin of which we are all guilty.

We have first-hand evidence that Paul’s description of the convicting power of the law is accurate because we live in a post-Christian world. Many people today are sinning without any sense of shame or regret because the law is not present in their minds, either because they have never been exposed to it or because they have ignored it. The same thing was seen in Nehemiah after the return of the captives from Babylon to Jerusalem. The Jews had been sojourning in other lands for seventy years after the horrific destruction of the city and had lost touch with their heritage. They asked Ezra to read the law and were devastated by it. “For all the

people wept, when they heard the words of the law” (Neh. 8:9). They wept because the law made them aware of their sinfulness for the first time.

This shows that the law convicts us. And according to Paul, this is what it was *designed* to do. “The commandment, which was ordained to life [‘Do this, and you shall live’], I found to be unto death” (7:10). The original Greek seems closer to “was into life” or “results in life” (*eis zōēn*), which makes the meaning a little more straightforward. The commandments show us what to do to obtain life, but we die in the commandments because we break them—“this into [or results in] death for me” (*hautē eis thanaton*). Now Paul articulates a rather embarrassing fact about human nature. The way to get us to do something wrong is to tell us not to do it. Eve is the prime example. The reason seems to be that sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, somehow produces mischief in us. It deceives us in the same way it deceived our first parents, first by causing us to think there is no penalty for sin (“you shall not surely die” [Gen. 3:4]) and then by enflaming our rebellious spirits through vanity (“you shall be as gods, knowing good and evil” [Gen. 3:5]). But when we succumb to temptation, the “do not” shows us that we are not like God at all. We are not good. We cannot follow the law that leads to life. “Why do you call me good? There is none good but one, that is, God” (Mark 10:18). And if we are not good, then it is impossible to obtain righteousness through the law.

“Wherefore the law is holy, and the [tenth] commandment holy, and just, and good” (7:12). Paul’s own sore conscience ratifies that the law that prohibits coveting is good by how much it stings him. But is this the fault of the law? “Was then that which is good [the law] made death unto me? God forbid. But sin, that

it might appear [to be] sin, working death in me by that which is good; [so] that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful” (7:13). He was coveting before he thought about the tenth commandment—he was in sin—but the commandment made his coveting exceedingly sinful in his own mind; it made him aware of it and caused sin to burn in his conscience. So, it seems the law is “good” in two very different senses. It is good because it delineates the path of life—very good and perfect in that sense—but also good because it convicts us of our sinfulness, although we may not cherish the lash. The law is good because, without it, we would not know the extent of our sin; we would not seek God’s mercy and have Christ’s joy and liberty. This seems to be what Paul has in mind.

He is going to illustrate these things in the confession that follows. We cannot obey the life-giving law by our very nature because our flesh is mortal; without Christ and his grace, our body is dead in sin. Therefore, we should not be clinging to the law for our identity. We should not be *boasting* in the law and thinking we are superior to our fellow Christians—or to anyone else, for that matter. We should open the doors of the church and let the Gentiles in, as odious as they may seem to us from our privileged vantage point.

SIN LIES DEAD

“For without the law sin was dead” (7:8). This is the third time Paul has brought forward this somewhat puzzling idea, but this time he will illustrate what he means by it. As discussed, it cannot be true in the literal sense. Paul has already told us that Rome is full of sin, which is very much alive and causing harm whether or not there is a written law against it. We know from the pagan Greek and Roman

writers that they were very much aware of sin; therefore, it is not literally true that “sin lies dead” apart from the revealed law. But these words are definitely true in the *subjective* sense. Thomas says sin lies dead under natural law because natural law is imperfect, but sin comes alive through the perfection of God’s law. Instead of making us feel good about ourselves and giving us peace, the law makes us more mindful of our sins; and the more perfect it is, the more it has this unsettling effect. The uncharitable thoughts we have about others, for instance, may not trouble us much until we become aware of the spirituality of the law, which builds up life by telling us to love our neighbor as ourselves. But as soon as we do understand this, we cannot help being filled with grief at our selfishness.

In Paul’s example, sin lay dead until he was confronted with the tenth commandment, which showed him that he was exceedingly sinful. The point is that the Judaizers should not be boasting in the law and condemning the Gentiles for being uncircumcised when they too are exceedingly sinful by the perfect measure of God’s law, according to which “no one is good; no, not one” (Psalm 53:3).

ALL ARE EQUALLY CONDEMNED UNDER THE LAW...

Now Paul gives a psychological self-portrait that is simply devastating to holiness boasting, and also to the Jewish religion as it was practiced at the time. He will show us how the law makes us conscious of sin, finally revealing what he had in mind with those puzzling passages about sin lying dead without the law. Yes, we can make ourselves look holy on the outside, as religious Jews aspired to do, but God looks into our hearts, and what is found there is not suitable for public consumption. Paul was more zealous for the

law than anyone, but he admits that sin, “taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me” (7:11), just as it slew Adam and Eve. This is profound. The fault is not in the law; it is in sin, which produces death in us through what is good—through the law—so that by the law sin might be shown to be sin; in other words, so that the law might show us we are sinners, no matter how holy we may seem outwardly or think ourselves to be, and cause us to repent and return to God on our knees. We are sinners no matter how much we may want to be righteous. This is what the law reveals. It is a central tenet of the visionary church. If all are judged under the law, then no one should judge others or create divisions based on the law; no, not even circumcised Jews who practice the law outwardly.

Paul demonstrates these things through the most intimate confession we know of in ancient literature, the very opposite of Pharisaical boasting.¹ He humbles himself and bares his soul in order to make it clear that he is not righteous in the flesh. He begins by acknowledging that the “law is spiritual” (7:14). That is, he fully agrees with his fellow Jews about the value of the law. But he himself is “unspiritual”; he is “of the flesh and sold under sin” (7:14). He cannot justify himself under the law, no matter how hard he tries, “for to will is present with me, but how to perform that which is good I find not” (7:28). This is radical. The whole point of philosophy is to use intellect to equip the will to pursue the good of happiness. But Paul is saying something highly subversive

1 N.T. Wright says there is a long tradition of such confessions in pagan literature predating Paul, from which he picked it up. We don’t remember any, but we would be happy to have our minds changed. In any case, they are unlikely to show the kind of agonizing or self-loathing seen in Paul since these things are produced by his consciousness of the perfection of God’s most holy law.

to such prideful ambition. He is fully aware of what sin is through the law and has chosen to avoid it, and yet he continues to sin. He chooses good but winds up doing evil. It seems there are mysterious forces at work in him that compel him to go against the dictates of his own reason and will.

He delights in the law of God after the inward man. He “identifies himself in his deepest and most determinate will with the law of God, which is good,” according to Murray.² As the psalmist said, “O how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day” (Ps. 119:97). Why would anybody love the law? Because it is perfect and good; because it shows us how to obtain life; because it is deep wisdom; because it teaches us to love God and one another; because it shows us true spirituality, for which we have a longing mixed in with our sinful longings; because it is a “lamp unto our feet and a light unto our way” (Ps. 119:105). Paul says he loves the law dearly, just like the Judaizers—but it seems he cannot obey it. “For the good that I [will to do], that I do not do; but what I hate, I do” (7:19).

This is an honest representation of the human predicament. Contrary to the claims of the philosophers, human reason and will lack the power to make us good. We can see what is good. We can love the good and desire it. But there are unseen forces at work in us that prevent us from actually being good and obtaining righteousness. “If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good” (7:16). If he does the very thing he does not want to do, he shows that he agrees the law is good to prohibit that thing. But then it seems it is no longer he who is disobeying the law—his conscious self. Some unknown force has come in between his idealized self and his actual self and compelled him to sin. “Now

2 Murray, *Epistle to the Romans*, 266.

then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwells in me” (7:17). He identifies this unknown force as sin and attributes his lawbreaking to it and not to will or desire. He wants to do what is right but winds up doing wrong. Through this description, he shows that we do not have full control over our actions. We can will ourselves to be righteous, to do what is right, like the Judaizers, but we are not able to carry out the thing we have willed. Therefore, we should not boast about our righteousness and judge one another.

You’ve heard of production for use. This is theology for use. The theology presented in chapter seven is not an end in itself but a means to an end. Its purpose is to get the Jews to stop boasting about circumcision and welcome the Gentiles into the church. Paul wants the Jews to think of themselves as being dead to the old covenant and alive in the Spirit because he wants them to walk in the Spirit of unity and love and not in the dividing power of the ceremonial law. His purpose in confessing his sin is not just to show us that we are sinners and can only obtain righteousness through faith, as important as that is. No, the reason for laying his heart bare is to bring the church together in love. If the Jews marry themselves to Christ and put aside the old covenant, the old husband, then the barrier between them and the Gentiles is removed. Paul longs for this to happen, as he says in Ephesians 2. That’s why he goes to extraordinary lengths by humbling himself before the church in Rome and confessing that he is a sinner. The visionary church is the underlying reason for the confession.

To return to our previous example, it is well within our power to recognize that having unkind thoughts about others is selfish and destructive and to will ourselves not to have such thoughts anymore. We, too, are perfectly capable of seeing the spirituality of the law that preserves our neighbor’s life, and we can indeed

make up our minds to follow that law by the power of reason. But what we cannot do is will ourselves to obey the law perfectly. Sin, working autonomously in us, or so it seems from an experiential point of view, causes us to do the very thing we have determined not to do. Those unkind thoughts return to us unbidden; worse, we seem powerless to prevent them. We want to prevent them, but we can't. Therefore, it seems to Paul that it must be sin working in him that causes him to go against his own will and reason, and indeed, against his best interests, since he desires life and a desirable identity. For all of the subtlety he employs, the net meaning is quite simple. He wants to be righteous but is a sinner. He is making this point for the benefit of his fellow Jews, who are still clinging to the old covenant of law, who just won't let the old husband go. They cannot do the good they intend to do because the flesh is at war with the Spirit. This confession is not intended to suggest that we sin in everything we do and can do no good. Not everything human is a sin. Such an idea would have seemed foreign to Paul, who was himself a Pharisee. But we do sin even when we choose to follow the law; therefore, it is impossible to justify ourselves under the law.

The law is spiritual, but we are made of flesh. Therefore, the law does not glorify us or how spiritual we are. It does not justify the preening pride seen in the parable of the Pharisee and his outward show of holiness, which apparently represents Jewish culture at the time. Instead, it shows that "I am carnal [fleshly], sold under sin" (7:14). Thomas says the "I" in Paul's confession stands in for reason, which should be the ruler of a man's own city—himself—but is not. Paul makes an object lesson of himself to show the perversity of boasting in the law. We may love the law and have the highest respect for it; we may be capable of having deep thoughts about the law. But what we cannot do is justify ourselves under the

law, not inwardly—not even in our own minds—because the law shows us that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, an idea which was current in Jewish theology of the time, according to Dunn. The very purpose of the law is to humble us; therefore, no one should “boast of the law” (2:23).

“Evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good” (7:21). Evil is not under his conscious control. He concurs with the law of God in the inner man, but he finds “another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members” (7:23). This “other law” has something to do with the bondage of his “members” to the grave, which foment rebellion. Life is holy, and the law is sacred because it preserves life, but we are mortal beings. We can perceive the sanctity of life and the law that preserves it, but the frailty of our mortal flesh prevents us from obtaining life through the law. It makes us rebel against the law, even when we don’t want to. “For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwells no good thing” (7:18). This is not to say there is nothing good in him at all—in other words, in his mind. He already told us that he delights in the law in his mind and innermost being, which shows he is perfectly capable of loving what is good. His sincere desire to *obey* the law is also good. He is not devoid of goodness, but the flesh prevents him from actually being good. Thomas comments that the lusts of the flesh preexist the workings of reason; therefore, reason cannot entirely root them out. However, he also says that these lusts are beyond rational control because they reflect the sin we have in Adam. And Paul is saying all this for the sake of his fellow Jews. “Now we know that what things soever the law says, it says to those who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God” (3:19). The Jews are the

ones who are “under the law.” Like them, Paul delights in the law. But as his confession shows, no one can justify himself by the law. Therefore, there is no cause for boasting in the law.

The rebellion of the flesh against the Spirit happens inevitably when we put ourselves “under the law” because the Spirit is life and we are mortal beings. This is what Paul’s confession is designed to illustrate. We love the law and its spirituality and long to obey it in the incandescent superego side of ourselves, but we simply cannot do what we want to do—cannot do it perfectly—because the flesh is in bondage to the grave. “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (7:24). He is in bondage to his own mortal body as shown by his inability to do the good he has willed himself to do that leads to life. Therefore, Paul acknowledges his need for a Savior. His only chance of obtaining peace with God is to be delivered from his mortal body; and the only person capable of doing this is Christ, by the power shown in his resurrection.

There is a vast sea of commentary on Paul’s confession, of course, but we would like to point out one thing that we don’t remember seeing anywhere else. It absolutely levels the playing field between Gentile and Jew. There can be no doubt, after such a representation of the state of our being, that we are all equally condemned “under law,” even a zealous Jew like Paul. What he humbly says about himself is true of everyone. We cannot obey the law perfectly even if we want to because there is another mysterious “law” at work in us over which we have very limited control, at least in the sense of not being able to ferret it out, as Thomas says. This “law” makes us do things we have resolved not to do and not do things we have resolved to do. This is not just speculation. It is real life. If we try to walk in the flesh, walk under the law, as the Judaizers were doing, judging Gentile Christians for not being circumcised,

we will stumble. We will never obtain justification, the only thing that can give us peace with God. But we can have justification as a free gift if we put our faith in Christ and walk in the Spirit.

A CULTURE OF HOLINESS

It strikes us that Paul's confession is not just a deconstruction of the Judaizers and their holiness boasting; it is a deconstruction of a religious culture. It seems that somewhere along the line, Judaism had lost its way. It based itself on the law, and the law is based on love, but it was not based on love. No, too often, it was based on self-aggrandizement. Startling instances of this can be found in Josephus. Apparently, many religious leaders were boasters and hypocrites. "Unless your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:20). They were righteous on the outside but not inwardly. "But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for you neither go in yourselves, neither suffer you them that are entering to go in" (Matt. 23:13). Why were they unable to enter that kingdom despite their sanctimonious pomp? Because everything they did was for their own benefit. "You devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayer: therefore you shall receive the greater damnation" (Matt. 23:14). There is a cold edge to religion when we use it to enrich ourselves by robbing others. And this was repellant to Christ and to Paul.

"Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought you to have done, and not to leave the other undone" (Matt. 23:23). To sum up, their religion is a false religion. It is about the letter of the

law, which they use to profit themselves, and not the spirit of the law, which is love; the spirit of justice and mercy, which fills the Old Testament. Now, of course, we do not mean all Jews were hypocrites or acted in this way. Christ's critique is of the religious leaders who rejected him and were trying to get him killed. Meanwhile, right-minded Jews were flocking to him every day. Crowds followed him around. Nicodemus was a Jewish leader who had sympathy for him. The first Christians were Jews. Gamaliel himself was protective of them. No, what Christ was condemning was the soulless national establishment of Judaism. Whenever any great and soulful idea is institutionalized, strong men rise up to take over the institution for self-aggrandizement. The Jewish leaders were using religion to enrich, empower, and glorify themselves. This is perverse since God required them to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with their God. Christ allowed himself to be struck down because his kingdom was *not* of this world. To be like him is to allow ourselves to be struck down as well, figuratively speaking, and to live a life of sacrificial love. In such a life, we may appear to the world to be nothing, as he did to the Jewish religious leaders; but then we will be raised to life by the same Spirit that raised Christ, the Spirit which is love.

By the way, we certainly do not believe—and are not even remotely claiming—that the only way to read Paul's confession profitably is in the context of the visionary church. Without thinking of that church at all, it is still one of the most potent and important passages in the Bible. It is powerful for the simple reason that we know exactly what he is talking about. His experience is our experience; his painful inability to be perfect and justify himself under the law is our inability; his agony our agony. "Who will deliver us from this body of death?" This is the anguished cry of every believer who is seeking peace with God and cannot find it in

himself. And yes, thanks be to God for our Savior! This is what we cling to when we are overwhelmed by the sting of our depravity, thanking Christ for our peace.

However, we would also like to point out that Paul's confession is vital to the visionary church. It rules out any possibility of holiness boasting, thereby leading to unity. We may not be boasting about circumcision anymore, but there is a great deal of boasting going on in all branches of the institutional church today. When will we stop boasting about how righteous we are in our mode of religion, our expression of worship and our doctrines, our outward signs of righteousness, and learn to love each other? When will we stop using Paul's humble confession to glorify ourselves and make us look more righteous than people we look down on, comparing their faith with our own as if we were in any sense holier than they are? Paul's humble confession reminds us that we should be humble, too. No one who boasts in the law and judgment can enter the kingdom of God. The only way to enter that kingdom is by walking in the Spirit and love.

REGENERATE OR UNREGENERATE?

There is a lively debate about whether Paul is talking about the regenerate or the unregenerate man in his confession. Is it about someone (i.e., Paul) who has confessed Christ and been baptized and still finds himself sinning, or is it about someone who has not yet found Christ or been reborn in him? Augustine, debating with himself, declared it was the unregenerate man before changing his mind later on in life. Luther's description of the confession seems largely devoted to this controversy, and Cranfield and Moo, towering expositors of our own time, come to opposite conclusions, as do Käsemann and Fitzmyer.

The confession is related in the first person, present tense—"I am carnal, sold under sin." Therefore, those who say it represents the regenerate man—Paul himself as a Christian—have the logic of grammar on their side, at least. But a fresh perspective on this question can be obtained by using the lens of the visionary church. If Paul had unity on his mind when he made his confession, then its purpose was to discourage holiness boasting by showing that no one is holy; no one is good. This includes Paul himself, a regenerate Christian—and those who were boasting about circumcision: the Judaizers.

The reason for claiming that the man in the confession must be *unregenerate* is that Paul says he is "sold under sin" (7:14), which seems to contradict what he says in the previous chapter: "Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. For he that is dead is freed from sin." (6:6-8). If we try to make these two statements into *systematic doctrine*, then it seems the man in the confession must be unregenerate. He cannot be both "freed from sin" and also "sold under sin"; therefore, he cannot be the regenerate Christian described in chapter six.

But this contradiction goes away if we take the visionary church into account. There were two distinct problems that needed to be addressed in the church, for which Paul used two distinct argument strategies. In order to negate antinomianism, he says to the Gentiles: Do you not realize that when you were baptized into Christ you were baptized into his death? Therefore, reckon yourselves dead to sin and stop sinning. But in order to negate boasting in circumcision, he says: Do you not realize that we are sold under sin in the flesh and have nothing to boast about when it comes to righteousness except the righteousness of Christ? Therefore, stop

judging the Gentiles. These two arguments support the visionary church. On that basis, they do not come into conflict with each other.

However, they do come into conflict if we use them to support certain doctrines that are not related to the visionary church. This is what happened with the Schoolmen. They took the statement that we are “freed from sin” literally in order to support their doctrine that it is possible to obtain holiness and “continuing justification” through virtuous action, which idea they borrowed from Aristotle. According to them, we have been literally freed from sin through baptism, and can, therefore, obtain righteousness through good works. Paul’s confession in chapter seven indicates that we have *not* been freed from sin even after being baptized. This conflicts with their doctrine, which is why they claimed the person in the confession must be unregenerate.

But Paul was not trying to support a doctrine of pure action. He was not a lover of Aristotle or his *Nicomachean Ethics*, as wonderful as that book might be (it is our favorite book of philosophy). No, he was trying to support the visionary church. And in that case, he was free to use arguments that may seem contradictory. Paul is not saying in his confession that there has been *no* moral improvement in us as regenerate Christians. Clearly, he has made improvements. He is not persecuting Christians anymore. Nor is he saying, as some would have it, that we are *incapable* of obeying the commandments. It is not necessary to negate free will and the human capacity for goodness in order to prove his point about holiness boasting. All he has to do is show that there are some cases where we do not do what is right and instead do what is wrong. If we are boasting of our righteousness under the law, then we must fulfill all of the law. If we fall down on any point, then our holiness boasting is an offense to

God and to man. Yes, we have been freed from condemnation for sin by the price Christ paid on the cross, but we continue to be sold under sin to the extent that we are still sinning. Otherwise, there would be no point in getting down on our knees. For that matter, there would be no point in writing chapter six.

Those who claim that the person in the confession must be unregenerate seem to be suggesting that we who are in Christ—who are “regenerate”—are free from the compulsion to sin and inability to fulfill the law that the confession demonstrates; that we can, in fact, obey the tenth commandment perfectly and are capable of becoming holy. However, this way of thinking subverts Paul’s intention to bring unity to the church, which depends upon the annihilation of the holiness boasting seen in the Judaizers. For unity to be possible, it must be true that the regenerate man is still a sinner and, therefore, has no right to boast about his holiness and try to separate himself from others.

And it is not only true for that reason. It is true because it is true. “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). Read Paul’s confession in a Bible study with sincere Christians and observe their reaction. It humbles them and makes them more appreciative of superabundant grace—which is the whole point. The purpose of the confession is to negate any inclination we might have to boast about our holiness by judging others, as has been shown. By claiming it is about the unregenerate man, we deprive it of this transformative power.

We may even encourage holiness boasting. Dodd has an interesting discussion of these verses where he outlines four stages of moral development that he sees in Aristotle. In the final stage, by absorbing good teaching and habituating ourselves to virtuous action, we actually become virtuous, even though no one is virtuous

by nature. The Schoolmen, who loved Aristotle, thought the same thing. Some went so far as to claim that it is possible for the baptized Christian to obey the commandments and obtain holiness, based on Romans 6. But this fails to take into account Romans 7, which deconstructs our holiness boasting.

There is an essential difference between the Biblical worldview and the Greek worldview seen in Aristotle. According to the Bible, all mortals are sinners. “The imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth” (Gen. 8:24). “Behold, I was shaped in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Psalm 51:5). “The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked: who can know it?” (Jer. 17:9). Human nature is not simply deficient in virtue; it is virtually impaired. This is the view that we see reflected in Paul’s confession. God has given us the law to show us what is right, but we are incapable of fulfilling the law because of sin in “our members.” We all fall short of the glory of God, regenerate and unregenerate alike.

By following Aristotle and claiming that virtue is indeed attainable for the regenerate man, the Schoolmen put themselves on the side of works-righteousness and the Greek idea of the perfectibility of the human spirit, which lends itself directly to holiness boasting. If it is indeed possible for the regenerate Christian to obey the commandments and stop sinning, then there is no reason for him not to boast in the law and his righteousness, just as the Judaizers were boasting in circumcision. The unity Paul was trying to effect through his confession of intractable sin is destroyed. This was played out in an epochal way in the Reformation and the division of the church, which will be discussed in a little while.

To sum up, Paul’s purpose in confessing his sin was to help bring about the visionary church where all stand in equal need of grace. Claiming that the confession is about the unregenerate man

undermines this goal, while following what appears to be common sense and the rules of grammar supports it.

AND ALL BELIEVERS ARE EQUALLY SAVED BY GRACE

Paul has just taken us down into the darkest depths of the soul. There is nothing we want more than to justify our existence, and for this very reason, there is nothing we hate more than the realization that we are sinners and fall short of the standard of goodness seen in God's law. "O wretched man that I am!" (7:24). These are the words of someone who loves the law and is in anguish over his inability to follow it, a man tortured by the sting of self-condemnation, as are we all from time to time on sleepless nights. Paul was not able to earn life through the law, as Moses tells us to do. Instead, the law showed him his mortal shortcomings. But that is not the end of the story. "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (7:25). *Someone* has the power to deliver us from "the body of this death" (7:24) in which we and our consciences are tormented.

In Paul's view, we are dead in our sins under the law. That is his brief against holiness boasting. It is possible for us to be delivered from the body of this death by dying with Christ through our baptism. In that case, the force of judgment found in the law becomes dead to us because our sins have been forgiven. Through Christ, we have a new covenant in his blood: we are no longer under law but under grace. This does not mean we are not expected to obey the law. Luther says it is not so much that the law has died to us, but we have died to the burden of the law. That is, we no longer have to attempt to *justify* ourselves under the law. We no longer have to suffer the anguish Paul has just expressed because we are under the rainbow of grace. Paul had been a persecutor of

Christians. He stood by while Stephen was martyred. He also had a “thorn in the flesh” that simply would not go away. These are heavy burdens, and we are sure he had others. We know exactly how he was feeling when he cried out, “Who will deliver me from this body of death?” It is the same cry we make when we say of our sins that “the burden of them is intolerable to us.”

That burden has been lifted, thank God, through grace and faith in Christ. But here’s the thing. Now that the burden has been mercifully lifted from us, we must not unmercifully put it upon others. This is the point Paul has been trying to make. Yes, we are sinners who are saved through the righteousness of Christ. But if it is *his* righteousness that saves us and not our own, then no one has a right to boast in the law. No Christian has a right to claim to be any more righteous than his fellow believers, as the Judaizers were doing. No one should use the law to condemn others when we ourselves are under condemnation under the law. To be under grace requires us to “stop judging one another” (14:14), to boast only in Christ and what he has done for us and not in our own righteousness.

Which is just what Paul does. “I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (7:24). Christ frees him from the despair of being condemned under the holy law that he loves; frees him from “this body of death” by giving him life. Paul’s cry of thanks is ours as well. We, too, love the law and see that it is good. We are capable of seeing that the law preserves life and is, therefore, spiritual. We may even serve the law in our minds, as Paul says he does. We may firmly make up our minds to start serving the law today. You have heard of New Year’s resolutions. But we find that “the flesh”—our incarnate being—serves a law that is hidden from our conscious mind, which Paul calls the law of sin and death. We wind up sinning despite our

good intentions; not always, to be sure, but often enough to shatter any illusions we might have about our righteousness.

Paul confesses his sin and receives the promised blessing. He humbles himself to show that we, too, should be humbled by sin and not think to lord it over others or judge them. This is not doctrine for the sake of doctrine. This is doctrine for the sake of peace in the visionary church. He sums up the argument he has been making all along on behalf of that church: “So then, on the one hand, I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin” (7:25). This is a message to his fellow Jews who are stirring up trouble over circumcision. We are all serving the law of God with our minds, but since we are made of mortal flesh, we are still sinners. This is why we should not presume to judge uncircumcised Christians as if we ourselves were holy.

CHAPTER 8

FINALLY, SOME GOOD NEWS!

Oh, perfidious chapter break! What comes next goes hand-in-hand with Paul's concluding comments in chapter seven. Having shown that we are all equally condemned under the law, now he shows that we are equally saved from condemnation by grace: "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus" (8:1). We are sinners in the flesh, even when we love the law and try to follow it, but we have a Savior who covers our sins. "The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus [the law of faith and new covenant of grace in his blood] has made me free from [condemnation resulting from] the law of sin and death [the old covenant of obligation]." Paul does not say there is no sin for those who are in Christ Jesus. Indeed, he has just shown that he is a sinner and elsewhere calls himself the worst of sinners. But he does say there is no *condemnation* for sinners who are in Christ Jesus. They

obtain the righteousness they cannot earn under the law through his righteousness. Condemnation is inevitable under the law, but there is no condemnation for those who put their faith in him, who have died to the old husband and married themselves to him as their Savior. Paul is still talking to his fellow Jews, still framing a choice between the old and the new. We can have freedom from the bondage of the law by putting our faith in our Savior, but we must use this precious liberty to serve one another in love. We must stop judging one another.

“There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” is one of the most beloved statements in the Bible, bringing sweet relief from the wretchedness Paul has just described. What can save us from condemnation if things are the way he painted them—if we don’t do the good things we want to do and instead do the evil we *don’t* want to do? Only a Savior who took our condemnation on himself and fulfilled the law on our behalf. That’s the good news in a nutshell. But Paul is making another subtler point with this glorious affirmation. If he and his fellow Jews are saved from condemnation by faith in Christ, then this is also true of *everyone* who has this same faith, including the reviled Gentiles. The statement has a surface meaning, which brings great comfort to the faithful, but there is also a less comfortable meaning for those who were eager to condemn the Gentiles and cast them out of the fellowship. Everyone who believes in Christ is in the same state of blessedness through grace and not through works, lest any man should boast. It does not matter if they are circumcised or uncircumcised. Everyone who believes is saved by faith.

Paul uses the word “law” (*nomou*) four times in the opening verses of chapter eight. He is not just happily rejoicing in the grace he has received but also trying to get the point across that the new

law of life in Christ, the “law of faith” (3:27), has made us free from the old law of sin and death. The bondage of death in the flesh has been undone by the Spirit, but in order to avail ourselves of this glorious gift, we must walk after the Spirit and not after the flesh. From Ephesians: “I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that you walk worthy of the vocation wherewith you are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with long suffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, even as you are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (Eph. 4:1-6).

The Gentiles have the same standing in the kingdom of God as Jewish Christians. Both are condemned under the law, and both have been set free from this condemnation by faith in Christ. This is radical equality, and it is still highly relevant today. There can be no hierarchy of righteousness within the church. Suppose Christians are inclined to imagine themselves as more holy or spiritual than their fellow believers, whether on account of charity or prayer or moral law or doctrine or for any other reason, such as the office they hold in the church or the way they dress or talk, or the friends they keep, or what books they read. They need to learn from Paul that “all have fallen short of the glory of God,” but that “there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,” the yin and yang of his teaching for the sake of unity in the church.

We want to clarify that we do not consider the “surface” reading of these verses to be surface-y or shallow. It is very deep indeed, as we immediately discover when we wade into Chrysostom, Augustine, Thomas, Luther, Calvin, and all their modern counterparts. It is absolutely essential to our “Christian Walk” and to our sanity, as

Christ's blood is the washing that sanitizes our being and preserves us from the madness expressed by Paul at the end of the last chapter. Looking at these verses with the visionary church in mind does not diminish traditional readings or the happiness they proclaim. But it does open a door concerning unity—what it really is and how to obtain it.

FLESH VS SPIRIT

At the end of the last chapter, Paul describes the misery of living under the “law of sin and death” (8:2). The existence of that law is revealed to him through the commandments, which convict him of unrighteousness in the flesh. The tenth commandment shows Paul there is “another law” at work in him that causes him to sin despite his love of God’s law and intention to be righteous; a law connected to “the flesh,” to his bondage to the grave and the inheritance of Adam. He calls it a “law” because it is universal and inexorable. It is “of sin and death” because it leads to death in those who attempt to obtain life under the law and who try to live according to “the flesh.”

But now Christ has set him free through the “law of the Spirit of life” (8:2). The Resurrection shows that this law is also inexorable. The bondage of death that indemnifies the flesh has been overthrown by the life-giving Spirit of God, who, as Murray puts it, “is the Spirit of life because he is the author of life and because he is life.”¹ We are worthy of condemnation in our sinful flesh no matter how much we may love the law in our minds or resolve to obey it. Indeed, God sent his Son in the “likeness of sinful flesh, and [as an offering] for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh” (8:3). Christ was sent in the likeness of sinful flesh because,

1 Murray, *Epistle to the Romans*, 276

although he was made flesh, he was not a sinner, having been conceived by the Holy Spirit, as Thomas informs us. He took on the likeness of sinful flesh to become an atoning sacrifice, but it was not his sinfulness that was condemned on the cross since he was without sin. It was the sinfulness of the flesh. This shows that obtaining righteousness through the flesh is impossible, i.e., under the old covenant. Because of the sacrifice that condemned sin in the flesh, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus if they walk after the Spirit and not the flesh. Those Jews who were judging the uncircumcised were still walking after the flesh and still under condemnation.

We cannot obtain righteousness by walking after the flesh despite what the Judaizers were claiming about circumcision—but we can obtain it through Christ and his righteousness, which is imputed to us if we have faith in him and the power of his blood. Through his sacrifice, we are released from the law’s curse: but our righteousness in him has a new claim on us. Since we can only obtain it through the Spirit and not the flesh, we must walk after the Spirit and not the flesh. The discussions we have seen of Romans 8:1-4 generally assume that they are about being and not becoming. They are about what has been accomplished in Christ, not what is to be accomplished in Christ. But they are about both being and becoming. They conclude with the conditional statement that we must walk in the Spirit, not in the flesh. Paul is not just describing a change in our being; he is trying to get us to change our behavior. He wants us to stop walking after the flesh and its love of boasting and condemnation.

For this reason, understanding what Paul has in mind with the terms “flesh” and “spirit” is a key—if not the key—to deciphering Romans, as Augustine realized, which is why he wrote a book about

it. Walking in the Spirit has been discussed, but what did he mean by walking in the flesh? Probably the first thing we think of is the sins of the flesh, concupiscence, but “the flesh” means much more to Paul than that, as has been discussed. It means “hatred, discord, jealousy, anger, conflict, division, false teachings, and envy” (Gal 5:20). Yes, the flesh is concupiscent and full of the lust for money, which puts it at enmity with God. But the flesh also puts us at enmity with each other through the bondage of the grave. In some places in Paul’s letters, “the flesh” can refer to the law, or rather to the attempt to justify ourselves through the law. To place ourselves under the law by boasting in circumcision is to walk after the flesh. In Galatians, Paul likens circumcision to “making a fair show in the flesh” (Gal. 6:12). Whatever else it might be, circumcision is a mark in the flesh. Paul has argued, contrary to the Judaizers, that this mark does not save anyone. Indeed, boasting in circumcision condemns us because it puts us under obligation to the entire law. Hence Chrysostom says the Jews were worse off than the Gentiles for having the law marked indelibly in the flesh. Finally, Paul associates “the flesh” with boasting. In Colossians, he talks about a man “vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind” (Col. 2:18). The flesh wants to prove it is not what it appears to be—that is, mortal. This is why it boasts.

This understanding of “the flesh” affects how we see Romans 8:1-4. We must walk according to the Spirit of unity and peace and not the flesh of boasting and condemnation and brawling. If we want to have the joy expressed in “thanks be to God,” the joy of release from the bondage of flesh and not being judged for our sinfulness, we must also release others. We must stop judging them and holding them up to the withering letter of the law.

READING WITH THE VISIONARY CHURCH IN MIND

Depending on what we make of the term “the flesh,” Romans 8:2-8 can be read in two very different ways. These verses can be construed as a warning against letting ourselves be dominated by fleshly sin instead of setting our hearts and minds on Jesus and the Spirit. This is the standard reading, and it is sensible and profitable. But since “the flesh” also indicates boasting in the law, walking after the flesh can be interpreted to mean judging the Gentiles over circumcision. Paul makes this connection clearer in Galatians: “But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so, it is now” (Gal. 4:29). The Judaizers are “born after the flesh” because they insist on using circumcision to judge the Gentiles. According to Origen, walking after the flesh means walking in the letter of the law and not the spirit of the law. If the law of the Spirit of life has set us free from condemnation for our sins, then we must obey this new law. We cannot walk in the spirit and also turn around and condemn others for not being circumcised.

By the lens of the visionary church, the meaning of these verses is that there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus even when we go on sinning—as long as we do not condemn others; as long as we walk in the Spirit, humbling ourselves and being kind and merciful to our fellow Christians, and living lives of love. These verses may be about a change in being, as is usually said, but they are also about becoming. This is what walking means. We start in one place and wind up in another. The Judaizers are walking after the flesh when they judge the Gentiles according to the flesh, and they will be judged by the same measure they use to judge, like the debtor who was thrown into jail for being unmerciful after having been shown

mercy. They may believe they are being spiritual by insisting on circumcision, but they are making comparisons based on the flesh. They are making themselves enemies of God (8:7), since it is God's intention to include the Gentiles in the body of Christ; they are at enmity with his plan of salvation.

According to Paul, faith in Christ is not *all* that is needed. We must also walk after the Spirit and not the flesh. We know what he has in mind because he tells us in Galatians: "For, brothers, you have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another. But if you bite and devour one another, take heed that you be not consumed one of another. This I say then, walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh" (Gal. 5:15-16). When Paul talks about walking after the flesh, he is thinking of biting and devouring each other with our judgments. And when he talks about walking in the Spirit, he means loving others as Christ has loved us.

"For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace" (8:5). Again, this can be read in two very different ways. It is true that to fix our minds on orgies and drunkenness is death, and to come out of such a lifestyle is life and peace. However, according to Origen, this statement refers to the legalism of the Jews, who "set their minds on the fleshly aspect of the law in that they understand the law according to the flesh."² By this interpretation, to be carnally minded refers to the pride of the Judaizers in thinking that circumcision made them righteous. The physical act of circumcision is done in the flesh, but "they that are [righteous] in the flesh cannot please God" (8:8). To cling to the pride of the flesh is to cling to the misery that comes from being under the law—but to walk according to the Spirit and stop

2 Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 50.

judging others leads to life and peace.

If the purpose of such soaring statements was simply to discourage fleshly sins, concupiscence, then they would amount to overwrought moralizing. There is no reason to use lofty language to declare that “they that are in the flesh cannot please God” if Paul is talking about nothing more than drunkards and orgiasts. The language would be out of step with the commonplace sentiment. But these words reflect something visionary if Paul is talking about our love of judging according to the flesh. In that case, they reflect the exalted spirit of Christ and his resistance to the legalism of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, for which he was crucified, a resistance we would do well to sign up for today.

“So, then they that are in the flesh cannot please God” (8:8). This statement is undoubtedly true of fleshly sins, but it is also true in a more profound sense if we keep Paul’s longing for unity in mind. The Judaizers believed they were pleasing God by insisting on circumcision, since God commanded it. But Paul has some difficult news for them. If they continue to depend upon what they can accomplish in the flesh, on their own righteousness, then they *cannot* please God. They are back to where Paul was at the end of the last chapter, himself a circumcised Jew. They are under condemnation under the law, for such is everyone who chooses to walk according to the flesh and not the Spirit. This is the hidden meaning of these verses, which we will discuss in more detail after a brief interlude.

FULL STRENGTH MEDICINE: YET ANOTHER DIGRESSION

At this point, we will take a little break from our narrative to deal with something that weighs heavily on our minds. As you may

have gathered by now, we long for nothing more than unity in the church. There is nothing that pains us more than to see the fragmentation of Christ's body, usually over doctrine and often over doctrines derived from this letter—in fact, from this very chapter; which is why we feel a need to say something about it here. This fragmentation is largely over the doctrine of justification and the controversy about faith and works. Since the divide we have in mind is between Catholics and Protestants, we are going to start by giving our impressions of the justification statement from the Council of Trent, which was a response to Luther and his doctrine of justification.

The point we hope to make is that denominational dividedness over this question is fueled at least in part by a divide in intellect itself between action and negation. This was seen in the philosophers. In fact, it was already evident in Plato and Aristotle. Plato was in love with the negating power of intellect, its capacity for judgment, its qualitative resistance to sense. He thought that intellect was “the good.” Therefore, he claimed the only way to obtain knowledge of “the good” was to totalize this force of resistance and negate the value of everything that exists, since existence is mutable and, therefore, not good. However, as his student Aristotle pointed out, negating everything that exists results in nothingness. You don't have any positive values. Aristotle claimed to be able to overcome this nothingness by describing the good as some sort of ratio of intellect and matter—as pure virtuous action, not pure negation.

Why do we bring up such an arcane topic? Because it is relevant to the doctrines that divide us. Intellect always divides us when it is used to describe “the good.” Its capacity for qualitative resistance appears to cast light on what is “good,” but this resistance is a negating power. When totalized as “the good”—an absolute

value—it leads to pure negation, as seen in Plato. The only way to overcome this negation while still clinging to intellect as “the good” is to attempt to overthrow it with a construct of pure action, as seen in Aristotle. In short, philosophy’s descriptions of “the good” are divided between pure negation and pure action. This same fault line is also seen among theologians who used Greek philosophy and its rules of logic. Augustine loved Plato and shared his unhappiness with existence, which caused him to emphasize negation and faith over action. Thomas had a sunnier disposition, as we gather from his discussion of Romans 6. He did not share the love of negation seen in Plato but was attracted instead to Aristotle and his construct of pure action—to the concept of “virtue” as a purely active mean of excess and depravity. Thomas did not reject Augustine any more than Aristotle rejected Plato. Indeed, he cited him reverently throughout the *Summa Theologica*. But our point is that these two great theologians were divided along the fault line of negation and action in much the same way as Plato, whom Augustine greatly admired, and Aristotle, whom Thomas openly adored.

This fault line between Augustinians and Thomists in the pre-modern church is well-known. However, it did not lead to an actual divide until the Reformation. Martin Luther was an Augustinian monk who suffered from severe depression. His inability to overcome it through monastic discipline drew him to the negating power of Paul’s confession in Romans 7. In Luther’s mind, this confession meant that all human action was polluted by the “sin that dwells in me” (7:20). Paul says, “For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwells no good thing: for to will is present with me, but how to perform that which is good I find not” (7:18). This is a confessional statement. Paul wants to make it clear that he does not consider himself “good” and that he falls short of the glory

of God. But Luther takes it to mean there is nothing good in us *at all*, and therefore, that nothing we can do has any redeeming value whatsoever in the eyes of God. There is no action we can undertake to justify our existence or provide peace from the devils that assail us daily. All our works are polluted by sin. This is why monastic discipline cannot make us happy or release us from our terrible burdens (as his own experience told him).

In short, Luther embraced a doctrine of pure negation. And he embraced it specifically as a force of resistance to the Schoolmen and their Aristotelian notions of the salvific power of “virtue,” or pure action. For him, Paul’s words that “I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing” are to be taken literally and not simply applied to “walking in the flesh”—to the Judaizers and circumcision. No, in his mind, they mean we are no good. Therefore, our works cannot be good, cannot do us any good, and cannot have any redeeming value in the eyes of God. All we can depend on for relief from the torment seen at the end of Romans 7—the torment in Luther’s own soul—is “faith alone.” It is only through faith, and not any human action, that we can obtain peace with God. This doctrine of pure negation swept through Northern Europe like wildfire, partly due to Luther’s considerable gifts as a writer and also because of weariness with Scholasticism, as will be discussed. When the contagion could no longer be contained or ignored, the Roman church convened the Council of Trent to respond to Luther and reaffirm other teachings that had come under fire from certain “protestants.”

Since Luther utterly negated the value of works and of action, it is not surprising that the Council of Trent’s response to his doctrine represented an attempt to restore this value by overthrowing his negation. For example, it declared that our response to God’s

calling is not merely passive, as Luther taught, but we have free will to cooperate or not cooperate in the call, with the caveat that this cooperation is in itself a product of grace and not innate human ability. It declared that our good works are not utterly tainted by sin or worthless for their own sake, as Luther and Calvin claimed, even if we continue to commit “venial” sins daily; that they have value because God fully expects us to do good works, to embrace hope and love, “faith cooperating with good works,” since “the only thing that matters is faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6), and since “faith without works is dead” (James 2:26). Trent concluded that we cannot embrace Luther’s negating doctrine of “faith alone”—on the face of it, salvation without works—and still expect to find favor or justification in the eyes of God, who desires obedience.

In short, Trent set out to overthrow Luther’s doctrine of pure negation by imposing a doctrine of pure action, much like Aristotle set out to overthrow Plato. The good doctors denounced any Protestant doctrine that claims that a believer who has been justified by faith and does good works “does not truly merit increase of grace, eternal life, and the attainment of that eternal life” on account of those works. The statement represents an attempt to restore the meritorious value of work, which Luther absolutely denies. And we find ourselves sympathetic to the statement’s intent, at least. It seems clear to us, based on the teachings of Christ and Paul himself, that works of justice, charity, and mercy have merit, that we are expected to do them, and that we are also rewarded for doing them (as will be discussed more fully in a moment).

But to say that good works have merit in the eyes of God and to attribute to good works actual merits that can be banked for salvation are two very different things. Even with the caveat given—that our meritorious works come only from abiding in Christ and

cannot obtain merit apart from him—to say that we are in any sense capable of storing up salvific merits for ourselves in heaven requires the doctors of Trent to set aside the negation of the redeeming value of work seen in Paul’s confession. Paul’s point is not that we can do nothing of merit in the eyes of God. What he is showing is that we cannot *justify* ourselves through our meritorious works because no one is capable of fulfilling the law. Paul does not say that our sin renders our works valueless, as the Reformers claimed, but it does prevent us from obtaining righteousness by our own merit, for instance through circumcision. We are saved by the righteousness of God and not our own, saved like Abraham by believing in the promises of God. This is the key argument of Romans, which Paul made for the purpose of including uncircumcised Gentiles in the church. There should be no divisive boasting about our works, as seen among the Judaizers. It is quite simply true, as demonstrated by Paul in his confession, that when we do any good work, sin is also present in us, not polluting the work itself if it is truly good—that is if it builds up the life of others—but polluting our own goodness because we are sinners. Our good works are valuable, but they cannot make anyone good. The Trent theologians claimed to be seeking unity and tranquility in the church, a noble objective, and also Paul’s desire. But by seeming to set aside Paul’s negation of the redeeming value of works under the law—by attempting to overthrow Luther’s Platonic doctrine of pure negation with an Aristotelian doctrine of pure virtuous action—they, in fact, produced a dividedness that now seems thoroughly entrenched.

Again, according to Canon 18, “If anyone says that the commandments of God are, even for one that is justified and constituted in grace, impossible to keep; let him be anathema.” Now, in one sense, this is undoubtedly true. It is possible to keep

the commandments as a whole. Moses said they weren't difficult to keep, and Paul did not deny this. According to Romans 6, the new covenant of grace enables us to obey the commandments more perfectly than when we were under the law, as both Augustine and Thomas aver. But the statement can be said to imply something more—not just that it is not impossible to keep the commandments for those in a state of grace, but that it is *possible* to keep them. We say “imply” because it condemns the negative without asserting the positive, since this would contradict Romans 7 and many other New Testament passages. It is possible even for unbelievers like Aristotle or Seneca to keep some of the commandments some of the time, and, according to Romans 6, it is possible for Christian believers to keep more of the commandments more of the time through grace; but virtually no one can keep all the commandments all of the time, which is the point of Paul's confession. Canon 18 was a *reaction* to the despised Luther. Its purpose was to counteract the Protestant idea that it is impossible to keep the commandments because of our depravity—the doctrine of pure negation that has been said to hollow out religion. However, by implying that we *can* keep the commandments, Canon 18 sets aside the negative import of Paul's confession, just as the Schoolmen did when they claimed that the person in the confession was unregenerate. And the problem with setting aside the confession is that we undo the good work Paul was trying to do. We encourage the holiness boasting that he was trying to condemn, thus undermining unity in the church.

Both Augustinians and Thomists were involved in the deliberations on justification—proponents of pure negation and pure action. Indeed, one of Luther's fellow Augustinians wrote the conclusions. However, it is impossible to overcome the force of negation represented by the Augustinians through intellect and its

methods of reasoning about what is good without overthrowing it with a concept of pure action. Trent did not resolve the conflict and bring tranquility to the church, as it purported to do; instead, it cemented the divide between the Reformers and the Schoolmen. According to the Trent theologians, our good works have sufficient merit to give us assurance of salvation. This doctrine of “pure action” reflects Aristotle’s doctrine of the salvific power of virtue, which they tried to impose on Luther’s doctrine of pure negation. But Paul tells us he cannot do the good he wills himself to do but instead does the evil he wills himself not to do. The purpose of this confession was to promote unity between Jews and Greeks by stopping the mouths of the Judaizers and showing them that they were not as righteous as they thought they were. Paul’s confession sets everyone on an equal level. But if we set aside this negation and impose a doctrine of pure action, we undermine the very unity that Paul was trying to foster. We are no longer on a level. Some of us are more virtuous than others.

Unity depends on the idea that we are all sinners who need grace—circumcised and uncircumcised alike. Paul’s blanket negation of man’s righteousness in his confession produces an equality among all people from which unity can commence. We are all under condemnation under the law. But according to Trent, not only are we capable of meriting salvation through works of the law, but we are also capable of doing more than our share of redeeming work so others can benefit. Yes, we are aware of this remarkable statement: “God forbid that a Christian should either trust and glory in himself and not the Lord, whose bounty towards all men is so great, that he will have the things which are his own gifts be their merits.” But if we are indeed capable of becoming so holy through pure virtuous action that our holiness can not only merit salvation

for ourselves but save others, then human nature dictates that we will be tempted to glory in our righteousness, just as the Judaizers gloried in circumcision at the expense of the Gentiles. It is not the Pharisee who feels justified by his good works who enjoys favor from God; it is the poor fellow who acknowledges himself to be a miserable sinner, since “everyone that exalts himself shall be abased; and he that humbles himself shall be exalted” (Luke 14:11). This type of thinking is found throughout the Bible and is foundational to the unity that Christ so ardently desired.

The doctors of Trent take the following words quite literally: “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust do corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust do corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt. 6:19-21). They interpret this to mean that we are literally storing up salvific merits for ourselves through our good works in a heavenly treasury. But in context it is a teaching against holiness boasting, coming at the end of several such teachings about not being like the Pharisees, not being proud of our works. Instead of parading our works in public to be praised by men—which is laying up our treasures on earth—we should do them in secret—which is laying them up in heaven, for then our heavenly Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward us. This teaching is about *humility*. It is about *not* being like the Pharisees, who pile up their treasures on earth. “Truly I say to you, They have their reward” (Matt. 6:2). Paul does say this in 1 Timothy: “That they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate; laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life” (1 Tim. 6:18-19). But he also

says this in Ephesians: “For by grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). Like Christ, Paul values good works, but he does not permit any boasting about our works, our merits. Indeed, all of Romans is about his contention that no one can save himself through his works.

Our point is not that there is no merit in human works. On the contrary, we endorse the idea that works of justice, charity, and mercy have merit when they manifest a sacrificial love in which there is no more self-interest than we saw in Christ when he went to the cross. Through such works, we obtain praise from God, which is the clear meaning of Christ’s teachings. But to suggest that our works merit literal merits that we can bank on for salvation is to set aside the negation seen in Paul’s confession and open the door to holiness boasting. If sin is always present within me, causing me to do things I should not do and not do things I should, then it is impossible for me to store up enough merits to save myself. This is the very point Paul is trying to make with his confession. Circumcision will not save the Judaizers, as they claimed. Salvation depends upon the righteousness of God and not the righteousness of men. Paul makes this point repeatedly to encourage humility among the believers, just as Christ was encouraging humility in his teaching about storing up treasures in heaven.

To sum up, the Council of Trent used a doctrine of pure action to overthrow Luther’s doctrine of pure negation, and this had the unintended consequence of overthrowing the negation of holiness boasting that Paul was trying to effect through his confession. This negation is essential to his plea for unity. As mentioned, the Schoolmen had tried to set aside this negation by claiming that Paul’s confession was about the unregenerate man. They were enamored

of Aristotle's concept of the salvific value of virtuous action, which is impossible if the man in the confession is a regenerated Christian. But our point is that this negation *cannot* be safely set aside, not if we desire unity. Only when every last vestige of pride and holiness boasting has been annihilated does it become possible for there to be true equality between Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free; also Catholic and Protestant, white and black, solvent and insolvent, liberal and conservative. And this equality is essential to unity.

We stand on the same level ground by the light of Paul's confession: we are all equally condemned under the law. This is the central teaching of Romans, and the purpose of the teaching is to prevent us from judging others, as announced at the beginning of chapter two. But Trent's conclusions on justification can be read to imply that we are *not* on level ground; that some of us have earned more merits and continuing justification through our good works than others. This impedes unity by opening the door to the holiness boasting that Paul was trying to suppress. It has certainly become an impediment in the sense that Christianity now seems inalterably divided between Augustine, with his love of the Platonic ideal of the holiness of pure negation, and Thomas, with his love of Aristotle and the notion of the holiness of pure action. As we have shown, this divide between pure action and pure negation is inherent in intellect. However, the dividedness of intellect does not necessarily have to divide the church, and we will have more to say about that in a moment.

To get a clearer idea of what we are talking about, read the "Treatise on Habits" (Part II, Section 59) in the *Summa Theologica*. First, you will notice that it reflects the idea that intellect has the power to determine what is good through "right reason" and

equip the will to pursue it. This Greek idea glorifies intellect and its qualitative power, thereby leading to the divide we described earlier. Nothing in the Bible indicates that intellect has the power to determine what is good; this knowledge has been revealed by God in the law. Second, it reflects the belief of the philosophers that they were capable of making themselves good through right reason. Paul rebuts this in Romans 7. Intellect tells him that the law is perfect and good and that he will have life if he obeys it, but when he tries to follow it he finds that there is “another law” in him that causes him to sin despite what he knows to be good. In short, Paul’s confession refutes the Greek idea that intellect has the power to equip the will to do what is good. Third, note the characterization of prudence (morality) as a mean. This idea of the golden mean comes directly from Aristotle through his resistance to Plato. By taking up Aristotelian ideas, the Schoolmen produced a divide between themselves and the Augustinians. And it is precisely this mixing of Greek ideas with the gospel that Luther railed against in his attacks on them.

BUT ROMANS IS ALSO ABOUT WORK— DIGRESSION #2

However, having said all this, and probably too much, there is no question in our mind that Romans is not just a negation but primarily a call to action. It is not just about faith, nor is Paul attempting to glorify faith at the expense of works. Quite the contrary. Paul is trying to get us to do the good work of becoming living sacrifices for the sake of unity in the church.

We have been complaining, as it will seem to some, about the Council of Trent and its tendency to galvanize the divide between Catholics and Protestants by imposing its doctrine of

pure virtuous action on Luther's doctrine of pure negation. But it was Luther who started the bonfire. As we have said, monastic work did not work out for him. He struggled because he did not understand the "righteousness of God." In his own words, "I hated the word 'righteousness of God,' because, in accordance with the usage and custom of the doctors, I had been taught to understand it philosophically as meaning, as they put it, the formal or active righteousness according to which God is righteous and punishes sinners and the unjust. As a monk, I led an irreproachable life. Nevertheless I felt that I was a sinner before God. My conscience was restless, and I could not depend on God being propitiated by my satisfactions. Not only did I not love, but I actually hated the righteous God who punishes sinners."

The dam broke only after intense study of Romans, guided by consulting Augustine. "Then finally God had mercy on me, and I began to understand that the righteousness of God is a gift of God by which a righteous man lives, namely faith, and that sentence: The righteousness of God is revealed in the Gospel, is passive, indicating that the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: 'The righteous shall live by faith.' Now, I felt like I had been reborn and had entered Paradise. In the same moment, the face of the whole of Scripture became apparent to me."³ Luther may have gleaned this revelation from Augustine, who says much the same thing. And his last statement is no exaggeration. His lectures on Romans and commentary on Galatians show that he had indeed reinterpreted all of Scripture in the light of justification by faith alone.

Be that as it may, the point we want to make is that Luther's description of Romans is a *reaction* to what he viewed as the works-righteousness of the Schoolmen. They came to the conclusion,

3 Luther, *Luther's Works Career of the Reformer IV*, 336-7.

following Aristotle, that God is Pure Act, and, since God is said in the Bible to be love, that God must be a purely active love, and therefore to be righteous is to do works of love, following John: “God is love; and he that dwells in love dwells in God, and God in him” (1 John 4:16). As we have said, this mixing of Aristotle with Scripture results in a divide between action and negation in our doctrines, the divide seen between Aristotle himself and his teacher. To equate righteousness with purely active love, the Schoolmen had to discount the negation of human righteousness seen in Paul’s confession. Some of them claimed that the person in the confession is not a regenerate Christian; therefore, it does not apply to those who are baptized. Having been cleansed by the Spirit, regenerate Christians no longer live in the bondage depicted by Paul and are free to do the good they have willed to do and not do the evil they have willed not to do. They are able to merit righteousness based on their deeds, just as the Judaizers claimed to merit righteousness based on circumcision. This type of thinking results in a culture of action and works-righteousness—the culture of the monastery that Luther knew so well.

So far, we find ourselves in sympathy with Luther and his reaction to the excesses of the Medieval Schoolmen. He strains with all of his might to show that Romans is essentially a negation of works-righteousness. He views it as an attempt to demolish any pride we might have in our righteousness “under the law” and repeatedly insists that the letter aims to promote a penetrating consciousness of our depravity and, therefore, a profound humility in preparation for grace. We agree that this is the net effect of the letter, but our point is that his doctrine of “faith alone” is a reaction to the Schoolmen and their emphasis on works—a deliberate negation of their construct of pure action, as can be seen from his

own words: “But the Scholastics follow the method of Aristotle in his *Ethics*, and he bases sinfulness and righteousness and likewise the extent of their actualization on what a person does.”⁴ This was the view Luther negated through his doctrine of faith alone.

Virtue is defined as pure ethical action by Aristotle. This puts him at odds with the Platonists and the idea that virtue consists of pure contemplation of the Good. This same dividedness is displayed in the Schoolmen, who openly modeled their doctrine on Aristotle and talked about the merit of action and works, as seen in Thomas’s extensive discussion of virtue in the *Summa Theologica*. Luther’s response to this mixing of the gospel with Aristotle was incendiary: “O you fools, you pig-theologians! So, then, grace was not necessary except in connection with a new exaction over and above the law! For if we can fulfill the law by our own powers, as they say, grace is not necessary for fulfilling the law but only for fulfilling a divinely imposed exaction that goes beyond the law. Who can tolerate such sacrilegious opinions!”⁵ At that point, Luther was still feeling reasonably conciliatory toward his fellow Catholics of the Thomistic persuasion. Fifteen years later, he found himself saying things like this: “And most horrible it is, that the Pope should ever be able to bring this to pass in the Church, that Christ should be denied, trodden underfoot, spit upon, blasphemed, yea and that even by the Gospel and sacraments; which he hath so darkened, and turned into such a horrible abuse, that he hath made them to serve him against Christ, for the establishing and confirming of his detestable abominations.”⁶ A chasm opened over the doctrines of pure action and pure negation through such incendiary language, and the breach has never been healed.

4 Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 128.

5 Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 192.

6 Luther, *A Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians*, 153.

The proximate cause of this breach was Luther's doctrine of justification by faith, to which he added the consequential word "alone." From his Galatians commentary: "Wherefore we must avoid this gloss as a most deadly and devilish poison, and conclude with Paul, that we are justified, not by faith furnished with charity [Christian love], but by faith only and alone."⁷ The problem with this "only and alone" is it seems to minimize the value of Christian love. It devalues works of justice, charity, and mercy in favor of faith, which can be as undemanding as assent to a certain doctrine. To return to his lectures on Romans: "For this reason, we sin even if we do good unless God covers this imperfection through Christ and does not impute it to us because of our faith and the humble prayer that this imperfection be endured in Christ."⁸ Our sinfulness is so great that it pollutes all of our works, even those commanded by Christ, turning them into sin and putrefaction. Calvin made the same claim in his *Institutes*. In the view of both men, the only thing we have to cling to in our search for peace and salvation is "faith alone."

The great Reformers put on this negative lens in order to discredit the Schoolmen and their enthusiasm for the idea of the redeeming merit of works. However, such a dark negation clashes with the glowing way works are described in the Bible. "Blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it" (Luke 11:28). "He that says, I know him and keeps not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps his word, in him truly is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him" (1 John 2:4-5). "What does it profit, my brothers, though a man says he has faith and have not works? Can faith save him?"

⁷ Ibid, 153.

⁸ Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 206.

(Jas. 2:14). “Therefore, my beloved brothers, be you steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as you know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58). (Many, many more passages could be cited.)

Here’s what Christ himself had to say on the subject of works: “He that has my commandments, and keeps them, he it is that loves me: and he that loves me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him...If a man loves me, he will keep my words: my Father will love him, and we will come unto him and make our abode with him. He that loves me not keeps not my sayings: and the word which you hear is not mine, but the Father’s which sent me” (John 14:21-24). Such glowing verses do not comport with the contention that making ourselves right with God is simply a matter of having faith “only and alone,” or that works are of little or no merit in the eyes of God. By Christ’s own words, it is not through faith only and alone that we show our love for him; it is by keeping his commandments. It is by doing works of love and obeying the moral law. And there is an astonishing promise for those who do. The triune God will come to them and make his home in them.

Scholasticism can justifiably be said to lead to an imbalance of works over faith, as is claimed in the Augsburg Confession. However, the negation of Scholasticism seen in Luther and Calvin can also be said to lead to an imbalance of faith over works, of contemplation and doctrine over the fruitful action that Jesus calls for and that Paul calls for in Romans 10 and 12-15. Granted, the first and most important work is to believe in him who was sent, but this does not mean that works of justice, charity, and mercy are of little value to Paul, as if he wrote Romans to glorify faith for its own sake and not to promote the “obedience of faith,” the first and

last thing he mentions in the letter. According to Luther, “Now the truth of the Gospel is that our righteousness comes by faith alone, without the works of the law.”⁹ But Paul says, “And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13). Luther: “To this, we answer with Paul, that by faith only in Christ we are pronounced righteous.”¹⁰ Perhaps so, in the sense of righteousness as a totalized value—forensic justification—but Christ gave us the parables of the sheep and the goats and the Good Samaritan, and they are about the righteousness of works of charity and mercy. Luther: “In him we are by faith, and he in us.”¹¹ But John says: “And this is his commandment, that we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment. And he that keeps his commandments dwells in him, and he in him” (1 John 3:24). And then there is this bone of contention: “You see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only” (Jas. 2:24). The meaning could not be plainer. Abraham was justified by his works in the sense that they showed his righteousness. It was not merely a matter of faith. True, we can say that this too was the product of the grace of God and movement of the Spirit in his heart; but to claim that his works had no value and did not declare him to be righteous in the eyes of God is to go against the clear meaning of Scripture.

“Faith” obtained towering status in Luther and Calvin as an all-purpose negation of the works-righteousness they perceived in the Schoolmen, a force of pure resistance to their doctrine of a purely active love. But was Paul really negating the value of works of love against the accumulated weight of Scripture and the words of Christ himself—and indeed, his own words? Not through

9 Luther, *A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*, 107.

10 Ibid., 154.

11 Ibid., 154.

the lens of the visionary church. From that point of view, all he was trying to negate was any boasting we might do about works; specifically the holiness boasting of the Judaizers, who thought circumcision made them righteous and were trying to exclude Gentiles on account of it. We can all agree that faith is infinitely more valuable than the outward work of circumcision, but to say faith in itself is more valuable than the acts of love that show our faith is to contradict both Christ and Paul. “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). We glorify God through works of justice, charity, and mercy. Christ and Paul say: let them shine. Much is made in Protestant circles over Isaiah’s contention “that all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags” (Isa. 64:6), but the “righteousnesses” he had in mind were works of the ceremonial law, as is made clear in Isaiah 58. Yes, our “righteousnesses” are like filthy rags when “we fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness” (Isa. 58:4); that is, when ceremonial fasting ends with boasting about our righteousness, which leads to quarreling. But the rest of that blessed chapter makes it abundantly clear that works of justice, charity, and mercy are not filthy rags at all; in fact, they shine like the dawn in the morning.

Meanwhile, Aristotle’s rueful observation about the negative results of Plato’s doctrine can also be said to hold true for Luther. “Faith alone and only” tends to result in a certain nothingness in our discussions of religion. After the negation of works—of existence as we actually know it—there is nothing left over but “faith” as a negation of the presumed depravity of works. However, as James pointed out, Abraham did not just have merit through faith. He also had merit through his work. He was rewarded for those works, as God avers in Genesis 18:19 and 22:15-18. Noah, Joseph, Moses,

Joshua, Ruth, Ester, David, Elijah, Daniel—they all had great faith, but they also had works, and their merit is measured not by faith alone but also through their works. Elsewhere, Paul talks at length about his works among the Gentiles and what he suffered for the Gospel. This suggests that he thought there was merit in them. In contrast, Luther's lectures on Romans seem curiously unimaginative regarding the merit of work. They are a negative reaction to such Scholastic notions such as "congruent grace" and the idea of a "treasury of merits." But the merit obtained through works of love has nothing to do with the Scholastic concept of "merits." It refers to the merit of works of justice, charity, and mercy and not to the various busybody forms of penance that were familiar to Luther. Also, it cannot be banked on for salvation, as if we could barter with God. Works of love are meritorious for one reason only: they build up life, which is something "faith only and alone" can never do. Nowhere does Paul devalue the law in the sense of works of love. Indeed, he has just told us that he loves the law in his innermost being, which is summed up in the command to love your neighbor as yourself, as he says later on. He recognizes the life-giving value of the law. This is why he calls it "spiritual." True, he confesses his inability to fulfill the law in order to discredit the works-righteousness of the Judaizers, but he never devalues works of love.

Paul's goal in Romans was to shut the mouths of the Judaizers and have the Gentiles welcomed into the church. To this end, he uses our inability to justify ourselves under the moral law to negate the boasting confidence that the Judaizers had in the ceremonial law. As he often points out, if you fail in one point of the law, you are condemned by all of the law; therefore, you have nothing to boast about and no reason to compare yourself with others, unless

it is to esteem them more highly than yourself. To this end, Paul shows in Romans 7 that he cannot obey the tenth commandment, not perfectly. In fact, no one can. But that does not mean it is impossible to obey other commandments—impossible to have no other gods above the one true God, or to honor the Sabbath or our parents, or not to steal or bear false witness. Moses was right. These things are not *impossible*. And Paul does not say they are. All he says is that no one can obey the law perfectly, and therefore no one has a right to boast in the law.

What Paul is proposing is not a total negation of works as if human beings were filthy dung and could do nothing good. Paul is heartily in favor of good works, as we shall see. But he does negate any holiness boasting that brings disharmony to the church. He does negate judging one another, as the Judaizers were judging the uncircumcised Gentiles. “Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whosoever you are that judge: for wherein you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you that judge do the same things” (2:1). But is this relevant to unity today? It seems to be. There are those on both sides of the Catholic/Protestant divide who like to boast about their doctrines, which are works of the mind. There are Catholics who insist we must believe in the assumption of Mary and her perpetual virginity, just as there are Protestants who insist we have to believe in total depravity and “faith only and alone.” The type of boasting we have in mind can be seen in Luther’s lectures on Romans. It divides the church.

Christ showed in what sense the law is spiritual in the parable already alluded to: “Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was hungry, and you gave me meat: I was thirsty, and you gave me drink:

I was a stranger, and you took me in. I was sick, and you visited me. I was in prison, and you came unto me” (Matt. 25:34-36). From this, we see that the law is spiritual because it builds up life. That is why the psalmist and Paul loved it so much. Second, the parable shows there is merit in work. The sheep are the ones who do the will of the Father, who bring life to others, and for this meritorious work, they are placed on his right hand. Meanwhile, those who do not do the Father’s work are not rewarded. Therefore, it seems the Father’s approval cannot be reduced to “faith only and alone,” as if human works of love had no merit in the eyes of God. Finally, unlike monastic discipline, the work of love is not burdensome. It does not weary the spirit as Luther’s spirit had been wearied by trying to appease God through confession, asceticism, self-flagellation, and a rigorous program of prayer, fasting, and worship at all hours of the day and night. Indeed, when it comes to charity, “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35), since, in the act of giving, the giver is anointed with grace and spiritual freedom. This is one reason why Christ can say, “For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:30).

Charity and justice are also matters of *will*. No, it is not enough just to believe. As much as we admire the Augsburg Confession, we are skeptical of the claim that, after justification through faith, “good works are bound to follow, which are the fruits of repentance,”¹² an optimistic forecast that has been repeated in the Protestant camp ever since. They are *not* “bound to follow.” We must make up our minds to make them follow. The good doctors took this position because Luther had negated free will. He was so enthusiastic about using “faith” to negate “good works” that he also negated the freedom of the will to do good works. But it is

12 *Augsburg Confession*, Article 12.

not true that works of justice, charity, and mercy are “bound to follow” from faith. They must be consciously chosen and enacted through the will. For Paul, the point of having faith is to walk in the Spirit. Walking requires action. The walking he has in mind is doing the good work the Spirit would have us do: work that builds up others, as we will see in a couple of chapters. Most of all he wants the Judaizers to lay down their love of circumcision as an act of the will and allow Gentile believers into the church. This is not “faith only and alone.” This is a good work that leads to unity.

According to Christ, faith is not a passive state of being. “If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matt. 16:24). To follow someone is to be active. The painful degree of self-denial seen on the cross does not happen automatically when we have faith. It is a difficult state of becoming that must be actively chosen and undertaken, as he did himself. Christ had his thorny journey, and those who choose to go his way will have thorns of their own. “For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has sufficient [resources] to finish it?” (Luke 14:27-28). We do not have to count the costs if faith is merely passive. But we do need to count them if it is active, weighing our natural selfishness against the type of becoming seen on the cross. Paul wants the Judaizers to sacrifice the righteousness they thought they had through the ceremonial law—the old husband—for the righteousness that can only be obtained through Christ. He is asking them to make a rational choice based on counting the costs and to act on that choice. And it should be noted that it cost them plenty to give up circumcision, which was the basis of their national identity. This did not happen passively when they put their faith in Christ, or Paul would not have felt a need to write to them. Indeed, it is possible

to have robust doctrines about “faith” based on Romans and not show *any* inclination to lay down our lives for our friends, not seek reconciliation and peace with fellow Christians, not pay the debt of love, not be completely humble and gentle. But it is not faith for its own sake that Paul wants. It is faith for the purpose of walking in the Spirit of reconciliation and love.

Paul tells us to engage the will, not negate it. “Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do you. And above all these things put on Christian love, which is the bond of perfectness. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also you are called in one body; and be you thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (Col. 3:12-16). These things do not flow automatically from faith as if from a vending machine. They are not passive. We must actively undertake them if we want unity in the church. And they show us that faith cannot be separated from works in Paul’s mind. Faith is actively shown through works of love. “Though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity [Christian love], I am nothing” (1 Cor. 13:2).

The point we’re trying to make is that Luther and the Trent theologians were divided over negation and action, contemplation and works, passive faith and active faith, and this is the divide we see to this very day and hear repeated from our pulpits as if Romans were actually written to divide the church and not unite it. We have suggested that this divide reflects the dividedness of intellect

and its methods of describing the good. Luther and Calvin loved Augustine, who loved Plato and his description of the good as pure negation; meanwhile, Thomas loved Aristotle and his description of the good as Pure Act. Therefore, it's not surprising that the divide between them is very much like the divide between Plato and Aristotle. But fortunately, the Bible is not divided in this way. Unlike the philosophers, the Bible does not glorify intellect as the good. Therefore, it is not divided by the idea that the purity of the good consists of "pure negation" or "pure action."

No, the guiding light in the Bible is life. "In him was life, and this life was the light of men" (John 1:4). Life is our highest value because it comes from the Spirit; the highest tangible value that we know. Love is our highest law, not because it kindles our hearts, as Luther would have it, but because it preserves life. Unlike intellect, life itself is not divided between action and negation. We are mortal, but the life in us is real life. Nor was the sacrificial love of the cross divided like intellect. Christ was crucified, but this negation led to the Resurrection, and it facilitated reconciliation between God and men—it gave us life. Similarly, Paul is trying to negate the holiness boasting of the Judaizers to facilitate life for the Gentiles and unity in the church. Yes, his doctrine is a pure negation of their boasting about circumcision, but this is not a negation for the sake of negation. It is negation for the sake of works of love.

In light of intellect and philosophy, the choice of action or negation is an either/or proposition. But the thinking of the rabbis is often more along the lines of both/and. For example, is God immanent or transcendent? Intellect is completely divided over this question—it is the underlying divide between Aristotle and Plato—but in the Bible, God is both. God is absolutely above us and even beyond our imaginings, and yet God is also the creator

who revealed himself in his works and spoke in person to Abraham and Moses and who was born a tiny baby in a stable and walked among us, full of grace and truth. Again, is holiness a negation of existence—absolutely different from what we presently know—or is it something active and real that can be described? Luther and the Schoolmen were divided over this question, as Plato and Aristotle were divided over contemplation and action; but in the Bible, holiness is both. It is a burning bush that is not consumed. It is set apart from human depravity, but it is also embodied in Christ and those who imitate him and walk in the Spirit. Again, is Christ true man or true God? He cannot be both by the law of non-contradiction—but according to Hebrews, he is both, which is vitally important to our faith.

Perhaps this is what Solomon had in mind when he said, “Take hold of this; yes, also from this withdraw not your hand” (Eccl. 7:18). We Christians are not beholden to Greek philosophy. We are not prohibited from simultaneously holding two seemingly contradictory ideas in our heads. Faith or works? Action or contemplation? Sovereignty or free will? Predestination or contingency? Immanence or transcendence? Communion as real presence or memorialization? For the sake of unity, the most productive answer to such naturally divisive questions may simply be “yes.” By all means, let’s cling to faith as our most important work and never dream to boast of our righteousness. This is what Paul is encouraging us to do in Romans. But at the same time, let’s embrace the hard work of the cross, loving one another and seeking reconciliation and unity. This is what Christ himself did, and if we call ourselves “Christians,” then maybe it is what we should consider doing as well.

THE LENS OF THE VISIONARY CHURCH

So again (to return to our theme), are we saying there is no benefit to talking about Romans outside the context of the visionary church? Not at all. The beloved eighth chapter can be read very profitably from stem to stern without even thinking about unity or the problem of holiness boasting. In fact, this is what almost all commentators do. For example, “For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh” (8:3). Now this verse is not necessarily easy to parse, especially from the original Greek. And there are many excellent and learned commentaries that do not mention the circumcision controversy at all. In fact, we are unaware of any that do mention it, other than Origen. Without even thinking of the visionary church, we could say, for example, that we could not save ourselves through the law because the flesh is inherently sinful, but that God sent his Son to atone for our sins, judging sin in the flesh through his sacrifice and thus making it possible to escape condemnation (continuation from verse 1) by believing in him. This makes the verse a doctrine of justification, and we would never gainsay it.

Similarly, no thought of the visionary church is needed to interpret the statement that Christ made himself a sin offering so that “the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us” (8:4). Many commentators also take this statement to refer to the justification we have in Christ. We cannot fulfill the law and become righteous ourselves because we are under “another law” of sin and death. Still, the law can be fulfilled in us if we believe in him who fulfilled it for our sake, not in the sense that our work is done, but that there is no longer any condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, since his righteousness has become ours as well, our

mercy seat covering. Or it may mean, as other commentators say, that his sacrifice makes it easier for us to fulfill the law by lifting the burden of the law of sin and death. In our view, both of these interpretations are sensible and profitable and can be supported by the text, even though they may seem to contradict each other.

And to ensure we are not misunderstood, we heartily agree that there are many other valid and profitable ways of reading Romans. For instance, the whole section we have been discussing can be described as a continuing elaboration on the idea from chapter six that we are dead in Christ and, therefore, cannot go on sinning. Every verse flows smoothly when read with such a frame in mind and is informative and useful. And there are other frames for reading these chapters that are too well-known to be rehearsed again here, Catholic and Protestant and otherwise. Are we dismissing these various frameworks? Not at all. However, we think there is another way to look at chapter eight that puts the letter to the Romans in a somewhat different light.

Let's start Agatha Christie-style by inquiring about motive. Why did Paul dictate something so ambitious when it is much easier to sit and do nothing? People don't generally write in a vacuum. It seems likely that there was some specific reason for him to put stylus to paper, something current and on his mind, something he felt needed to be addressed through highly involved and often passionate reasoning. That *something* seems to be the ongoing attempt of the Judaizers to exclude the uncircumcised Gentiles from fellowship, as we have shown. It is possible to see this conflict as a hidden subtext for all of chapter eight, not openly in view but strongly implied, once you have it in mind. Fitzmyer seems to feel this was an "old" controversy and no longer a concern, but it could not have been *that* old if the Jerusalem Council was in

50 AD and Paul wrote his letter to the Romans in 55. And even if it had been settled officially, it could still be very much simmering in Paul's mind. On the other hand, Philippi claims that the epistle deals in a general way with the Jewish doctrine of justification by works and not any active attempt by Jewish Christians in Rome to impose circumcision on Gentiles, and this seems possible, too.

In any case, reading the chapter in the way we are suggesting transforms it without invalidating conventional wisdom. It's as if we were reading along and finding ourselves on one of the traditional glide paths where all of the parts fit together very nicely and the things that are usually said about the chapter make perfect sense and are edifying—and then we put on the lens of the visionary church and suddenly discover the possibility of *another* glide path, quite different in meaning from the others, but not at all contradictory—in fact generally complementary—and also edifying. For instance, let's take a look at this again: “For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh” (8:2). This statement can be interpreted through Paul's desire for unity because the Judaizers were “making a fair show in the flesh” (Gal. 6:12) over circumcision. Paul wants them to know that by sending his Son in the *likeness* of sinful flesh, God *condemned* the sinfulness of the flesh itself. The law is weak in us because of our sinful flesh; weak in the sense that it cannot produce righteousness in a flawed instrument. But the law was not weak in Christ because his flesh was not sinful. Therefore, through his likeness to sinful flesh, God condemned the sinfulness of the flesh—the same mortal flesh in which the Judaizers were boasting by insisting on circumcision.

And this: “That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit” (8:3). Again,

this might very well be about justification, as most commentators say. Or, as others say, it may mean that Christ's sacrifice makes it easier for us to fulfill the law and obtain sanctification. We do not dispute either interpretation. However, it can also be said that it supports the visionary church. The righteousness of the law cannot be fulfilled in us if we walk according to the flesh—in other words, according to the old covenant of law and circumcision that Paul invoked with the wedding analogy. But it *can* be fulfilled in us if we walk according to the new covenant of faith in Christ because *he* makes us righteous. Are we still clinging to the old husband and condemning others for not being circumcised, or are we walking in the freedom of the Spirit in which there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, including the Gentiles? Paul has been discussing these things since the beginning; he still seems to be talking about them now.

So again, are we dismissing traditional interpretations of Romans 8? Not at all. However, we believe the chapter can be read on two levels. As discussed in our introduction, Paul tells us what he has in mind with the things of the flesh in Galatians: “adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like” (Gal. 5:19-21). Based on this list, the things of the flesh clearly do include fleshly sins, and any commentary claiming that this is what Paul has in mind in Romans 8 is therefore justified. However, they also include contentiousness, emulation, and envy. Therefore, Romans 8 can also be read to indicate Paul's disapproval of the Judaizers and the uproar they were causing in the church. In Galatians 5:22-23, he gives us a list of things of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.”

Here, the emphasis is clearly on comity in the church. And this same emphasis can also be found in Romans 8 if we are attuned to looking for it.

So, for example, “To be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be” (8:6-7). Now, it is undoubtedly true that fornicators and drunkards have their minds set on the flesh in a literal sense and not on God or spiritual things and are, therefore, at odds with God and his will. However, the carnal mind also refers to the fallen spirit of emulation, which leads to envy and jealousy in the church. The mind that is set on the flesh, as the Judaizers were on circumcision, cannot be subject to the law because the flesh is at enmity with the Spirit, as Paul tells us more expansively in Galatians 5:17. So while these verses can be interpreted to refer to concupiscence, and almost always are, they may also indicate Paul’s longing for unity. They can be read on two different levels, one obvious and one not so obvious, based on Paul’s own lists of the things of the flesh and the Spirit.

The judgment the Judaizers were using against the Gentiles with regard to righteousness was based on a mark in the flesh. Since we know from chapter two that Paul was opposed to this superficial judgment, we wonder if this is why he took such great pains in chapter eight to show that “the flesh” is naturally at enmity with God. What if his condemnation of “the flesh” is not just about fleshly sins but also has something to do with his desire to get the Judaizers to stop boasting in the flesh and in circumcision, as Origen suggests? If so, these passages take on a very different coloring. Paul may be saying that the Judaizers, by insisting on a judgment based on the flesh, are not only making themselves hostile to the Gentiles

but also to God, since God's will is for the Gentiles to be saved.

MAKING THE SPIRIT MORE RELATABLE

Another benefit of using this lens is that it can make such statements seem a little more relatable; that is, more concrete and real. After all, what does it really mean to be “set free from the law of sin and death by the law of the Spirit and life”? (8:2). In the abstract sense, it may mean that the Spirit, by giving us life through our faith in Christ, has liberated us from the chains of the grave and moribund law that Paul lamented at the end of the last chapter, the “other law in my members” (7:23) that causes us to sin despite our best intentions. However, this does not seem to be its literal or only meaning, since Paul also made it clear that the law of sin and death still operates in him on some level despite his faith, causing him to do things he has willed himself not to do and not do things he has willed himself to do. He has not really been completely set free from that law.

However, through the lens of the visionary church, it may be possible to see another meaning in this comment. Perhaps Paul is trying to say that the law of the Spirit of life has set us free from the bondage that accrues to us through the law of sin and death when we try to walk according to the flesh—that is, when we walk in the way of judgments made with our eyes. Specifically, he may be thinking of the bondage we assume when we insist upon circumcision, bringing the whole weight of the law down on ourselves. “Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage” (Gal. 5:1). This yoke is the ceremonial law, the old husband, which the Judaizers were trying to foist on the Galatians. The statement can be both literally true and also clearly relatable. It's not just an airy sentiment of indefinite significance, as it may sometimes appear to be in the

commentaries; it is something we can actually put into use in our everyday lives.

Here is another example of the same thing: “But you are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwells in you” (8:9). We collectively nod our heads when we hear this read in church and say, “Yes, yes; very true.” But what does it actually mean? What specific import does this momentous-sounding “if” have for our everyday lives? Is it possible to go beyond the level of abstraction seen in most commentaries to a practical understanding that Aunt Mabel can go home with and put to good use after baking some sweet rolls for dinner? We think it certainly should be. And maybe the following passage from Ephesians can help: “I therefore, a prisoner of the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:1-3). To be “in the Spirit” is to manifest behaviors like these, which are not abstract at all but very practical. And perhaps an additional hidden meaning is that the Judaizers *cannot* be “in the Spirit” and also hold onto their love of condemning and contentiousness, which they literally have “in the flesh” through circumcision.

After all, who is the Spirit, and what exactly does the Spirit do? The Bible describes the Spirit as a comforter, an advocate, and the source of creativity, wisdom, and discernment. The church also tells us that the Spirit is the “Lord and giver of life” and “spoke by the prophets.” Thomas says the Spirit is “the love of the Father and of the Son.”¹³ And speaking of love, on Pentecost, the Spirit did something utterly astonishing. God had frustrated human ambition at the Tower of Babel by diversifying the languages of the

13 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Question 37, Article 1.

builders. They could not understand each other, so they could not carry out their prideful scheme of trying to build a tower to heaven. The ensuing language barrier became a curse on existence, creating enmities and leading to endless wars. And this is the specific barrier that the Spirit overcame at the birth of the church. The disciples found themselves capable of communicating the good news to those gathered in Jerusalem in their own languages. One interpretation of being “in the Spirit,” then, based on how the Spirit actually acts, is to act in the spirit of unity to bring people together, to bridge cultural divides, to enable communication (more on that later), and bring peace.

Obviously, we are not spirits. We are flesh. So how can we be “in the Spirit”? By thinking we are spiritual, as many say they are? This could mean anything. The antinomians in Corinth thought they were spiritual, and so did those who were bragging about speaking in tongues. By virtue of contemplation? Spending quality time alone with God? We know people who readily find themselves “in the Spirit” through contemplation, which can bring us close to the Spirit, not when we try to imagine God without his attributes, God as an absolute being, but when we are contemplating the Spirit that gave life in Eden, the Spirit of love, the self-sacrificing spirit seen in Christ himself, the Spirit that drew the church together and keeps it together despite what the world can do to destroy it (Chrysostom), the Spirit hovering in infinite wisdom over the waters of the deep, the Spirit that goes where it wills, the Spirit that revives the faith when it is almost dead, the Spirit that descended on Christ like a dove—the Spirit of peace with God—indicating that the floodwaters of wrath were finally receding; yes, to contemplate all this is surely to find ourselves “in the Spirit.”

But there remains another way to be “in the Spirit” that is

available to everyone who may not have the gift of contemplation but to whom the Spirit has been granted through faith—and that is to do spiritual things. After all, the Spirit is a real person with real attributes. To be in the Spirit is to reflect those same attributes in our lives. For instance, the Spirit gave us life, and we act spiritually when we give life to others both actively through charity and justice and by negating the desire to do them harm. “If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. Let us not be desirous of vain glory, provoking one another, envying one another” (Gal. 5:25). According to this, to be in the Spirit is to remain humble and avoid holiness boasting, which leads to biting and devouring one another. Paul gave us a list of the “fruits of the Spirit” in Galatians 5:23—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Perhaps this is the kind of fruit he wants us to bear unto God in Romans 7:4. With a dry smile, he informs us there is no law against such things for the benefit of the legalists in the crowd. Such things are spiritual because they build up life. In Paul’s mind, we cannot be truly spiritual without them. All of these things also lead to “the unity of the Spirit” (Eph. 4:3). This is why it is possible to use the lens of the visionary church to look at Romans 8 in a way that is not abstract but that we can clearly understand and put to use in our lives.

Paul doubles down. “Now if anyone does not have not the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to him” (8:9). That’s a pretty emphatic statement. But what does it mean? Beyond the level of abstraction seen in many commentaries, what actually is the Spirit of Christ? What thing or things does Paul have in mind? We suppose it can mean many things based on Christ’s behavior. It can mean being kind to others, not being a snob when invited to parties, indulging the sinful woman with her jug of oil, welcoming the little children

and others like them, healing the sick and preaching the good news to the poor, turning the other cheek, and most of all laying down our lives for our friends. All these things reflect the spirit of Christ because they were things he did or taught. But he also told us to “love one another” (John 13:34), and prayed that “they all may be one; as thou, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be one in us” (John 17:21). Whatever else the spirit of Christ might be, it seems it is also the spirit of love and unity.

Paul appends a promise: “And if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin; but the Spirit is life because of righteousness.” Very important. We are alive in Christ even while we are still dead in our sin because we have his righteousness imputed to us. The Judaizers were claiming to be righteous because of circumcision; but, in fact, they were dead in sin as long as they depended on the law and the flesh to justify them. Meanwhile, those who believe in Christ are also sinners; but by putting their faith in him for justification, and not in the flesh, they have the righteousness that cannot be obtained under the law. “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead does indeed dwell in you, he that raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwells in you” (8:11). This great promise applies even while we are still moribund in the flesh.

But if the Spirit dwells in them, in effect sanctifying their mortal flesh, then they must walk after the Spirit and not the flesh with its self-aggrandizing desires. They must walk in love and refrain from judging one another. They must not consider equality with God as something to be grasped but submit to the cross of love. They must consider others to be of more importance than themselves, even when those others happen to be Gentiles. And yes, they must stop sinning: “Flee fornication. Every sin a man does is without

the body, but he that commits fornication sins against his own body. What? know you not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which you have of God, and you are not your own?" (1 Cor. 6:18-19). We're not saying that Paul isn't disavowing concupiscence in Romans 8, as the commentators aver, almost universally. We are saying that he is also disavowing holiness boasting and contentiousness in the church.

DEBTORS TO THE FLESH

But are we still "debtors to the flesh" (8:12) and unspiritual? Hard to say. What does Paul mean by this? It seems logical to assume that we are a "debtor" to the flesh if we think we owe something to the flesh; perhaps when we have our minds set on glorifying the flesh, as the Judaizers were doing with their claim that circumcision was necessary to salvation, and attaching more significance to outward appearances than they actually have. The Judaizers were literally in debt to the flesh for their holiness boasting, as seen in Galatians: "For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law" (Gal. 5:3). If they are making themselves debtors to the flesh by boasting about circumcision, then they are in debt to all of the law, which is a central tenet of Paul's thinking. And that is a debt no one can pay.

But if we put to death the "deeds of the body" (8:13) by the Spirit, then we can have life. The commentators seem united in thinking this refers to fleshly sins, but "deeds" (*praxis*) of the body are not the same thing as "sins" (*hamartia*) of the body. Indeed, there is one "deed of the body" that is not in any sense a sin, having been commanded by God in Genesis 17:14. It is this particular "deed of the body" that Paul has been encouraging the Jews to put to death throughout the letter for the sake of unity in the church.

Circumcision has been put to death by the Spirit because the gifts of the Spirit have been manifested in uncircumcised Gentiles. Therefore, by consent of the apostles, circumcision is no longer necessary for salvation. It is quite literally dead in religious practice, like the husband in the wedding analogy. To put this deed to death by the Spirit removes the separation between Jew and Gentile. And that's what Paul was looking for.

"As many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God" (8:14)—i.e., both Jews and Gentiles. The Gentiles are sons of God without the deed of circumcision when they are led by the Spirit of God. "For you have not received a spirit of slavery of fear again" (8:15). This refers to the old covenant with its burden of obligation to a wrathful God—the slavery of thinking you must be circumcised to be saved, which the Judaizers were attempting to reintroduce into the church. All who believe in Christ have left this slavery behind and been adopted as sons of God, Jews first and also Gentiles—as long as they walk in the Spirit and do not attempt to walk in the flesh by judging others. They call him "Abba, Father." The relationship is no longer one of quaking fear as at Mt. Sinai but tender love.

From Galatians: "Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world: but when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father" (Gal. 4:3-6). The Son of God was sent to redeem those who were under the law—the Jews—so that they might be sons themselves and not merely servants. And the Gentiles have also now become sons through Christ. So then, why make themselves

servants again by putting themselves under the law with its days and months and times and years and rite of circumcision? “Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage. Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if you be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing” (Gal. 5:1-2). Christ frees us from bondage under the law by fulfilling the law on our behalf. If we take it up again, we lose our freedom and are no longer sons.

Ellicott calls the “spirit of bondage to fear” the “old terrorism of the law.”¹⁴ The law puts us at enmity with God. But those who are in Christ have been blissfully set free from this fear. For them, there is no condemnation. Again, we wonder if Paul is using such exalted rhetoric in an attempt to reassure the Jewish Christians that they don’t have to be afraid of mixing with the Gentiles anymore. The letter of the law that separated Jew from Gentile with the threat of shame and expulsion from the community has been replaced with the spirit of love, the first fruit of the Spirit, according to Paul in Galatians. The ceremonial law that included circumcision enforced a separation that was absolutely necessary for people who were trying to justify themselves under the law. The old covenant required them to come out of the world and be separate so that their men would not be seduced into idol worship by pagan women like Samson and Solomon. For that reason, the ceremonial law is a separating power, and shame and fear are its primary enforcers. But Paul is trying to get them to see that everything has changed. They are no longer obligated to make themselves righteous through the old covenant because Christ has already made them righteous and done what the flesh cannot do if they believe in him and the

14 Ellicott, *Bible Commentary for English Readers*, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/romans/8-15.htm>

redeeming power of his blood. Their victory over death is sure; therefore there is nothing to fear from gathering with believing Gentiles and welcoming them into the church.

“And if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin; but the Spirit is life because of righteousness” (8:10). If we are Christians, the body and its deeds are *still* dead because of sin, as Paul has shown in his confession. Even as Christians, we cannot justify ourselves under the law, as the Judaizers were trying to do by reimposing circumcision on the church. But the Spirit brings us life because of the righteousness we have in Christ. This has been the theme of the entire letter. We have no hope of salvation if we lean on our own righteousness, the righteousness we have in the flesh. The only hope we have is in the righteousness of God. Because of Christ and his righteousness, we are sinners who are sinless in the eyes of a holy God—that is, we are not under condemnation for our sins. His sacrifice is our covering, our mercy seat. We will not “surely die” (Gen. 2:17), which is the consequence of sin under the old covenant. We shall live because of Christ and the “new covenant” (Luke 22:20) we have in him. “If the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwells in you” (8:11). We can have this quickening if the Spirit of Christ dwells in us through faith even while we continue to inhabit mortal flesh—but then we must *walk* in the Spirit and not in the flesh. That’s the point. We cannot continue to cling to the flesh and the comparisons it furnishes, the body of death the Judaizers were boasting about, in which we are still under condemnation.

Paul has now explained everything he has been trying to convey to the Jewish Christians. In their bodies, they are still dead in sin because they continue sinning, as he has shown in his confession.

Therefore, they have nothing to boast about when it comes to circumcision and the ceremonial law. They have been set free from sin by Christ, but this does not mean they can use their freedom to judge others and exclude them from the fellowship. No, they must use their freedom to serve one another in love. They must put to death the deeds of the body and its boasting in the flesh and walk after the Spirit.

But what about the universal opinion that mortifying the deeds of the body means mortifying sin? We do not deny it. In fact, we believe that what we are seeing is something along the lines of a convergent dialogue. It is not an allegory in which two unlike things are combined; it is more like two parallel lines of thought carried forward together. Paul uses the same terminology in Romans 8 that he used in Galatians 4-5, where the context is clearly the freedom obtained through the Spirit from the bondage of the ceremonial law. He seems to be using the idea of “debtors to the flesh” to combine the concern seen in chapter six about antinomianism amongst the Gentiles with the concern seen in chapter seven about holiness boasting amongst the Jews. In chapter eight, he merges these two streams of thought into one seamless argument: that we, having been freed from the grave, must grasp the liberty of walking in the Spirit and not make ourselves slaves again. In the most obvious sense, this means slaves to sin. In the sense that Romans strongly resembles Galatians, it means slaves to the deed of circumcision.

And now another conditional promise: “The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together” (8:16-17). How exactly does the Spirit bear witness with our spirit?

Through what specific sign or signs will we know that the Spirit lives in us and is giving us the glory of eternal life in spite of the fact that we are still sinners? Origen and Chrysostom say it is when we cry “Abba, Father,” since what is being witnessed in this cry is a change in status by which we become children of God. Barnes says it is when we exhibit the fruits of the Spirit. But Paul indicates that it is when we suffer as Christ suffered. What exactly does it mean to suffer like him? We think it means taking up our cross in the service of love, and more on that anon.

One more thing about this statement before we move on. We are children of God if we believe in Christ and walk after the Spirit—all of us, both Jews and Gentiles. This is the idea Paul introduced back in chapter one and will elaborate on in his predestination argument. It is not just the Jews who are the children of God anymore, the chosen people of the old covenant; it is all who are in Christ and his new covenant. All who put their faith in his blood instead of deeds of the body like circumcision are joint heirs of eternal life, heirs of God, and heirs with Christ—if they are willing to suffer as Christ suffered.

THE SUFFERING SERVANT

Paul wants us to demonstrate that we truly have the Spirit of Christ by suffering with Christ; that is, suffering in the same way Christ suffered. But what does this mean? How can we translate Christ’s suffering into our quotidian lives? Ancient Christians experienced extreme suffering due to persecution from both Jews and Gentiles, which is a major topic in Acts and also the basis of Revelation and continues to find expression as late as Origen. Being stoned by the synagogue or thrown to the lions in the Colosseum or hung up as human torches to light pagan revelries or having our livelihoods

taken away from us and being ostracized from the community because of our faith are clear cases of suffering that virtually anyone can understand.

But in what sense do *we* suffer? What does it mean to suffer like Christ, as Paul says we must do if we want to be glorified with him? Well, from the commentators, we learn that the obedience of faith compels us to give up sinful pleasures. Paul repeatedly called on the Gentiles to come out of the lifestyle of drunkenness and orgies that was prevalent in the pagan world, and the resistance to such things can cause suffering to the degree that we continue to desire them or have become dependent on them. They also rightly point out that we will likely suffer for the sake of the Gospel, just as Paul himself did. Christians will suffer the contempt of the world just by being who they are; by representing life and not death, love and not selfishness, sincerity and not feigning, God's truth and not man's vain imaginings, just as Christ suffered at the hands of the Jewish leaders. As Paul says, "All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12). The early church experienced this suffering in varying degrees. Perhaps we are beginning to experience it in a new way as we enter a post-Christian era.

But there is another kind of suffering seen in Christ that Paul may also have had in mind—identity suffering for the sake of love. We think of Cordelia. "Love, and be silent." The Judaizers depended upon circumcision to give them an identity of righteousness. They were proud of this civic identity and made a great deal of noise about it. But if we want an immortal identity like Christ's, we must be willing to be like Christ. We must be willing to be *unknown*. We must be willing to become nothing in the world, which is based on judgment, just as he was willing to become nothing on the cross. Self-sacrifice can lead to the type of suffering seen in the Garden

of Gethsemane—identity suffering, the pain of nothingness. Christ described nine types of people who are counterintuitively “blessed,” and all are identity sufferers. “Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:3). They are not boastful; therefore, they seem like nothing to the world, which is likely to be a source of suffering. But they are blessed when they have faith in God, which gives them joy and peace. Similarly, Paul advises the Judaizers to circumcise their hearts in secret and stop boasting about their mark in the flesh. Perhaps they will lose status by this sacrifice of remaining silent in a world full of boastful, dissimulating words. By embracing their nothingness, they will suffer. But they will gain status in the eyes of God.

Christ did not just experience physical suffering when he was on the cross; he also suffered humiliation and shame. The Pharisees and soldiers jeered him. Even his lowly fellow victim made fun of him for not extricating himself from his foolish predicament. His own disciples stayed away, except for one. In fact, he suffered this way throughout his ministry. He had to endure the blindness and hostility of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, who set clever traps for him, slandered him, and plotted to kill him almost from the beginning. “He came to his own, and his own received him not” (John 1:11). He had to endure the cluelessness of his own disciples—“O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you?” (Matt. 17:17). He was, as Paul says of himself, “unknown, and yet well known” (2 Cor. 6:9).

This is identity suffering. In some ways, it can be worse than physical suffering, which at least has a limit. As Cranfield says, this type of suffering comes from living in a world that does not know Christ. But it also comes from living in fellowship with other believers. We know Paul as one of the foremost of all the apostles,

with more books in the Bible than any other author. We know him as a superstar of the faith. But that was not how they saw him in Corinth. To them, he was “rude in speech” (2 Cor. 11:6) compared with the super-apostles. They did not take him very seriously; they considered his visit a burden—a church he had founded—and 2 Corinthians 6 is a record of his suffering.

In short, we experience identity suffering when we consciously give up boasting and the love of judging on which the world bases identity. Paul is asking the Judaizers to give up the identity judgment they were making through circumcision. He was asking them to suffer since this was an identity they valued very highly, their historic identity ordained by God. After all, they were “the circumcision.” It was the root of their identity; giving it up was hard. And the same is true of us. If we genuinely desire unity, we cannot have what we want without suffering; without embracing our nothingness, giving up things we cherish, and putting others first, as Paul tells us to do. This will cause pain. But the promise is that those who are willing to suffer and be last in the world will be first in the kingdom of heaven.

BUT WHY ARE WE *STILL* SUFFERING?

Paul, therefore, encourages those who are suffering like Christ. “For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (8:18). We will be glorified—our nothingness dispelled—if we are willing to suffer with him, just as he himself was glorified through the Resurrection, an idea expressed more fully in Hebrews: “Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily besets us, and let us run with patience the race that is set

before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:1-2).

Paul feels moved to explain why we continue to suffer even when we have the spirit of Christ and adoption as sons. It is because we have not yet been delivered from these mortal bodies, from the ache of the nothingness of the flesh under the disquieting pressure of our consciousness of eternity. “For the earnest expectation of the creature waits for the manifestation of the sons of God” (8:19). The sign of sonship is life, and we have sonship through Christ and his righteousness. Still, this eternal glory cannot be seen in us while we continue to inhabit mortal bodies. Therefore, we suffer. As he says in 2 Corinthians 5:2, “For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven.” This is the suffering of the “I” finding itself naked in eternity. In fact, it is not just we who suffer, but all creation is said to suffer because it longs to see this manifestation of life in us while laboring under the bondage of the grave.

“The creature [us] was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who has subjected the same in hope, because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God” (8:20-21). Deliverance from these mortal chains is coming. As Paul says in Philippians, “Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself” (Phil. 3:21). But meanwhile we continue to suffer. We long for an immortal identity like Christ’s. Still, we have been made “subject to vanity” by God in our schemes to obtain it by boasting about our deeds, to teach us to be humble and

hope for deliverance in him only. “Vanity” in this instance can mean subject to our nothingness, which oppresses us; it can mean subject to futility in our attempts to redeem ourselves under the law; it can also mean being subject to vainglory of the type seen in the Greek philosophers or in those Jews who thought that being circumcised and observing the ceremonial law made them holier than others and gave them a transcendent identity.

Why do we suffer? Because we long for the “glorious liberty of the children of God” (8:21)—that is, the glory of immortality and liberty from the grave—and don’t quite have it. From 2 Timothy 2:11-12: “For if we are dead with him, we shall also live with him: if we suffer, we shall also reign with him.” This suffering is evident to any Christian who comes into contact with an unbelieving world. But does it have redeeming value? Indeed, it does, according to Paul. It teaches us to hope. “For we are saved [from our suffering] by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man sees, why does he yet hope for?” (8:24)—he means hope in the promises of God, according to Chrysostom. Our suffering is the *cause* of the hope we have for something better than this world, hope being a most precious gift of the Spirit, not just as a theological concept but for the sake of getting us through each day and putting one foot in front of the other. This hope is not yet seen—the glory of eternal life—and therefore, we are still suffering. But if we were not suffering, we would not have hope. The precious thing we live on is the *reward* for our suffering. The world does not want to suffer, and, therefore, it does not have this hope. It depends entirely upon the deeds of the body to fulfill the needs of the “I,” which is a hopeless proposition, the body being mortal, since “[God] has also set eternity in their heart” (Eccl. 3:11 [NASB]).

We experience identity suffering while we wait for the glory to

be revealed that we obtain through Christ. The creation groans for life, and we “ourselves also, which have the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body” (8:23). We have the “first fruits” of life in the fruits of the Spirit described in Galatians. Still, we do not yet have life itself. Hence, we suffer. We hope for the glory of the resurrected life that we saw in him, but he suffered terribly to obtain it. For him, the path to life was through the Garden of Gethsemane. “And being in agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground” (Luke 22:44). But on the other end of this great suffering came Easter. This is our hope as well, the hope that sustains us in our suffering as we wait for the redemption of our bodies—that is, as we wait for life, the thing cherished most by the “I” that cannot be satisfied with its own mortality.

Those who do not have faith in Christ may attempt to overcome suffering by boasting in their deeds, whether it is the boasting of the Jews in regard to circumcision or of the world in the various ways it tries to make itself seem triumphant. But it is impossible to satisfy the longings of the soul by boasting in the flesh when the soul is immortal and the flesh is careening toward the grave. We long for an immortal identity. This longing can only be satisfied by suffering like Christ, a suffering that purges us of our attachment to the world and its insufferable boasting.

HOPE AND THE VISIONARY CHURCH

Paul assures us we can have a glorious identity like Christ’s as sons of God—if we are willing to suffer like him. Christ was the Suffering Servant. He washed the feet of his disciples. He endured the calumnies of the religious leaders. He was beaten and died on

the cross. If we want to be like him, then we must die like him. We must become suffering servants and put to death the ego and its selfishness. It was the will of God that the church should contain Gentiles as well as Jews. This was revealed to Paul after his conversion and also to Peter. This revelation caused the Jews a good deal of suffering, since it overturned their culture as well as their cultural identity. But if they submit to God's will, their suffering is redeemed by the hope of obtaining a Christlike identity: that of the suffering servant.

Suffering is the road to the visionary church. It is only by suffering and self-sacrifice that unity can be obtained. If we are too comfortable in our religion, our shining skin, then this may be a sign that we are not really taking Christ's plea for unity to heart. Paul is calling upon the Romans to give up their vanity in both senses—both the futility of trying to obtain the identity of sons of God by judging one another as well as the vainglory this reveals—to obtain a type of glory the world has never seen: the perfect unity that is only possible in the body of Christ, the church with him as its head; a church that has the self-sacrificing mind of Christ. Unity requires the sacrifice of “submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God” (Eph. 5:21), which causes us suffering because of our natural selfishness. It requires a living sacrifice, but more on that later.

What God wants is unity among the faithful. Christ makes this crystal clear. We say “among” because of the seeming infinity of iterations of the faithful since the Reformation. If we are proud of our doctrine and spending time marinating in our pride and attempting to assure ourselves and others that we know the truth and other so-called Christians are somehow deluded—if we are expending all of this energy in an attempt to justify ourselves

and rejoice in our doctrines and what we practice outwardly as “religion”—then in what sense are we suffering like Christ? Exactly how much suffering is going on in our boasting in the flesh? Are we truly suffering to be “all things to all men” (1 Cor. 9:22)? Do we really long to save lost souls and live in unity? And if we are not suffering, how can the Spirit of the Suffering Servant be said to reside in us?

Paul wanted the church in Rome to suffer for the sake of unity, but is that what is seen in Rome today? Is there much suffering going on for the sake of unity—or any at all? Are there signs of a spiritual longing to reach out across the divide to modern Gentiles—to non-Romans—even the unwashed Protestants—or is there retrenchment and condemnation? There are many cultural accretions in Rome that now constitute a wall like the one around the Vatican. Mary is depicted as almost on par with her son in our affections. Mary did not die on the cross or save us from our sins. She is not equal to Christ in any regard, and any iconography that makes her seem so is a form of boasting that creates an impenetrable barrier to the outside. Paul says there should be no bickering over special days. Is there bickering over special days? Paul says there should be no bickering over what we eat. Is there bickering over what we eat?

But is there any suffering for the sake of unity among the so-called Protestants? Do they want to condemn Catholics for being devoted to Mary? This also comes from spiritual pride—from being too proud of our particular form of piety. Do they want to condemn Catholics for having statues in their churches? This is strange, since there were cherubim on the Ark and images of cherubim in Solomon’s temple. As long as the images are not worshipped, who are we to look down on those who cherish them

and are nourished by them, who love to gaze at them and think about what they represent? Protestants like to say their doctrine is “pure.” Does this mean that those who do not agree with them in every detail are somehow impure—i.e., less holy than ourselves? This is holiness boasting. There may be a literal wall around the Vatican, but there is a figurative wall around many of our Protestant churches, a wall of preemptive piety built for the sake of identity.

Paul wants all such walls to come down for the sake of unity. Tearing them down will cause us to suffer since it will mean giving up something we love, something that is part of our identity, just as circumcision was the root of the Jewish identity that had to be given up for the Judaizers to become one new humanity with the Gentiles. We will suffer as servants of Christ and his desire for unity just as he suffered to reconcile us to God. Sometimes our suffering may be so great that we won’t even know what to pray for, like Elijah running away from Jezebel, or David surrounded by innumerable enemies. Everyone who is a Christian has experienced such suffering in their lives. But Paul comforts us by saying: Don’t worry. When you are suffering so much that you are unable to pray, the Spirit will intercede for you with groaning too deep for words. The Spirit is able to intercede for us because he knows our minds—and because God knows the mind of the Spirit. Murray comments: “The children of God have two divine intercessors. Christ is their intercessor in the court of heaven. The Holy Spirit is their intercessor in the theater of their own hearts.”¹⁵

Yes, times of suffering may come, whether from persecution for the sake of the Gospel or identity suffering for the visionary church, and sometimes they are the same thing. But even when we don’t know what to pray for, Paul reassures us that “all things

¹⁵ Murray, *Epistle to the Romans*, 311.

work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (8:28). When we are suffering, it is good to remember that God is sovereign. He will not let those who love him be confounded or their suffering to go unrewarded. Now Paul offers the most profound comfort we can have as lonely beings in a vast universe. We are called according to his purpose. Our lives are not meaningless. God has a plan for salvation, and we are part of that plan, no matter how bleak things may seem today. We who love God are predestined for glory, no matter how insignificant we may feel at the moment, which is just how Christians must have felt in the year 55 AD in Rome, the seat of a massive empire that was utterly indifferent to their faith, except to occasionally persecute them.

All who love God have been chosen. Paul is about to make this very clear to his fellow Jews. The Gentiles are also called according to what God purposed for them from the beginning and what the Spirit said through the prophets; according to what Christ himself said in his parables on this very topic, for instance the parable of the workers, or of the tenants. Therefore, they must stop judging them and insisting on circumcision.

CODA

Before we move on, we feel moved to acknowledge another kind of suffering, a generalized suffering we experience for unknown reasons. Suffering seems to be a simple fact of our existence. Some days, we may even feel like we are in danger of being capsized by suffering and unhappiness.

We suffer because of the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. We suffer because of our family. We suffer due to illness or injury or getting old. We suffer because we hate being sinners. We suffer

because of our fears, not being able to pay our bills, or the problems our children are having. We suffer because of injustice and violent men, the guy who cut us off on the highway, or the neighbor who insists on expanding his property lines at our expense. Our suffering does not even necessarily need a cause. Sometimes, we just suffer for no apparent reason.

The visionary church gives us rest from our suffering. From the time of Chrysostom, it has been called a “hospital for sinners”; or as Luther puts it, “The church is an inn and an infirmary for the sick and for convalescents.”¹⁶ We hear about Christ and about God’s love for us, we read the scriptures, we pray for one another, we have fellowship together and commiserate or rejoice together, we sing praises, we receive the bread and wine, heavenly sustenance, we love and support one another. “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2). This is the only real antidote to suffering.

WARNINGS COUCHED AS PROMISES?

Anything this good bears repeating—“And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God” (8:28). What an amazing statement! Meant to give comfort to those suffering for their faith, there is nothing like it in any other literature. God is conceived as being both sovereign and benevolent, arranging and disposing all things to the benefit of those who love him, just as he worked to liberate the Israelites from Egypt, or saved them through Esther by labyrinthine means, or led Abigail to intervene in order to spare David from the bloodguilt that would have prevented him from being anointed as God’s king, or allowed Joseph to be thrown in a pit by his jealous brothers, which led to the saving of Israel.

¹⁶ Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 130.

In fact, this statement can be seen as a summary of the entire Old Testament, in both the positive and the negative sense, for the Jews had a compelling sense of the sovereignty of God, as can be seen, for example, in Psalm 37.

No one knows how God does this—but we can see its effects. Any Christian can look back on his or her life and see the preserving hand of God at work at critical junctures. Even the bad things that happen to us are turned by providence to our advantage. The beating and crown of thorns that Christ endured worked to his good in the sense that through them, his suffering was glorified, just as the martyrs have the glory of being the seeds of the church. As Chrysostom put it, “For the things which made them the most bright and conspicuous, and great in the sight both of God and of men, were these.”¹⁷ But as is so often the case in Romans, there may also be a hidden message regarding the visionary church in this great promise; a subtle warning to the Judaizers who were so busy dividing the church. The fact is that the Gentiles also loved God. Therefore, all things work together for *their* good, too—whether or not they are circumcised.

Was this splendid promise of Paul’s also a warning to the Judaizers to stop condemning them? If so, this may shed light on the notion of predestination that it introduces. Paul’s discussion of predestination is often described as a follow-on message of comfort in our suffering. We have been chosen to suffer as Christ suffered to be conformed to his image—to become sons of God, which is a great reward. However, these verses can also be seen differently through the lens of the visionary church. If we keep Paul’s love of unity in mind, then they may be an attempt to acclimate the Jews to the idea that the Gentiles are also now chosen, which he

¹⁷ Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, 9:31.

has been hinting at since the beginning of the letter and will say more openly in a moment. Predestination can mean many things to many people, but it always implies an act of choosing. “Whom he did predestinate, them he also called” (8:30). The bedrock of the Jewish identity was this notion of chosen-ness. God called Abraham out of obscurity and made a great nation from him, favored in innumerable ways.

However, Paul has a difficult message for his fellow Jews to try to absorb. It seems, based on the spiritual gifts and miracles seen among the Gentiles, that they have been chosen too. “For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren” (8:29). The controversial part of this statement was not the notion of being predestined. All Jews believed in that. No, the rub for them was the notion of there being many brothers. It is not just the Jews who are the chosen children of God anymore. It is all who receive justification through faith in Christ. They are *all* being conformed to the image of his Son, whether or not they are circumcised. And in that case, the barrier between Jew and Gentile simply disappears.

FOREKNEW

In our opening remarks, we suggested that the lens of the visionary church could be used to soften some of the doctrinal disputes that have arisen over Romans. These verses about predestination (8:29-30) provide a good example of what we have in mind. If we view them as predestination *doctrine*, then they seem to come into conflict with free will, and the church becomes divided as sides are taken and words weaponized. However, viewed through Paul’s desire for unity, they reflect his design to establish his Gentile flock

on an equal footing with the Jews, which he has been doing throughout the letter. “Whom he did predestinate, them he also called” (8:30). Translation via the visionary church: the Gentiles have now been called as shown by their love of God and the seal of the Spirit. “And whom he called, them he also justified.” Translation: the Gentiles have been justified through their faith in Christ, as Paul has been arguing all along, regardless of circumcision. “And whom he justified, them he also glorified.” Translation: the Gentiles are also the “chosen people” and sons of God, there being no more glorious identity than this. As Paul puts it in Ephesians 3:3-6: “How that by revelation he made known to me the mystery; (as I wrote before in few words, whereby, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ) which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel.”

Paul continues in the same vein: “What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?” (8:31). Who does not love these words? Every time we hear them, our hearts swell because of the promise that almighty God loves us and is our “rereward,” as Isaiah said. And certainly, for early Christians, there were probably times when they felt that *everybody* was against them. But our point is this: it was not just circumcised Jews who had this tremendous promise. It was the Gentiles, too. Indeed, from that point of view, this beloved verse may imply that the Gentiles will thrive despite the efforts of the Judaizers to ostracize them. God is for “us.” Paul’s own Gentile flock is included in this “us,” giving them cover, but there may also be a subtle warning in these words to the Judaizers. Is Paul telling his fellow Jews they had better stop

condemning the Gentiles since God is now their defender as well? Are they risking God's wrath by opposing their inclusion into the church?

"He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" (8:32). The commentators have said many beautiful things about this verse. It does indeed seem to be a guarantee, as Schreiner says, that God will give the things promised in verses 28-30 to those who are suffering. But it can also be read, somewhat more prosaically, to say that a God who is so supremely gracious as to give us his own Son to pay for our sins is surely capable of giving salvation to the Gentiles without obliging them to be circumcised. We are reminded of the parable of the workers. Those who show up at the end of the day (the Gentiles) are freely given the same wages as those who had been working all day long (the Jews). This shows the supreme graciousness of God, who will provide us with good things if we put our trust in him and do his good work. And it includes the Gentiles, who are coming into the church without having done the lifelong work of the law, as surprising or disquieting as it may seem to the Jews. We think it was probably extremely disquieting. They were "the circumcised." This was their distinctive identity. Paul is asking them to give it up in order to welcome the Gentiles, whom they were inclined to despise, into the church. There was an internal war going on, and it is important to read Romans and the predestination argument with this war in mind.

"Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifies" (8:33). Again, this verse brings great comfort apart from any notion of the visionary church, especially when we are suffering. But it can also be read as a warning to the Judaizers, since the Gentiles have now been chosen, according to Paul. They, too,

are “God’s elect,” and in that case, who are the Jews to condemn them for not being circumcised? It is God who justifies—Gentiles as well as Jews—not because of works of the law like circumcision but because of faith in Christ. “Who is he that condemns?” (8:34). Who indeed? It is possible, as some say, that Paul is referring to the columns of Roman soldiers marching down narrow imperial streets. However, based on the tenor of the entire letter, the most likely suspects are the Judaizers. They are the ones who have been condemning the Gentiles and trying to get them excluded from the church based on circumcision. Paul reminds them that only Christ has the right to judge, having earned this right by going to the cross. He repeatedly spoke about the opening of the kingdom to the Gentiles. Indeed, in the parable of the wedding feast, he implied that the “children”—the Jews—would be cast out because of their unwillingness and the reviled Gentiles let in.

Having told us that Christ is at the right hand of God interceding for us, Paul asks, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” (8:35). Are there many verses in the Bible more beloved than this? No matter what happens in this mortal realm, whatever suffering we may endure or disappointments and sorrows, we have Christ at our side through faith—“Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me.” But again, whom specifically does Paul have in mind with this “who”? Exactly who is it that’s attempting to do any separating? The only group we know of that was trying to separate anyone from the love of Christ was the Judaizers, who wanted to exclude the Gentiles based on circumcision. But in that case, these inspiring words have a hidden meaning for Paul’s recalcitrant opponents. Nothing can separate uncircumcised Gentiles from the love of Christ either.

We will pause here to cheerfully concede that these soaring

verses can be read profitably without any reference to the visionary church. They are filled with hope and reassurance for the suffering believer. Every Christian can drink in the comfort Paul intended without thinking for a moment of the dirty deed the Judaizers were attempting to perpetuate on the Gentiles. Indeed, we depend upon this comfort ourselves. But if we have the visionary church in mind, these verses can also be seen as an impassioned call to unity. And then they become highly unified in a new way. In fact, chapter eight coheres beautifully, using the visionary church as a filter, with the thoughts flowing from one to another in a way not at all anticipated by traditional commentary.

But then, are the commentaries that do not see or note this subtext misguided? Not at all. The genius of Romans is that it can be read profitably on two different levels. There is no question that these verses provide the sublime comfort described in the commentaries. Not only do we not dispute this view, but we also heartily endorse it and take the same comfort ourselves. Chapter eight has application to the church today without any thought of the historical context that gave rise to it. God used the occasion to produce something universal. This is nothing new. We see it throughout the Old Testament, which is almost in its entirety a story on two levels. Our point is not that these verses must be deprived of the comfort they give. Our point is that everything Paul says here and throughout the letter can also be contextualized by his desire for unity. Comfort is important, but unity is important to Paul, too.

Our hope is that contextualizing Romans in this way may somehow help to mitigate the dividedness seen in the church over this section of the letter. If we think of the statements Paul makes about predestination in chapters eight and nine as part of his defense

of his Gentile flock instead of systematic predestination doctrine, then they are less likely to divide us. We will be more focused on the unity Paul is trying to effect and less focused on the individual arguments he uses to effect it. The predestination argument for its own sake is not what matters most to Paul. It is one argument that he floats among many in Romans. What matters to him is unity. To use this argument in a contentious way, for the purpose of biting and devouring each other, seems contrary to his purposes.

IN IT TOGETHER

“As it is written, For your sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter” (8:36). Paul quotes Psalm 44 to compare the trials and tribulations and suffering—to tie in what has gone before—of the early church with the suffering of Israel in a time of great national distress. That’s the standard interpretation, perfectly reasonable. But whom does he mean by “we”? Does it include the Gentiles? Is this a subtle reminder to the Judaizers that they were *all* in this daunting situation together? They were all making great sacrifices to follow Christ, as he pointedly reminds them later when he talks about the generous donation of the Gentiles to the church in Jerusalem—that is, to Jewish Christians. They were a band of brothers.

“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us” (8:37). There’s that “we” again. This verse refers to much more than persecution. It can be read by the Gentiles as soaring encouragement to stick to the gospel that was preached to them and not be intimidated into doing things that don’t need doing, as Paul says explicitly in Colossians: into empty religion based on the letter instead of the spirit of the law. And to the Jews it might be a warning that the Gentiles will be conquerors of any

attempt to quarantine them—which in fact turned out to be the case over time.

Now Paul makes one of the most striking promises in the entire Bible: “For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8:38-49). This passionate verse is rightly beloved by believers for the tender encouragement it gives. But this promise is to the Gentiles as well as the Jews. In fact, if we read it in that light, it amounts to a personal guarantee from Paul that no opposition from the circumcision party will block the Gentiles from their adoption as children of God. It stands very well on its own as a verse of sublime encouragement, like a mighty tree; but this tree may also support the visionary church.

To sum up, the beloved verses of encouragement seen in chapter eight can be read in two ways. What the standard interpretations say about them is undoubtedly true. They do balance the condemnation implicit in Paul’s confession with sweet assurances that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, even though they are still sinners, offsetting the suffering that the early Christians were experiencing with the comfort of the Holy Spirit and the benevolent promises of God. But if the theme of Romans is unity in the church, then these assurances can also be seen as a stout defense of the inclusion of the Gentiles, Paul’s flock. “Nothing shall separate us from the love of Christ,” including those who claim that circumcision is necessary for salvation.

CHAPTER 9

ISN'T GOD ENTITLED TO CHOOSE WHOM HE PLEASES?

Some feel the transition to chapter nine is jarring—from the most sublime assurances of blessing and comfort imaginable for those who suffer with Christ to Paul's expression of concern for his fellow Jews who do not believe. But it is not jarring at all by the light of the visionary church, just as there is no actual chapter break in the original. We have shown how those expressions of assurance are likely also subtle warning shots across the bow of the pestilent circumcision crowd who have been trying to deny the Gentiles the blessings of the gospel. If this interpretation is correct, then what happens next is perfectly natural and perhaps inevitable. Having spent so much time and energy boosting his Gentile flock, Paul now steps back and tries to reassure his fellow Jews that his gospel

is for them, too. In fact, the last thing he says in chapter eight flows directly into the first thing in chapter nine. He is convinced that nothing can ever separate us from the love of Christ—and yet he is willing to be separated from that love if it could mean the salvation of devout Jews.

He wants them to know that he is something more than the “apostle to the Gentiles,” as if that were all he cared about. His longing and love for them is great. But he has created a formidable problem for himself in this attempt at conciliation. The fact is that the majority of them have rejected Christ. How can he argue that the Gentiles are chosen because of their faith in Christ and not exclude most of his fellow Jews who do not believe, including families and friends of Jewish Christians? He did not want to alienate them with his claim of Gentile election. In fact, later on he claims that what he really wanted to do was to bring more Jews into the church. But he has set down a marker in defense of the Gentiles. He has claimed they are also now chosen because of their faith, and he cannot back down from this claim one inch since his main objective is to see them included in the church. The opposing pressure from these two conflicting goals causes him to bounce around a bit in the next couple of chapters. Many have expertly described a flow to them. We will try to find out if there is also a flow when we read them with the visionary church in mind.

To get an idea of the sort of opposition Paul might have been facing to his claim of Gentile election, consider this prophecy from Isaiah 52:1: “Awake, awake; put on your strength, O Zion; put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city: for henceforth there shall no more come into you the uncircumcised and the unclean.” In the following centuries, Jerusalem would be humiliated by multiple Gentile invaders, starting with the siege

of the Assyrians in 701 BC, which is probably why the messianic vision included an element of Gentile purification. But Paul seems to be saying just the opposite. According to him, the glory of the Messiah is that he brings the Gentiles *into* the new Jerusalem—which is the church—circumcised not by human hands but by the washing of water and the Spirit. A great mystery has occurred. The Gentiles have also now become the chosen people, just as the Jews were chosen long ago, as Paul says in Ephesians 3:3-6: “By revelation he made known unto me the mystery; (as I wrote before in few words, whereby, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ) which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel.”

However, this revelation had many reverberating consequences. If the Gentiles really had become chosen because of their faith in Christ, then what about all those devout Jews who did not believe in Christ? Did it mean they were no longer chosen? Had God reneged on his covenant of long ago? Also, as we see in Isaiah and vividly in Jubilees 22:16,¹ the Gentiles were *unclean* in the minds of the Jews. There were not just historical objections based on what they had done to the Jews—and were still doing—but there were also strong religious and cultural objections to their pagan lifestyle. Were these brash newcomers going to be allowed to flood into the church without being circumcised, without having to act or look or even think like a Jew? Were they going to redefine what it meant to be part of the family of God in a church rooted entirely in Judaism? And Paul had a *role* in the preponderance of Gentiles in the early

1 Hat tip to Dunn for this revealing background.

church. As Fitzmyer puts it, “In a sense, he had been involved in the ‘rejection’ of Israel [by bringing so many Gentiles into the church]. Hence his agonized cry with which this part of Romans begins.”²

Our point is simply that Paul had a lot on his mind as he set out to defend his radical claim of Gentile election. The main thrust of his argument is that God is free to choose whomever he pleases, which Fitzmyer calls “the divine freedom of election.”³ Election is a matter of God’s sovereign choice by its very nature. God is the creator and ordainer of all things—and more than that, God is the one who’s actually doing the choosing. God seems to be choosing the Gentiles in the early church, at least in numbers, which was undoubtedly dismaying to Jewish Christian; but Paul stoutly defends the right of God to make such a choice. After all, God has his reasons. “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” (11:34). It might seem strange that God would use Gentiles to populate the early church, especially since God commanded circumcision. But Paul will argue that God does not choose according to the flesh.

Of course, it goes without saying that this appeal to the sovereignty of God, the absolute right of God to choose whomever he pleases, implies both the superior wisdom of God and his steadfast love and benevolence. Without those things, the sovereignty touted by Paul might be nothing more than tyranny, just as without sovereignty, wisdom and love might be helpless and unable to achieve their goals. Submission to God’s perfect will is reasonable because it is based on our trust in his love and providence. As the Jews said throughout their tortuous history, “The love of the Lord endures forever.” We submit because we believe he knows what is

2 Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 541.

3 Ibid., 571.

best for us and has our happiness in mind. This is why we tenderly refer to him as “Father.”

BUT WHY ARE THE JEWS STAYING AWAY?

A prominent characteristic of the early church, according to Acts, is that the Gentiles were flocking in while Jews were staying away. Some commentators frame this as the “rejection of the Jews,” as if it were a *fait accompli*, or even desirable, but we’re not sure Paul sees it that way. To him, it seems both painful and perplexing. It’s one thing to say the Gentiles were now also part of the chosen people—but what about the paucity of Jews in the new church? What can possibly account for that? True, Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles, but he was also a Jew who loved his own people and their traditions. He seems eager to assure his fellow Jews that he is not happy about what was going on. “For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh” (9:3)—in other words, he himself is willing to be accursed if it meant the Jews could come into the church. These words are a poignant reminder that, for Jewish Christians, it was literally their own kin who appeared to have been cut off. And we wonder if some of their family may have used the proliferation of Gentiles as an excuse to stay away.

Although he has been arguing for the inclusion of Gentiles without circumcision, Paul is eager to assure his fellow Jews he has “great heaviness and continual sorrow” (9:2) over the fact that so many Jews were rejecting Christ. He shows just how deep his sorrow is by expressing the highest love and respect for them, “to whom pertains the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises” (9:4). These are not just good things; they are the highest and

most valuable things. The Jews have been singled out by God in an astonishing way. Their knowledge and wisdom are not to be compared with the Gentiles, who were proud of their philosophers but worshiped idols and did not know the one true God or their right hand from their left. Most of all, through the Jews came Jesus Christ, who is the Savior of the world.

But now devout, God-fearing Jews were staying away from the church in droves—and Paul’s election claim seems to imply that this is because they have not been chosen to believe in Christ, even though they are the chosen people. In other words, he seems to be saying they have lost their chosen-ness. So then, has the word of God failed or “taken none effect” (9:6)? Is that what he is implying with his election claim on behalf of the Gentiles? Paul insists this is not the case, offering several arguments, some more effective than others, in our view. These arguments reflect the following claim: “They are not all Israel, which are of Israel” (9:6). In other words, his explanation for why there are so few Jews in the church is that not all of Israel is truly chosen.

He illustrates this in several ways. First, he introduces the concept of the children of the promise and the children of the flesh. God said to Abraham, “At this time will I come, and Sarah shall have a son.” (9:9). That is a promise from God, and it applies to Isaac only, not to any of Abraham’s other numerous children born later on. Sarah tried to redress her childlessness by sending Hagar to her husband, through which union Ishmael was born, a child of the flesh. But God had a better plan. He promised to bless Abraham with “many nations” through a legal heir. Paul’s point here, as in chapter four, is that it is the promise that counts the most, that has the most value, not “the flesh,” neither in the sense of being the progeny of Abraham nor in the sense of the mark Abraham

was commanded to make in the flesh. The promise did not pertain to *everyone* born of Abraham; only to Isaac—which seems to be a clear way of demonstrating that “they are not all Israel, which are of Israel.”

Except, of course, that Isaac and Ishmael predated Israel. So Paul uses Israel himself—Jacob—to narrow the demonstration. Jacob and Esau were twins from the same womb, and yet God told Rachel that “the elder shall serve the younger” (9:12) before they were born. Jacob was therefore a child of a promise from God. It was not a matter of flesh, nor was it due to merit, since Jacob was chosen in the womb before either brother had done evil or good. It seems the *choosing* is entirely a matter of God’s mysterious predilection. “Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated” (9:13) Paul says, quoting Malachi. The reasons for this are unclear from the human point of view. Jacob’s behavior is not always pleasant. His own father seemed to prefer his (slightly) older brother. But Jacob was the one who was chosen, against the rule of primogeniture.

Paul argues that election is based on God’s sovereign love in the case of Jacob and Esau. But the *point* of the election argument is that “they are not all Israel, which are of Israel.” Paul is attempting to explain to his detractors why there were so few Jews in the church. Just as God chose Jacob and not Esau, so at the present time God is choosing some Jews for the Christian church and not others. “What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!” (9:14). Was God *unjust* to choose Jacob over Esau? No, it is impious even to suggest such a thing.

The matter of who gets chosen is one of the great mysteries of life. Why are we Christians so fortunate as to have the happiness of faith when others do not, including people who are dear to us, people who try to lead moral lives and are charitable and just? We

know it's not because we deserved it. "For if you, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?" (Ps. 130:3). No, it seems, from the experiential point of view, that election is due entirely to the sovereign love of God. "For he says to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then it is not of him that wills, nor of him that runs, but of God that shows mercy" (9:16). While this may sound harsh to modern ears, it does show that God is merciful and compassionate. God shows mercy on whomever he pleases, which Cranfield calls the "freedom of God's mercy,"⁴ as opposed to some ugly determinism.

But it seems unseemly for those who have the good fortune to be objects of mercy to question the justice of divine election, as Paul's Jewish opponents were doing. Do they have the joy of faith in Christ? If so, their cup should be overflowing with gratitude, not Job-like grouching about the justice of God and the prevalence of Gentiles in the churches. The Judaizers should stop complaining about God's merciful choosing of the Gentiles because God has been merciful to them too. Nor is election just about us. As God said to Pharaoh, "Even for this same purpose have I raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth" (9:17). Why would God harden Pharaoh's heart? The answer is right there in plain sight. It was to display his glory through the liberation of his chosen people. The fact is the Jews owed a great deal to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Otherwise, they would not have known that God loves them and has a plan for them. They would not have known that it is in the nature of God to deliver them from bondage. They would not

4 Cranfield, *Romans, a Shorter Commentary*, 233. Cranfield's passionate defense of the mercy of God in election is well worth consulting.

have known that God is gracious and willing to intervene on their behalf. They would not have been freed from cruel slavery and become a great nation.

All this resulted from something that may seem unfair to the human mind—the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. But perhaps this is why it is not wise to question the choices God makes, as Paul's interlocutor was doing. Besides, many have noted that Pharaoh's heart was already hardened against God. He was an enemy of Jehovah and his chosen people, the industrious slaves whom he liked to exploit to his glory and did not want to give up. He was predisposed against God and his will to liberate them, and God “hardened” him in this predisposition in the sense of allowing it to fester unimpeded, as opposed, for example, to the intervention he performed with Paul.

But wait a minute. Is Paul implying that the reason so many Jews are staying away from the church is their hearts have been *hardened*, like Pharaoh's? It certainly sounds like it. He anticipates how they might react to this. “You will say then to me, Why does he yet find fault? For who has resisted his will?” (9:19). If God willed the Jews not to believe in Christ, as Paul seems to be implying by invoking Pharaoh—hardened their hearts against him—then they are simply doing what God willed them to do. And in that case, how can a just God find fault with them? Paul sniffs at the objection he himself has raised. “No, but, O man, who are you that replies against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why have you made me thus?” (9:20).

So, what exactly is going on here? Throughout Romans, Paul has been critiquing the Judaizers and their holiness boasting over circumcision in an attempt to have his Gentile flock welcomed into the church. Has he set this critique aside in order to

formulate a systematic doctrine of predestination? Or is he using a predestination *argument* in an attempt to explain why there were so many Gentiles and so few Jews in the church? His argument has led him to imply that the Jews are rejecting Christ because they have been hardened against him. But this leaves him open to the critique in 9:19. If it was God who hardened them, then who has resisted his will? Is it enough to say “who are you to reply to God”? Isn’t this just an appeal to authority?

This seems like a good time to step back for a moment and do a reality check. What if Paul doesn’t really have a good answer to the quibble he himself has raised? What if that’s the reason for resorting to an appeal to authority? What if he was *sparring* with his determined Jewish interlocutors, instead of trying to create predestination doctrine? After all, Malachi did not say, “Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated” in the stark way Paul presents it. The prophet was not making an argument for predestination in any sense; he was simply pointing out to Israel that God has shown her more love than her neighbors by helping her to prosper—and therefore she should love God in return. Nor does God seem to be making a predestination argument when he tells Moses he will be gracious to whomever he will be gracious and have mercy on whomever he will have mercy. God said this to reassure Moses that he would not destroy the Israelites despite their dalliance with the golden calf—not to suggest that he had predestined anyone to damnation. Paul has repurposed both passages to promote the acceptance of Gentiles into the church and to explain why the Jews are so far staying clear.

Are we questioning his integrity? Not at all. But we do think he was a good debater who knew how to muster rhetoric and arguments against his opponents. There is a tendency in some

circles to view Romans as doctrine handed down directly from the hand of God, like the Ten Commandments. But Paul was living through the breech birth of the non-Judean churches. It was a time of great turmoil, and such times call for extraordinary measures. If we view the arguments he makes through the lens of the visionary church, as has just been done, they tend to inspire a desire for unity. We are one because we are all chosen by the one true God. But clearly they divide us when we view them as predestination doctrine; and we doubt this is what Paul had in mind.

STICKS AND CARROTS

Paul uses them both in an attempt to answer potential objections of his fellow Jews to his claim of Gentile election, with more stick than carrot, either because we tend to be harder on the ones we love, or because of his anxiety to protect his Gentile flock, or because of the harsh treatment he has received from the Jews in various places. Again, we think it's important to keep in mind that many Jewish Christians would have had dear ones who were observant Jews—not unbelievers, not heedless by any means—who had not accepted Christ. Naturally, they would find it upsetting to think, based on Paul's election argument, that their God-fearing kin and friends had not been chosen for eternal life, especially with all the unwashed Gentiles crowding into the church. Indeed, Paul's argument seems to imply that they have been *rejected* in favor of the Gentiles, which would be a hard pill for the Jews to swallow. Paul addresses these concerns in two ways. First, he uses the stick to strongly assert the right of God to choose as he pleases; then, he comforts them by claiming that, in the end, all Israel will be saved.

Paul has just admonished anyone who might quibble with his doctrine of Gentile election that they have no standing to

question the justice of God or the sovereign choices he makes—why he makes us what we are. Now, he elaborates on this idea with an earthy illustration derived from Isaiah and Jeremiah. Doesn't a potter have absolute power over his clay? Doesn't his privilege as potter entitle him to do anything he wants—for instance, to make “from the same lump one vessel unto honor and another unto dishonor” (9:21) if he so chooses—apparently referring to the one lump of believing and nonbelieving Jews. Note that Paul does not positively assert that God does make vessels for honor or dishonor. He simply asks whether God has the *authority* to do so. This refers to the previous question, and the answer is “yes, he does.” Was Paul trying to present a doctrine of predestination, or was he simply asking a provocative question in defense of his argument that not all Israel is chosen? In our view, it is probably a little of both.

Why are there so few Jews in the early church? This is a highly perplexing question, and Paul has offered several arguments to account for it, finally linking their unbelief to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. His imaginary interlocutor has seized on this and objected that they were not resisting God's will if it was God who did the hardening, which clever objection Paul rebuts by saying, “No, but, O man, who are you that replies against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why have you made me thus?” (9:20). It sounds like Paul, having backed himself into a bit of a theological corner, is parrying to put his Jewish opponents on their heels. The question is: why are there so many unbelieving Jews (and by implication, why is Paul spending so much time with the Gentiles)? And his combative answer is: doesn't God have the right as potter to make them that way? Doesn't he have the right, as God, to make some Jews for honor and some for dishonor?

This is often taken as predestination doctrine and not simply

Paul parrying with his stubborn opponents. But it's worth noting that neither Isaiah nor Jeremiah uses the potter metaphor in connection with the idea that God makes "vessels unto dishonor"—vessels fitted for destruction. In Jeremiah, the "clay" is not individual Jews but the nation of Israel, and God is declaring his right to pluck up or pull down any nation that does good or evil in his sight. In Isaiah, the potter image is used as a plea for mercy. "But now, O Lord, you are our father; we are the clay, and you our potter; and we all are the work of your hand. Be not full of wrath, O Lord, neither remember iniquity forever: behold, see, we beseech you, we are all your people." (Isa 54:8-9)." Since the prophets do not use the "potter" metaphor to indicate anything about predestination, was Paul's use of the same metaphor in Romans intended as predestination doctrine—or was he using a theoretical to defend himself against charges that he was favoring the Gentiles over the Jews?

Again, Paul has simply asked the question in response to his interlocutor. He has not positively asserted that God has made some Jews for honor and some for dishonor. But here's something to consider: "[What] if God, [although] willing to show his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: and [did so to] make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had prepared before unto glory" (9:22-23). Paul *might* still be thinking of Pharaoh, whom he put up with for some time before sending the last and most terrible plague; which would make the Jews the "vessels of mercy," according to Chrysostom. On the other hand, he might be thinking of the Jews described in Scripture who did not believe in God or follow his commandments, which seems to be the majority of them. But he might also be thinking of those

Jews whose hearts seem to have been hardened against Christ. In that case, this verse could be a subtle reminder that some Jews were fitted for dishonor not just because of their rejection of Christ but because they had him *killed*, which might also explain why God was “willing” to show his wrath toward them by hardening their hearts.

Paul’s imaginary interlocutor has been attacking his doctrine of Gentile election by claiming it brings the justice of God into question with regard to the chosen people and covenants he made. Paul’s response seems to be that God has not been peremptory in his judgments toward the Jews but has suffered their perfidy for a long time, in fact from their inception as a nation. Why? To make the riches of his glory known on the vessels of mercy, “Even us, whom he has called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles” (9:24). God’s covenant with the Jews has not been abrogated by the calling of the Gentiles. Instead, God is glorified by the mercy shown to *both* Jews and Gentiles, which is known through contrast with those who refuse to believe. This argument seems to be consonant with the purpose of the letter—to shut the mouths of Jewish opponents to his outreach to the Gentiles. He wants both Jews and Gentiles to be saved. And he very prudently puts his fellow Jews first.

He is trying to *include* the Gentiles with these election arguments without *excluding* the Jews, which is a difficult task from a rhetorical point of view. Up to this point, he has been using the stick to chastise the Jewish provocateurs and remind them that their salvation is by the mercy of God and not any righteous work they have done, including circumcision. The arguments are periodic, leading up to the momentous statement that God’s mercy is “to the Jews first, and also to the Gentiles,” and flow directly from the following in chapter eight: “Whom he did predestinate,

them he also called” (8:30). The Gentiles are also chosen, as he now openly says. And if God does this while leaving out some of the same devout Jews who had his Son killed in Jerusalem, then it is his right to do so; and in fact, not all that surprising.

Having openly referred to the Gentiles, Paul uses Scripture to justify his claim of Gentile election. He begins by quoting Hosea: “I will call them my people who were not my people, and her beloved who was not beloved” (9:25). He did not need to explain the context to his fellow Jews. The scriptures tell us that Israel did not love God with all her heart, soul, and mind. All too often, she fell in love with other gods and was shamelessly unfaithful. In fact, that was the whole history of the Northern Kingdom, which is why she is likened in Hosea to a prostitute whom God has made his bride but must go after again and again to bring her back home. Israel was chosen by God and loved and favored in many ways, but she went a-whoring after false gods and lived in the same depravity and disregard as her neighbors, as Ezekiel 16 and 23 plainly put it. God tolerated her unfaithfulness with long-suffering, for hundreds of years; but in the end, she was punished with annihilation and dispersion. His long-suffering links this verse to the “patient endurance” described in 9:22. God indeed has been patient so that the glory of his mercy might be shown. Hosea prophesied pardon for the Israelites and a rekindling of God’s love—which Paul takes to refer to the Gentiles of his own time.⁵

Paul is still trying to make the point that “they are not all Israel, which are of Israel” to account for the lack of Jews in the church. Clearly, their own history shows that not all Jews were chosen. Those living in the Northern Kingdom were “vessels fitted for

5 Since this promise was to dispersion Jews, is Paul, by any chance, hinting at what he’s going to say in a moment—that devout Jews will also be saved in the end?

dishonor” according to their own history. Now he quotes Isaiah, who prophesied that although Israel’s people were like the sand of the sea, only a small remnant would be saved from the annihilation wrought by Assyria. Upon the rest, there will be a summary judgment. Why? Because God’s patience has run out. God has endured their depravity with long suffering, but no more. Only a remnant will be saved, which Paul applies to the small cohort of Jews in the church. “Except the Lord of Sabaoth had left us a seed, we had been as Sodom, and been made like unto Gomorrah” (9:29). If nothing more than a “seed” of the Israelites remained faithful, then not all were chosen.

Chapter nine can seem quite dismaying. Taken at face value, it makes God seem rather arbitrary and cruel—not a God of love. But love is, in fact, the reason for the arguments Paul has been making. He is trying to protect his Gentile flock by claiming that they have been chosen and God has a sovereign right to choose as he pleases. In our view, some of the arguments are more successful than others. The potter argument, for example, tends to confirm the imaginary interlocutor’s objection rather than dispelling it. But perhaps Paul was not trying to create predestination doctrine *per se*, as is sometimes claimed. Perhaps he was trying to protect his Gentile flock by using whatever rhetorical means he had at his disposal to spar with his opponents in the church.

But then again, isn’t the potter argument correct? Doesn’t God have the right to make some vessels for honor and some for dishonor, some for mercy and some for destruction, according to his inscrutable purposes? Church doctrine is united in saying he does. Our point is simply that the *context* for this argument is the situation in the early church and Paul’s desire to defend his ministry to the Gentiles. The ultimate goal of Romans is to facilitate unity

between Jewish and Gentile Christians. We believe this should be taken into account when pondering predestination doctrines based on chapter nine. Contextualizing these verses may help to take the heat away from some of our discussions and thereby reduce divisions in the church.

A STUMBLING STONE

We know Paul has been fending off objections to his claim of Gentile election with these passages from the prophets because now he comes right out and says so. “What shall we say then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law” (9:30). This is what he has been saying throughout the letter. On one hand, it does seem strange that those who did not work for God’s righteousness or even care about it should suddenly obtain it through faith in Christ, while so many of those who had been given the law of righteousness and followed it religiously since the time of Moses should not obtain it. Put yourself in the place of the Jews. It is not surprising that the claim of Gentile election caused consternation and even ridicule.

But that’s the reason for the allusions to Hosea and Isaiah. The facts on the ground, as attested by the seal of the Spirit, are that the Gentiles have obtained righteousness through faith in Christ—they have obtained the righteousness that comes through the law of faith—while the Jews’ own scriptures plainly show that they did not obtain righteousness through the law of Moses. Paul has already explained why. The Jews did not obtain righteousness because it is impossible to obtain it under the law. But the Gentiles obtained it through faith in Christ because he fulfilled the law on

their behalf. His righteousness is imputed to them through faith, but only those who believe in him can have this righteousness. And that excludes most of the Jews. This is the conclusion Paul has been working toward with all his convoluted arguments in chapter nine. The Gentiles were preponderant in the early church because they accepted Christ. The Jews were scarce because they had not. And in many places, they rejected Paul's gospel virulently.

Christ came to offer them righteousness as a free gift, but they rejected the generous offer because they were proud of their own righteousness. He came to them full of grace and truth, and they did not receive him. They refused to believe he was the Son of God when he was among them doing jaw-dropping miracles, and they did not believe it when he was resurrected and seen ascending into heaven. They "stumbled at that stumbling stone" (9:33) prophesied by Isaiah, the cornerstone of the temple, which, in the tradition of the rabbis, is interpreted to refer to the Messiah, and by Paul to Christ, as well as by Peter and Christ himself. Why did they stumble? Because of the cross. "We preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness" (1 Cor. 1:23). They were expecting a military conqueror like David in Psalm 18. But Christ died very foolishly, hung up naked on a cross for all to jeer. They stumbled because he proclaimed himself to be meek and lowly and told them to "love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that you may be the children of your Father which is in heaven." (Matt. 5:44-45). They did not want to love their enemies. They wanted them thrown out. They wanted the restoration of the kingdom of Israel that was seemingly promised by the prophets.

Oddly, they stumbled because they were *too* religious, unlike

the Israelites of Isaiah's time. They were like the older brother of the prodigal son. They saw the offering of grace with their own eyes but had a hard time accepting it because they had been working for the Father all this time and wanted credit for their labors; because they were jealous of the prodigal who received the Father's love even after deserting him and living a life of carelessness and ignominy; because theirs was an exclusionary religion and Christ invited *everyone* to come to him who was weary and heavy laden; because he healed on the Sabbath and did other things that seemed contrary to the law, which they did not understand—the spirit of the commandment, which was made for man.

But now the clincher—"And whoever believes in him shall not be ashamed" (9:33). *Whoever*. This prophecy from Isaiah is interpreted by Paul to refer to those who put their faith in Christ. The Gentiles who believe in Christ will not be put to shame by those who claim they have to be circumcised in order to be saved. This is the connecting thread that holds all of the seemingly disparate parts together. They shall not be separated from the love of Christ by those who "know the law" and are actively trying to separate them. They are more than conquerors through him who loved them. They may not have looked or acted like Jews—they might not be religious to the Jewish way of thinking—but they did have the most important thing of all, since "this is the work of the Lord, that you believe on him who was sent" (John 6:29). They accepted Christ when Jews rejected him; thus they obtained adoption into the family of God. (Paul has an explanation for this that is not quite so hard on the Jews, but he saves it for later on.)

CHAPTER 10

PAUL'S HEARTFELT DESIRE

Paul reiterates his heartfelt desire that salvation would come to Israel as well as to the Gentiles who are so prominent in the non-Judean churches. He doesn't mean to *everyone* in Israel (or at least we don't think he does); he means to those who love God as Abraham loved God and wanted to follow him. He knows they have zeal for God because he once had this zeal himself as a Pharisee and persecutor of Christians; but for the same reason, he also knows their zeal is "not according to knowledge" (10:2). They are to be commended for being zealous for righteousness, but they are "ignorant of God's righteousness [as offered in Christ], and going about to establish their own righteousness [through insisting on circumcision], have not submitted themselves to the righteousness of God" (10:3). This is perhaps the most straightforward statement yet about the contrast he has been making throughout the letter between the righteousness

of man and of God. The Jews as a whole did not acknowledge that the righteousness of Christ was demonstrated with power by the Resurrection. “For Moses describes the righteousness which is of the law, that the man who does those things shall live by them” (10:5). That man was Jesus Christ. He did those things, he fulfilled the law and obtained life through his righteousness. As for the Jews and their righteousness—the old covenant to which they were clinging—the old husband—it did not give them life. Their lack of righteousness led to the destruction of Israel, and, in calling for the crucifixion of the Son of God, would soon lead to annihilation.

What is the “righteousness of God” in Paul’s mind? We believe it is this: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). God fulfilled his promise of salvation in Christ. This shows his righteousness. Christ came out of love to fulfill the law, since mortals were incapable of fulfilling it themselves; to be righteous on their behalf, obedient unto death, for “love is the fulfilling of the law” (13:10). He came to give them the gift of righteousness through faith and thus to change the course of human existence. The Jews, his own people, rejected him and “refused to submit” to his righteousness. They were stiff-necked and did not recognize the bridegroom coming up out of the desert in his casket or understand that “Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone that believes” (10:4).

Christ is the “end of the law” because he was righteous. “He who does these things shall live by them,” and he did do them, and he gained life. He alone obtained the righteousness that the Jews had been dreaming about ever since they received the law. His righteousness could give them life if they submitted to it; that is, if they acknowledged him as the Son of God and had faith in him

and the power of his blood, righteously shed to save them. They refused to submit because they were too proud to let go of their own righteousness. They wanted to fulfill the law so they could boast in it. Paul was just like them until he was compelled to see that Christ is the living Son of God. He prays from his heart for his fellow Jews to be shown this supreme converting grace as well; for God's covenant with them, which cannot be broken, to be confirmed in a glorious interruption as it was for him.

Christ may also be the "end of the law" in another way, as many commentators argue, Schreiner among them. The outward forms of the law that the Jews were using to compare themselves with others had literally come to an end with Christ's all-sufficient sacrifice. They did not realize it yet because their identity was based on those things in an age when they had become a doormat for the Roman Empire. They thought the Messiah was going to lift them off the doormat. They thought he was going to pull down their enemies and purify Jerusalem of the uncircumcised pestilence. They did not understand that the enemy he came to conquer was not the Romans, the pagan filth in the city, but the filth within. He came to conquer sin and the grave.

In order to accept this, they had to submit to his righteousness, which they were unwilling to do. The Judaizers continued to cling to a little mark in the flesh to distinguish themselves from the Gentiles when Christ had washed the Gentiles clean through his blood and given them a righteousness no one can obtain through the law. "For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him. For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (10:12-13). The Lord will be rich to those who call upon him for salvation, rich in mercy like the father of the prodigal, killing the fatted calf

to celebrate his return from depravity. But most of the Jews refused to call upon Christ. They did not submit to his righteousness. Paul would love nothing more than for them to see the glory of God's righteousness compared with the empty righteousness to which they were clinging through the law. But they were too proud to submit to Christ as their Savior.

These arguments are about *humility*. Paradise and perfect unity were lost when we rebelled and tried to be like God—but then the only way back is to humble ourselves and submit to God and his righteousness. If we call upon his name for salvation, we obtain life and the identity of sons of God instead of the degradation of the grave and condemnation under the law. This is what many “Greeks” were willing to do, and it is what most Jews were unwilling to do; hence the proliferation of Gentiles and paucity of Jews in the early church. The law was given as our taskmaster to humble us and ready our hearts for the coming of a merciful Savior. Therefore we should boast in Christ and not in the law; in his salvation and not any salvation we can earn for ourselves through the deeds of the flesh. This has been Paul's message all along. And it is for the sake of unity in the visionary church.

We must walk in the Spirit and not in the flesh. We must be full of grace and tenderness instead of condemnation and judgment. We must stop making distinctions based on the ceremonial law and trying to exclude others from the kingdom. Paul did not understand any of this until he was knocked off his donkey. He did not understand that the law was given to humble us. He did not understand the righteousness of God or how Christ is the end of the law according to the prophetic words of Moses. He knows the benightedness of the Jews because he was just like them. He was a proud Pharisee who happily persecuted Christians until God

humbled him. He sympathizes with his fellow Jews and wants them to be saved as well, to be cast down into the dust so that the scales would fall from their eyes and they would see the glory of Christ's righteousness in the Resurrection. It is to this end that he has been deconstructing their righteousness all along.

HOLINESS BOASTING AND THE CONCEPT OF RIGHTEOUSNESS BY FAITH

Paul says Christ is the end of the law for righteousness. We think this means that Christ was the epitome of righteousness, since he goes on to say: "For Moses describes the righteousness which is of the law, That the man who does those things shall live by them" (10:5). Moses promised life to those who fulfill the law, but the only one who actually did this was Christ. Therefore, he is the "end" or epitome of the law. This is relevant to Paul's ongoing comparison between God's righteousness and the righteousness the Jews were seeking in circumcision. Moses himself indicated that Israel was stiff-necked and would not obtain life through the law. In fact he made a formidable list of the curses they would bring upon themselves through their disobedience. But how do we get from the lawgiver's own soulful view of the law as a humbling force to the holiness boasting seen among the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' time, those "whited sepulchers" that he complained about so bitterly? We get there through the outer forms of the law; the "letter of the law," as Paul calls it. Jews were capable of obeying the ceremonial law because it is merely outward. They were also capable of obeying the moral law in a purely outward sense. This made them think they had the right to boast about their righteousness, like the Pharisee who compares himself with the lowly tax collector. And this same boasting, in Paul's mind, is what is seen in the Judaizers when they

insist that the Gentiles must be circumcised.

Anyone can make himself seem holy by the letter of the law because the letter is outward; it is what is written. But Paul has shown through his confession that no one can make himself holy through the spirit of the law, which points to the unseen man. Christ brought this home in a highly disconcerting way. “But I say unto you, that whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment” (Matt. 5:27). It is entirely possible to be circumcised, and to observe the Sabbath, and to tithe and be charitable and avoid breaking the ten commandments in such a way that anyone would notice—but no one can go through life without being angry with his brother for no reason. We are not capable of it by nature. If this is the spiritual meaning of the commandment, then all are doomed, no matter how much they might love the law or want to follow it. Similarly, “Whosoever looks on a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matt. 5:28). Are there any men who can justify themselves by this rigorous standard of holiness? The proximate cause of these teachings was the holiness boasting of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. Christ said our righteousness must exceed theirs, and then used these examples to show what he had in mind. His point was that we all fall short of the glory of God as revealed in his most holy law.

Being mindful of our shortcomings, we should not be conceited, like the Pharisee on the street corner—or the Judaizers. We should not be boasting in the law at the expense of others. Instead, we should be as humble as Moses, whose meekness was “above all the men which were on the face of the earth” (Num. 12:23). All holiness boasting is ruled out by the very law in which we make our boast, for only Christ fulfilled the law and obtained

life through the law. Paul emphasizes this by interpreting something Moses said in a new way. Moses encouraged the Israelites when he gave them the law by telling them it was not too hard to obey, at least in this sense: "It is not in heaven, that you should say, Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it?" (Deut. 30:12). The law was not far off. No, it was close to them, in their mouths and hearts, because God had given it to them. They literally carried it around with them in the Ark. But since Moses' time, it had become abundantly clear that the law *was* far off in the sense that no one was capable of fulfilling it. Israel did not follow the law and even lost the Ark and the tablets on which the commandments were written, according to Jeremiah.¹

Paul has argued since the beginning of the letter that the Jews had nothing to boast about when it came to the law. Their righteousness cannot be compared with the righteousness of Christ, as seen in the Resurrection. He expands on this argument by using Moses' idea of not having to ascend into heaven to know the law. Instead of saying that the law is easy to grasp because it is "very close to you, nearby, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it" (Deut. 30:14), he argues that the righteousness seen in Christ is *not* something we should attempt to grasp. We should not boast in the law by judging others because we cannot do what Christ did. "But the righteousness which is of faith speaks on this wise, Say not in your heart, Who shall ascend into heaven? (that is, to bring Christ down from above:) Or, Who shall descend into the deep? (that is, to bring up Christ again from the dead)" (10:6-7). These verses echo Ephesians 4:7-13, where Christ's righteousness

1 It is also possible that he was thinking of Prov. 30:3-4: "Neither [have I] learned wisdom, nor have the knowledge of the holy. Who has ascended up into heaven, or descended?" If so, then the sense would be that it is beyond our intellectual capacity to try to ascend or descend like Christ.

is similarly glorified; and there the idea of the power of Christ to ascend and descend is explicitly linked to unity.

Paul's point is that we cannot go up into heaven or down into the abyss like Christ because we are sinners. Boasting in the law like the Judaizers insults Christ and his righteousness. We diminish his glory when we attempt to glory in the law. "Whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased, and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted" (Matt. 23:12). Christ did not just say this; he modeled it by going to the cross. Because of him, salvation is no longer a matter of trying to justify ourselves, aspiring to ascend and descend with him as if we were the end of the law. Such heroic measures are no longer necessary because a new word is in our mouths—the word of faith, which is better than the word Moses talked about since it is based on grace and not judgment. Christ is our redeemer. All we have to do to be saved is put our faith in him and his righteousness. The Jews insisted that the Gentiles had to be circumcised to be saved, but here is Paul's response: "If you shall confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus, and shall believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you shall be saved. For with the heart, man believes unto righteousness; and with the mouth, confession is made unto salvation" (10:9-10). We obtain righteousness through faith even if we have not been circumcised. By reinterpreting Moses, Paul promotes unity and levels the playing field for the Gentiles. (We agree with Schreiner, whose views on this section of the letter seem quite similar to our own.)

Paul wanted unity. Christ wanted unity. What do we want? Unity seems to have been pushed aside in the modern church. We pay little more than lip service to it when we pay any attention at all. But the time may come when we will be reminded of how important it is. Unity is the threefold cord that cannot be broken.

Christ knew his followers needed to be united in order to weather the coming storm when they would be persecuted by those trying to extinguish the faith. And the day may come when we will again find ourselves in troubled waters. The age of Christianity is being supplanted by something that purports to clothe itself in light but is a great deception. Modern civilization increasingly resembles Paul's description of Rome at the end of the first chapter. We sin and boast in our sinning. It is no longer impossible to imagine a return of the empires of paganism or the worship of Diana or Artemis. And if that time comes, perhaps nothing will seem more desirable or needful than the unity of those who believe.

In any case, the point we have been making is that this section of the letter is about boasting in the law, and therefore about unity. All boasting about our own righteousness and condemnation of others is ruled out by the righteousness that comes by faith. This is the concept that Paul has been trying to get across. Christ is our hero, our Joshua; we find our way into the Promised Land on his coattails; which is good news, since we cannot do it by ourselves. But if we are saved by calling on his name, then we cannot go on boasting of our righteousness and judging others. We cannot look down on them and separate ourselves from them based on the law, as if we were capable of fulfilling it. "For the scripture says, Whosoever believes on him shall not be ashamed. For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him. Whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (10:11-13). The uncircumcised Gentiles are saved through faith; therefore they cannot be put to shame.

Paul has given us the arguments we need to pursue unity. And while there isn't any boasting about circumcision going on in our churches today, we certainly have found other things to boast about.

It seems everybody wants to tell us what is needful for salvation, in effect raising up themselves and their piety at the expense of others. Therefore we love this verse with all our heart: “If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus, and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you shall be saved” (10:9). These precious words continue to unite us by taking the hot air out of our holiness boasting.

PAUL JUSTIFIES HIS OUTREACH TO THE GENTILES

Paul has just said there is no difference between Jew and Greek when it comes to the justification that comes by the law of faith. Now he defends himself for spending so much time preaching to the Greeks and helping them found churches. There were probably two sources of criticism regarding this ministry. The Jewish leaders who did not believe in Christ were “filled with envy” (Acts 13:45) and “persecuted us...forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles, that they might be saved” (1 Thess. 2:15-16). But apparently there was also opposition from Jewish Christians. Perhaps they were not happy about the influx of so many Gentiles into the church—or the fact that there were so few Jews.

The Jews were not in favor of missionary outreach in general. There is nothing in the Old Testament comparable to Christ’s command to “Go you therefore, and teach all nations” (Matt. 28:19). We can infer that the Jews in Jerusalem were skeptical of Paul’s missionary efforts from the fact that they became agitated when he said that the Lord had told him to go to the Gentiles. Jonah seems to be a meditation on this very subject. It wasn’t that Jonah was afraid of failing in his mission. No, he was afraid of succeeding. He did not want the Ninevites to repent and be saved.

God appeals to his better nature through the allegory of the vine. "Then said the Lord, You have had pity on the vine, for the which you have not labored, neither made it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night: And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than six-score thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?" (Jonah 4:10-11).

God wants Jonah to have pity on the Ninevites. In the same way, Paul wants censorious Jews to have pity on the Gentiles. It's worth noting, as recorded in Acts, that Paul did not deliberately set out to go to the Gentiles. He became the apostle to the Gentiles by default after being rejected by the Jews. "Paul was pressed in the spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus was Christ. And when they opposed themselves [to him], and blasphemed, he shook his raiment, and said to them, Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean; from henceforth I will go to the Gentiles" (Acts 18:5-6). This fulfilled what the Lord had said to Ananias: "Go your way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel" (Acts 9:15). Through the power of the Spirit and astonishing boldness he experienced success in bringing Gentiles to Christ, planting churches in far-flung places even while taking heavy fire from the local synagogues.

But it seems this success was causing resentment among Jewish Christians, who had a long-standing abhorrence of Gentiles. Perhaps they were like Jonah and did not want the reviled Gentiles, their ancient enemies, to be saved. He appeals to their better nature. Having just expressed the beautiful thought that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved, he now asks how they (the Gentiles) can be saved if they don't have an opportunity to hear that name. "How then shall they call on

him in whom they have not believed?” (10:14). This could refer to the Jews, as many commentators say, or to both the Jews and the Gentiles, as Schreiner argues; but the Jews believed in Jehovah, or at least knew about him, while the Gentiles neither knew him nor believed. “How shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard?” It was the Gentiles who literally had not heard of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. “How shall they hear without a preacher?” That would be Paul. “How shall they preach, except they be sent?” (10:15)—that is, unless either God sends them, in which case Paul’s mission to the Gentiles has divine sanction, as indicated in Acts, or unless the church sends them, which would make this an appeal to Jews to support his ministry and not be so critical. He quotes Isaiah: “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace and bring glad tidings of good things!” (10:15). It is not himself he is praising but the preaching ministry and its life-saving effects. Without this ministry the Gentiles would be just as lost as the Ninevites.

And now we have another one of those neck-wrenching course changes that caused Origen so much grief. In the middle of justifying his ministry to the Gentiles, and without providing us with the comfort of a transition of any kind, Paul apparently shifts his attention to defending himself against the charge that he wasn’t spending enough time talking to the Jews. “But they have not all obeyed the gospel” (10:16). The “they” he was talking about in the previous verses seem to be the Gentiles, but here “they” refers to the Jews in the cities where he preached. They refused to accept Christ. They “have not obeyed the gospel” and come to faith, as have many Gentiles. Paul made a point of preaching to the Jews on his missionary journeys, going to the local synagogue first; but they rejected him, as seen in Acts 13, 18, and even 28, when he

finally comes to Rome. "Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!" (Acts 28:28).

Of course there is no neck-wrenching change if he has been talking about both the Jews and the Gentiles all along. But he seems to be defending his ministry to the Gentiles by saying he was rejected by the Jews. "For Isaiah says, Lord, who has believed our report?" (10:16). Who indeed? The Jews and the Gentiles both heard the gospel from him, but it was the Gentiles who believed and not the Jews. Therefore it was the Jews themselves who were at fault for so many Gentiles coming to Christ. "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. But I say, [surely they have] not heard [have they]?" (10:17-18). Now Paul brings back his imaginary interlocutor to challenge his claim that the Jews have heard from him. Oh yes they have, he replies, quoting Psalm 19:4: "Their sound went into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the world." The diaspora Jews have heard the gospel from him, but most of them simply refused to accept it, often violently. So he turned to the Gentiles.

The imaginary interlocutor comes back: "But I say, surely Israel did not know?" (10:19)—apparently referring to the coming flood of Gentiles into the kingdom. Indeed they did know from their own scriptures. Moses said: "I will provoke you to jealousy by those who are no people, and by a foolish nation I will anger you" (10:19). The people who are "no people," by Paul's interpretation, are the Gentiles, and he will have more to say about provoking the Jews to jealousy in a moment. "But Isaiah is very bold [even bolder than Moses], and says, I was found of them that sought me not; I was made manifest unto them that asked not after me" (10:20). Paul sees Isaiah's prophecy as referring to the willingness of the Gentiles to

accept the good news of salvation from him; but as for Israel—"All day long I stretched forth my hands to a disobedient and gainsaying people" (10:21). Thomas applies this to Christ stretching out his hands to do the miracles that unbelieving Jews ignored. It shows God's frustration with his chosen people as well as his forbearance. He stretched out his hands to them throughout their long history, as on the cross, but they remained disobedient to the law of faith. They have a long history of resisting God's overtures.

In sum, Paul has just told us why there are so many Gentiles and so few Jews in the non-Judean churches. The Gentiles listened to him, and the Jews didn't. And we surmise that his purpose in doing so was to stop the cluck-clucking of divisive Jewish Christians, like the pesky interlocutor depicted in these verses.

CHAPTER 11

SO, THEN, HAS GOD REJECTED THE JEWS?

Paul has been addressing the proliferation of Gentiles and paucity of Jews in the early church to defend his ministry to the Gentiles. But this imbalance does raise a troubling question. Has God, weary perhaps of stretching out his arms to the Jews, cast away his own chosen people? Is that what Paul is implying? Not at all. Paul was a Jew himself. For that matter, the twelve apostles and most of the early believers were Jews. But then how do we account for the troubling phenomenon of the rejection of Christ by Jews in general? What in the world was going on?

Paul now reintroduces the idea of the remnant, but this time in a positive sense. There were many times of apostasy during Israel's long history, but God always preserved a remnant who remained faithful to him even in the worst of them. Paul cites the example of Elijah and his despair when Jezebel wanted to have him killed. It

was not just the volatile queen or his dangerous predicament that depressed Elijah; he was upset with his own people. Israel itself (the Northern Kingdom) had turned against God's prophet. In fact, things had gotten so bad that he felt like he was the only faithful one left, as is also suggested by his single contest with the four hundred prophets of Baal and by the slaughter of his fellow prophets. He was the only prophet left in a land that had turned against God. But God reassured him by telling him he had preserved a remnant of seven thousand who had not bowed the knee to Baal, just as he reassured Hezekiah when Sennacherib was threatening Jerusalem.

Paul's comment? "Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace" (11:5). This seems to be his explanation for the small number of Jews in the church. And we believe it is also something more. Just as God used the idea of the remnant to reassure Elijah, so Paul seems to be using it to reassure the Jewish Christians. Like Elijah, they were undoubtedly depressed by their small numbers, feeling insignificant and exposed. This may be why they were unhappy with Paul for being an apostle to the Gentiles. But to call them a remnant is to give them a positive sense of identity. The very name *remnant* indicates something of enduring value. It is a small group of people who continue to cling to what is good and true in a faithless world; in Elijah's case, the world of Ahab, who had built a temple and altar to Baal in the land given to the Jews by Jehovah. But then, it is an honor and privilege to be part of a remnant despite its small numbers.

Now, if God "kept" the remnant for himself, as he said to Elijah, then it was done by grace and not the might of men. God was the one who did the keeping. The same idea is seen in the exiles returning from Babylon. "And now for a little space grace has been shown from the Lord our God, to leave us a remnant to escape,

and to give us a nail in his holy place, that our God may lighten our eyes, and give us a little reviving in our bondage” (Ezra 9:8). God redeemed them out of the disaster they brought upon themselves and preserved them through the remnant. If it had been by works, grace would not be grace since a worker earns his reward. Paul uses the idea of the remnant, which he himself has invoked, as another opportunity to needle the circumcision crowd and remind them that salvation comes by grace, not works. They are part of a remnant created by God—a remnant of grace. This should not make them boastful since grace is a gift and not a work; but it should give them encouragement and hope and a glowing ember of identity.

Expanding on the remnant idea, Paul comes right out and says that Israel as a whole has not obtained what it seeks (righteousness). Only those who are chosen have obtained it, chosen to be part of the remnant that showed faithfulness to God by believing in his Son. This is God’s doing. It is not because of Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles that so many Jews are staying away from the church; it is because “God has given them the spirit of slumber, eyes that they should not see, and ears that they should not hear, unto this day” (11:8, quoting Moses and Isaiah). God willed the violent resistance to Paul’s gospel seen in Acts. And Paul will explain why in a moment. God’s plan is to make room for the Gentiles in the church and to provoke the Jews to jealousy so that they would return to him.

And now we believe Paul hints at what really happened in Jerusalem. Quoting Psalm 69: “Let their table became a snare, and a trap, and a stumbling block, and a recompense to them” (11:9). This verse comes after a lengthy litany of the terrible things that had been done to the psalmist by his own people. Paul does not come right out and say so, as he does in 1 Thessalonians, but it is

worth noting that terrible things were also done to Christ by his fellow Jews. The Jews rejected Christ in Jerusalem in the worst way possible. They have no right to complain about Gentiles coming into the church when they were the ones who had the heathen occupiers crucify the Son of God.

PROVOKING TO JEALOUSY

Having brought up Moses' prophecy that God would "provoke the Jews to jealousy by them that are no people" (Deut. 32:21), Paul returns to it and gives it a positive spin that does not seem evident in the original. In his view, God has been adopting scores of Gentiles into his family not just for their benefit but for the benefit of unbelieving Jews, to provoke them into a sort of redemptive envy. The idea is that this envy will cause the Jews to desire the grace of Christ for themselves. They are in the same position as the older brother of the Prodigal Son. They can reject the good news and stand apart from the feast and make themselves miserable for nothing, or they can join the party. Jealousy, the green-eyed monster, can have positive effects if it causes us to come to our senses.

"Have they stumbled in order to fall?"—the Jews, that is. They stumbled at that stumbling block, Jesus Christ crucified, but did this actually cause them to forfeit the election of God, as Esau forfeited his birthright? "God forbid." Rather, their trespass has opened the door for the Gentiles to come in. This was literally true. It was because the Jews rejected Paul in several places that he reached out to the Gentiles, as he said in Antioch: "It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you [the Jews]: but seeing you put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46), and in Corinth: "And when they opposed themselves, and blasphemed,

he shook his raiment, and said unto them, Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean: from henceforth I will go unto the Gentiles” (Acts 18:6). But even then he says that the real reason for preaching to the Gentiles was to make Israel jealous for the good news of salvation, jealous of the peace and freedom the Gentiles were enjoying.

Think about this from Paul’s perspective. It sounds like he has been taking fire from Jewish Christians for preaching to the Gentiles—but he always preached to his fellow Jews first. In some places, he received a favorable welcome, as in Thessalonica, but in others he was rejected outright, at times violently. However, he received a surprisingly positive response from the Gentiles. He became the apostle to the Gentiles not because he favored them in any way but because they were receptive to his message. It was all so strange, so contrary to expectation—Israel rejecting its own Messiah and the Gentiles calling upon his name. Paul seems to be puzzling out what God’s plan might be. Why would he harden the hearts of his own chosen people against Christ? Paul concludes that it must have been to lead them back to himself. Because the Jews rejected Christ, the Gentiles were blessed with hearing about him from Paul—but religious Jews would also accept Christ in the end and would receive a double blessing.

Although he claims to be speaking to the Gentiles, we believe he is still trying to explain himself to his fellow Jews. He “magnifies his office” (11:13) inasmuch as he is called the apostle to the Gentiles, not to magnify himself but to “provoke to emulation them which are my flesh, and might save some of them” (11:14). He has justified his ministry as a source of glad tidings to the Gentiles to provoke the Jews to desire those glad tidings for themselves. In this case, it is not God who provokes; it is Paul himself. And he had been an

unbeliever like them at one time and knew what sorts of obstacles he was facing.

With this statement, he accomplishes two things. He makes the case to his fellow Jews that his ministry to the Gentiles was also intended to benefit them. But at the same time he also forestalls any boasting among the Gentiles. He is not ashamed to be known as the apostle to the Gentiles, as he said at the beginning of the letter, but he contends that his fellow Jews have been uppermost in his mind all along. The Jews come first for Paul as for Christ himself; therefore, the Gentiles should not boast. Still worthwhile to keep in mind today. Gentile arrogance is always a good thing to avoid, for instance, when there may be a tendency to forget that we are merely grafted onto the tree and, indeed, try to make ourselves into that tree.

Yes, the Jews were always uppermost in God's plan for salvation, as Jesus told the Canaanite woman. Most are staying away from the new Christian church, but this is a temporary situation in Paul's mind. "For if the casting away of them is the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?" (11:15). God cast them away in order to make room for the Gentiles, as Paul will argue more fully in a moment, but he will receive them again, and that will be a glorious day. There are varying interpretations of the last phrase. Perhaps it means the Jews became "dead"—gave up everlasting life, as he says in Acts 13—when God gave them a spirit of stupor and prevented them from seeing that Christ was the Messiah—when they were "cast away"; and therefore when they come to Christ in the end, as Paul assures them they will—as indeed he himself did—it will be like coming back from the dead. In any case, the ecstatic imagery seems designed to reassure his fellow Jews that he loves them and has not

forsaken them.

SOME PASSIONATE METAPHORS

Paul continues reassuring his fellow Jews that they, too, will be saved and that God's promises to them have not failed, even though the Gentiles have also now been chosen. "For if the first fruit is holy, then the lump is also holy" (11:16). This seems to refer to the wave offering of the harvest's first fruits in Leviticus 23:10-11, holy because it is an offering accepted by God. The starter dough made from this sanctified offering is also considered holy and continues to be holy as more grain is added to the dough. Perhaps the meaning is that all Israel, all the grain added to the dough, is sanctified on account of the Patriarchs and the covenants, even if, for the present, they seem to have been rejected. Or, according to Thomas, perhaps it refers to the apostles and indicates that all Jews will be blessed through their belief in Christ.

The next metaphor of the tree seems a little more straightforward. "If the root is holy, so are the branches" (11:16). The root is probably Abraham and the patriarchs, or perhaps the nation of Israel, sanctified by God's election and covenant, or Judaism itself, or all of the above, and the branches are the Jews of Paul's own time. Again, both metaphors are intended to show Paul's deep affection for his brethren, ascribing holiness to the same people whom he has just finished upbraiding in rather harsh terms for their rejection of Christ, stick and then carrot.

And the tree metaphor gives him another idea. The Gentiles have been "grafted onto" the tree of faith in the one true God "and with them [meaning the Jews] partake of the root and fatness of the olive tree" (11:17). They were like a mere wild olive shoot. At the same time, Judaism is a mature, cultivated olive tree, beautiful

and highly desirable. They were grafted onto this magnificent tree “contrary to nature” (11:24) because, as Thomas informs us, the natural procedure is to graft a cultivated branch onto a wild root. For the moment, some of the branches of that tree have been broken off to make room for them, meaning the Jews who have rejected Christ. But the Gentiles have no right to be haughty toward the Jews despite their numerical superiority. “Boast not against the branches” (11:18). The Gentiles are not the ones who support the tree. Quite the contrary; the tree, with all of its richness and beauty, its spiritual “fatness,” supports them.

Since the Jews, the chosen people, were broken off at least temporarily for unbelief, Paul says to the Gentiles, “Be not highminded, but fear” (11:20). Don’t boast about the Jews being broken off for your sake or about your newfound status on the tree. If God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare the branches that have been merely grafted on, should they also prove unfaithful. “Behold, therefore, the goodness and severity of God: on them which fell [the Jews], severity; but toward you [the Gentiles], goodness—if you continue in his goodness. Otherwise, you, too, will be cut off” (11:22). Paul’s aim throughout the letter has been to facilitate unity by humbling the faithful so they would condescend to be kind and gentle to one another. Heretofore, it has been mostly the Jews who have been on the receiving end of the stick; now he disciplines his own spiritual adoptees, the Gentiles, as well (see also Schreiner, p. 608).

The Gentiles have been grafted onto the tree of the Abrahamic faith, which suggests they can participate in the life of the tree without forfeiting their own original character. They do not have to become Jews and be circumcised in order to be grafted on. They were, after all, an olive shoot of the same kind as the host

tree, although “wild,” not cultivated. But if they have been merely grafted on, then they have no right to boast about their status. It is not difficult to imagine some arrogance on the part of the Gentiles toward the Jews on account of their numerical superiority. But Paul says: “And they [the Jews] also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in: for God is able to graft them in again” (11:23). God may have broken the Jews off initially to make room for the Gentiles, but there is plenty of room on the tree for them to become Christians as well.

After all, it is *their tree*. “For if you were cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and were grafted contrary to nature into a good olive tree: how much more shall these, which be the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree?” (11:24). Note Paul’s characterization of pagan culture as “wild” and Abrahamic faith as “good.” There can be no doubt which tree is superior. The Gentiles have no reason to boast about their grafted status because the tree where they received succor is superior to their own. It is the tree that produced the law and prophets, and it is the tree that gave the world a Savior. The tree of paganism is praised and boasts many fine poets and writers, but it cannot offer the one thing men and women desire most. It cannot offer life.

So Gentiles, do not be boastful. You are very fortunate to have been grafted onto the ancient cultivated tree without having to do the ceremonial works that had always been required of the Jews. Be humble toward those devout Jews who are the natural branches of the tree but have been temporarily cut off for your sake, and incredibly humble toward your fellow Jewish believers. Again, this is relevant for our own time. It seems the temptation to run down the Jews never grows old. Meanwhile there is also a message of reassurance for Jewish Christians. Don’t be troubled by the Jews’

apparent rejection of Christ. They have rejected *him*, but God has not rejected *them*. In the end, they too will be saved, if they are willing to come home from their pigsties and call upon the name of the Lord.

HOPE IS NOT LOST FOR UNBELIEVING JEWS

The Gentiles have no right to act boastfully toward devout Jews who have not yet accepted Christ because the Jews are also part of God's plan for salvation. Many Jews may have been blinded for a time so that the appointed number of Gentiles could come into the church. Still, in the end, "all Israel will be saved" (11:26). Therefore do not, O Gentiles, be "wise in your own conceits" (11:25). Don't lord it over the Jews just because there are more of you in the church. Paul has been trying to build up the Gentiles and improve their status in the church with the election argument, but he doesn't want to encourage any holiness boasting on their part either.

He reassures the Jews that the preponderance of Gentiles does not mean unbelieving Jews have been shut out of the kingdom. Their unbelief is temporary. He quotes Isaiah: "There shall come out of Zion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob" (11:26), which he seems to interpret to mean that Christ will come out of Jerusalem and turn away unbelief from the Jews, just as he did in the case of Paul himself. "For this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins" (11:27). God's covenant with the Jews cannot be broken. He will take away their sins. Unbelieving Jews are enemies of the gospel for the sake of the Gentiles, in order to make room for them. But when it comes to election, they are beloved for the sake of the patriarchs. "For the gifts and the calling of God are without repentance" (11:29). God has shown grace to the Gentiles, but he has not "repented"

of his covenant with the Jews or changed his mind about what he promised to do for them.

Just as the Gentiles did not believe at one time but have now received mercy due to the unbelief of the Jews, so have the Jews not believed in the present time so that through the mercy shown to the Gentiles, they too should receive mercy. As the examples Paul uses to reinforce his point keep getting more complicated, it is perhaps fortunate that this is the last one. But the meaning is the same. In the end, all Israel will be saved despite present appearances. All faithful Jews who believe in the one true God will come to Christ. Just as God has miraculously redeemed the Gentiles, so he will miraculously intervene to save his chosen people. He won't forget them.

"God has concluded them all in unbelief, that he might have mercy upon all" (11:32). *All* refers both to the Gentiles, who did not believe in Jehovah until they heard about Christ from the Apostles, and to those Jews whose hearts have been hardened against Christ for their benefit, as Paul has argued. This is Paul's doctrine of equality stated in a new way. It was by the mercy of God that both Jews and Gentiles were saved and not their own righteousness; therefore, no one has the right to boast.

Now Paul appeals to the unfathomable wisdom of God to account for the weirdness of the times, like Job, like Ecclesiastes, like the psalmist and many prophets before him—the strange phenomenon of Gentiles rushing into the church while devout Jews were staying away. He has been striving mightily to make sense of it all, perhaps at times mangling the sense, but now, fully aware of his own inadequacy and of having fallen somewhat short of his own goal, he gives his great burden, his sorrow and suffering for the church, for unity, for saving souls, for the put-upon Gentiles and

his own put-upon beloved people, to God. “For who has known the mind of God? Or who has been his counselor?” (11:34).

The arguments Paul has been making to explain the phenomenon of Gentile proliferation may seem too incredible to be true, but no one knows the mind of God. Just as Habakkuk once described something inconceivable to the Jewish mind—God using heathen armies to punish his own chosen people for their disobedience—so Paul has attempted to provide an explanation for the perplexing question of why so many Jews are staying away from the church. Fitzmyer comments: “One has to realize that Paul has not solved the ‘problem of Israel,’ nor have Christian theologians since then.”¹ The arguments seen in these verses represent his attempt to make sense of it as it is actually happening, before there was anything like formalized doctrine to guide him. He humbly confesses that God’s plan for salvation is concealed in his immensity. “For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory forever. Amen” (11:36).

Paul does not know that plan. But he knows two things *about* that plan. The Gentiles have also now been chosen for adoption into the family of God, and at the same time his fellow Jews have not lost their promise as children of God. God will have mercy on them both. The arguments he musters in defense of these seemingly contradictory positions are inspired; but in the end, it is a mystery even to him—wonderful, but a mystery nonetheless—as he now confesses with his hymn to the inscrutable wisdom of God.

1 Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 633.

CHAPTER 12

“THEREFORE”

It is usually observed that Romans, like some of Paul’s other letters, is divided into two parts, one consisting of doctrine and the other of exhortations. This may make it sound like these parts have little or nothing to do with each other, and indeed, we have heard them described from the pulpit in just this way. But Paul begins his exhortations with the word *therefore*. As most commentators agree, this suggests that what came before is intimately connected with what comes after; that what comes after is somehow the conclusion of the foregoing profound and durable teaching.

But perhaps the question is *how* they are connected. And here’s where our unique lens may become helpful. All of the exhortations can be said to support unity, and, therefore, to reflect Paul’s longing for the visionary church. “Paul discusses mostly the demands made on Christian living for the sake of unity” (Fitzmyer).¹ Paul has been vigorously leveling the playing field so Gentiles could

1 Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 638

come into the church without being circumcised, including the argument just made that the Gentiles are also now chosen. Now he describes actual behaviors that should result from this leveling: tangible things we can do that lead to unity and holiness. Thus, the exhortations can be seen as practical applications of everything that has gone before.

He beseeches us “by the mercies of God” (12:1). Why? Perhaps it is because mercy is the thing he wants us to embrace in our behaviors. He wants us to choose mercy over our natural contentiousness and love of judging. He wants us to walk, as he puts it, after the Spirit and not the flesh, after mercy and not judgment. This is a choice we must make every day if we want unity. Will we continue to cling to the judgments we make about others to justify ourselves, or will we repudiate the spirit of emulation and cling to the Spirit of love? Mt. Sinai or Mt. Zion? Which are we going to go to in our minds—the one representing law and judgment, smoking with lightning and fire by which we ourselves are consumed, or the one with the cross on it, representing mercy and the sweet balm of forgiveness? Only one of these mountains offers life. Only one can give peace and joy. Only one can lead to unity.

LIVING SACRIFICES AND RENEWAL OF THE MIND

Paul begins his exhortations by asking us to present our bodies to God as a living sacrifice. He tells us what he means by this in Ephesians 5:12: “Be you, therefore, followers of God, as dear children; and walk in love, as Christ also has loved us, and has given himself for us [as] an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling savor.” To be a living sacrifice is to imitate Christ by walking in love. This sacrifice is our “reasonable service” because

Christ sacrificed himself for us and was raised again to life. The Resurrection makes the reasonableness of sacrificial living clear. Commentators tell us sacrificial living means living lives of purity, charity, and justice. But it also means laying down our lives for our friends. A sacrifice requires a victim. We make ourselves a victim just as Christ did when we sacrifice our selfish desires “that they may be one, even as we are one” (John 17:22).

Paul will tell us precisely what the “sweet-smelling savor” consists of in a moment. For now, he implores us not to be conformed to the world. The commentators conclude that this means not wallowing in the fleshly sins described in 1:18-31. But “the world” is also based on emulation, and in that sense, not conforming to the world means that we stop being like the world and biting and devouring one another in order to glorify ourselves. Paul encourages us to be “transformed by the renewing of your mind” (12:2). We know he has emulation and contentiousness in mind here as well as fleshly sins because of Ephesians 4:17-20, which begins thus: “Walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart: who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.” So yes, renewal of the mind does entail cleansing it of cupidity and concupiscence. But then he goes on: “Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamor, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: and be you kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake has forgiven you” (Eph. 4:31-32). To be “renewed in the spirit of your mind” (Eph. 4:23) also means to “live a life of love” (Eph. 5:2) and obtain the “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3).

The first sign of a renewed mind is humility. If the mind was polluted through the prideful rebellion of that one man, Adam, then mind renewal begins with returning to God on our knees through that one man, Jesus Christ, meek and lowly of heart. “For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, according as God has dealt to every man the measure of faith” (12:3). To be renewed in the mind is to make ourselves living sacrifices by resisting the temptation to boast about our holiness. This type of renewal removes the barriers created by the “vanity of the mind” (Eph. 4:17). “So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another” (12:5). This metaphor of the church as a living body is found in many of Paul’s letters. We have seen it described as a reflection of pagan literature—the “body politic” of Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero—but no such literature embraces perfect equality as described by Paul, or the idea that unity reflects the power of the Spirit and its renewal of the mind. Nor do they have the warmth and tenderness seen in Paul, for whom the church is a place of perfect love, not political accommodation.

Mind renewal requires us to “put on the new man” (Eph. 4:24), which is Christ. This type of man was new because he was resurrected on account of fulfilling the law. He was the first man of his kind. “In him was life, and the life was the light of the world” (John 1:4). The light has come into the world and shown us what is good, leading to renewal of the mind and its conceptions of things. The mind is renewed by the cross, which demonstrates the highly counterintuitive truth that the way to obtain life is to lose it; i.e., to become living sacrifices. The cross showed us that God is love, the first such demonstration in history. MacLaren observes that until

the cross, no one believed that the words “God” and “love” could be brought together in one sentence. The cross produces thought renewal, as seen in John’s first letter and 1 Corinthians 13, there being nothing like them anywhere else.

Paul tells us what he means by having the mind of Christ in Philippians 2:5-8: “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, thought it not [a thing to be snatched at] to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.”² Having been thus renewed in our minds by his example, we can “prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God” (12:2). For Paul, it was God’s perfect will for uncircumcised Gentiles to be welcomed into the church. But he may also have something else in mind with the word “prove” (*dokimazein*). We can test the will of God by living a life of love. Renewal of the mind is not just a matter of thinking. It’s also a matter of doing. Paul views living a life of love as the means of obtaining knowledge of God, as he says in Ephesians 3:8: “That you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passes knowledge.” It is in sacrificial living that we explore the power of God’s love, participating in Christ’s suffering so we may also be partakers of his glory.

2 Maybe this is a case where we should use the NASB, which is much clearer: “Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, as He already existed in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped.”

ABOUT “GIFTS”

But what exactly is he referring to with the call to “sober judgment” and thinking rightly about ourselves? In context, he is referring to how we regard our spiritual gifts. Apparently, this had become a bone of contention in the early church. The first sign of the outpouring of the Spirit was the astonishing gift of tongues granted at Pentecost. This was the same sign that Peter witnessed in Gentiles in the house of Cornelius. However, from 1 Corinthians, it seems that some Gentiles were glorifying themselves on the basis of this gift. The original purpose of the astonishing gift was to bring people together—to heal the language breach that began at Babel. Thus, the gift indicates the “unity of the Spirit” that Paul talks about in Ephesians 4:3. But using this gift to glorify ourselves has the opposite effect. It divides people and causes anger and resentment in the church.

As in 1 Corinthians, Paul counters such boasting with the gracious argument that *everyone* in the church has “gifts” given by the Spirit for building up the body of Christ. “For as we have many members in one body”—eyes, hands, heart, etc.—“and all members do not have the same office [bodily functions], so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members of one another” (12:4-5). This is a beautiful description of unity in the visionary church. Moo calls it a concrete instance of the renewal of the mind. Fitzmyer comments, “No one is superfluous or to be regarded as supernumerary.”³ If some think they are more spiritually gifted than others, based on some hierarchy of gifts, then the unity Paul has in mind becomes impossible. But if we view our fellow believers as people who have been gifted in diverse ways for the “increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love” (Eph.

3 Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 647.

4:16), then we have the unity of being equal in our value to the church, "that there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another" (1 Cor. 12:26). Cranfield comments that the "measure of faith" (12:3) Paul has in mind is not a measure by which we measure others but a measure for measuring ourselves.⁴ Hence the admonition in 12:6 that one should prophesy, if one has that gift, but according to the "proportion" (*analogian*, rational measure) of his or her faith—that is, not boasting by pretending to know things that have not been revealed by the Spirit.

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE TO BE A LIVING SACRIFICE?

Paul gives us a full picture of what he means by sacrificial living. We will just note that everything he asks us to do can be said to support the visionary church. First, let love be "without dissimulation" (12:9). We like what Luther says about this: "Nothing abhors dissimulation so much as love does, and nothing must suffer so much dissimulation as love must bear."⁵ We will also note that this exhortation follows immediately upon the plea for unity and is connected to it. In order for there to be true unity, love must be genuine. And examples of genuine love follow.

Abhor that which is evil; cling to that which is good (12:9). This applies to believers individually, of course, but also to the church, which must stand firm in an ever-buffering world and provide moral and spiritual clarity based on Scripture and the goodness of God. To be genuinely loving is not to flatter the world in its sin but to proclaim the truth about Christ and that which leads to life,

4 Cranfield's discussion of this section on gifts is detailed and excellent.

5 Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 340.

happiness, and peace. Following this principle unites the church against the world and its worldliness. Not following it divides the church against itself. Therefore, it is also a principle of unity.

Be kindly affectioned to one another with brotherly love (12:10). Genuine love is kind and brotherly. Following this rule won't always be easy since we do not always love our fellow parishioners in the way we might love our own brother. Fortunately, Paul is not talking about the *emotion* of love but rather the *disposition* to love—the conscious decision to embrace benevolence and gentleness toward all, which anyone can do, especially when inspired by the example of the cross. The emotion sometimes follows, but not always.

In honor preferring one another (12:10). Our natural inclination is to seek honor for ourselves. This is how we imagine we can escape our nothingness. But Paul wants us to re-channel our carnal love of praise into a spiritual love of praising others—spiritual because, by praising them, we build them up. As he says in Philippians 2:2-3, “Fulfil you my joy, that you be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.” This describes the conscious disavowal of the spirit of emulation. It does not flow naturally from affection because natural affection is not always present. Nor does it flow naturally from faith, since it requires will and decision.

Not slothful in business (12:11). We think the commentators are probably right that this echoes the sentiment found in Ecclesiastes 9:10: “Whatsoever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.” This is deep wisdom for combatting the lassitude of idle, undirected existence; for making ourselves busy instead of busybodies. Idle hands make idle tongues. It probably also means not being slothful in the business of the church. Slothfulness must be put aside when

it comes to the aforementioned spiritual gifts. If you have one—as Paul says we all do—then do what God has gifted you to do to build up the church; don't squander the gift or bury the treasure.

Fervent in spirit, serving the Lord (12:11). Christ's love was so fervent it took him to the cross. We, too, should be fervent in everything we do—fervent in love, fervent in charity and justice, fervent in prayer, fervent in healing, fervent in reconciliation and welcoming, fervent in church maintenance and every kind of service, fervent in pursuing unity. Genuine love is fervent love. It is not lukewarm, like the church in Laodicea. Is something blocking our zeal? If so, we should remove the impediment. "Wherefore if your hand or your foot offend you, cut them off, and cast them from you; it is better for you to enter into life halt or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire" (Matt. 18:8).

Rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing instant in prayer (12:12). Genuine love is not easy. We are reminded of Albert Schweitzer: "He commands, and to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflict, the suffering which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and as an ineffable mystery; they shall learn in their own experiences who He is."⁶ The goal of fellowship is the knowledge of the love of Christ, but we must suffer like him in order to obtain it. Rejoicing in hope and being patient in tribulation are healthy mental habits we can cultivate to help us persevere. Being constant in prayer gives us the strength to do what we need to do, to invite God's kingdom to come and his will to be done, to ask for protection from the attacks of Satan, and to seek wisdom and discernment in the guiding and tending of the church.

6 Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 561.

Distributing to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality (12:13). Charity is genuine love because it builds up life. Charity is connected with the light and glory of Christ. See Isaiah 58. Whatever else Paul may mean by abolishing the law, he clearly does not mean that the call to charity has been set aside under the new covenant. Christ gave us the parables of the sheep and goats, the Good Samaritan, and Lazarus and the rich man. Based on them, it is clear that charity has great value; we might say infinite value, since every life relieved by charity is precious in the sight of its Creator. Hospitality is also vital to unity. Keep meeting together in each other's homes and breaking bread together. Keep cultivating the bond of genuine love. Don't just invite those who can afford to invite you back. Invite those who have no other place to go.

Bless them which persecute you; bless, and do not curse (12:14). This is the hardest imperative of genuine love of all. It is seen in Christ on the cross, forgiving his crucifiers. "Blessed are you when men revile you, and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you for my sake" (Matt. 5:11). After all, this is how he himself was treated by God's own chosen people and how the prophets were treated as well. His words suggest there will be great rewards for those who follow his example. Blessing those who persecute you was practical advice in the early church. Christians were persecuted by Gentiles and Jews alike. Paul himself was a persecutor until Christ stepped into his path. He knew better than anyone that it is better to bless your persecutors than to curse them, which will earn you nothing but grief.

Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep (12:15). This is genuine love in action, real sacrificial living. We show respect for the value of life when we set aside our own feelings and enter genuinely into the feelings of others. There may be times

when their rejoicing and weeping are at cross-purposes with our own; say, when their team wins the Super Bowl, or their candidate the election, or they get the promotion or the solo or the praise we coveted for ourselves, or they have their tenth grandchild while we are still pining for one. Chrysostom says that by rejoicing with those who rejoice, we purge ourselves of grudging and envy. To do what Paul is asking can be hard, but it is an excellent contribution to the visionary church, to the world's happiness, and to personal happiness. It occurs to us that it is also the path to freedom.

Be of the same mind one toward another (12:16). Likemindedness is genuine love for the sake of unity. It is intentional. It must be actively undertaken. It can be challenging because we are all so different. It cannot be obtained in any other way than by agreeing to love each other sacrificially and submitting to the will of God, as discerned through prayer and the Spirit. This does not mean suppressing our differences when they arise—and they will. But it does require us to “speak the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15) without any judgment or rancor until we can perceive the forward movement of the Spirit, who is there to help us when we come to an impasse. It means seeking God’s will, which we have a tendency to confuse with our own. Being likeminded will often require us to sacrifice our own will and desires, “submitting yourselves one to another in fear of [Christ]” (Eph. 5:21).

Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate (12:16). This is the genuine love seen in Christ. He was kind and generous to those of low estate, as his comment on the poor widow exemplifies. He welcomed the little children. He ate with tax collectors and sinners, not exactly the religious elite of his day. His preaching ministry was primarily to the poor, as he himself said and as was prophesied. That’s because the poor needed him the most,

being abused and neglected by the world, and because he had a heart of gold. James also prohibits favoritism based on wealth and position. A church that does not embrace those of low estate does not understand the Bible and is not a healthy church.

Be not wise in your own [thoughts] (12:16). Paraphrasing Proverbs 3:7, this is a most excellent piece of advice for its own sake and great preventer of folly. But it also helps to facilitate the visionary church, since nothing is more deadly to unity than the conceit of thinking ourselves wiser than others. Wisdom is not a mountaintop experience, a perch or resting place, or anything else we might want to boast about. It is not about how much we pray, or how many Bible verses we have memorized, or how many religious programs we have participated in or shut-ins we have visited, as good as those things are. In short, it is not a merit badge. It is obtained through the process of sacrificial living. This is a lifelong process. And no one who realizes that he or she is still in the process of acquiring wisdom will ever be so foolish as to think themselves wise.

Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men (12:17). Sometimes unpleasant things happen to us in our fellowships, and we are hurt. For the sake of genuine love, we must give up the natural desire to save face and seek revenge. Moo and Fitzmyer feel that this does not just apply to people in the church but to everyone who crosses our path, to all relationships with our fellow mortals. Doing it can sometimes be very difficult. When that happens, Paul, echoing Proverbs 3:4, provides the wisest and most helpful advice for dealing with such situations that we have seen. Focus on the sorts of behaviors that are comely and honorable in the eyes of all. This thought experiment removes us from the smallness of our own perspective and encourages us to

give up our selfish pride and consider the good of the church.

If it be possible, as much as lies in you, live peaceably with all men (12:18). Christ said, “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matt. 5:9). This identity cannot be stressed enough, especially in the visionary church. We do not want to be at war with the world—or our fellow parishioners. We are warlike by nature, but those battles benefit neither others nor ourselves. Just as Christ sacrificed himself so that we could have peace with God, so we should make ourselves living sacrifices in order to have peace with one another. Do we have an obnoxious neighbor who delights in provoking us? Are there people who antagonize us with their nefarious political opinions, say at Thanksgiving dinner? Is there someone on a town committee who has too much time on his hands and is inordinately interested in what we are doing with our new deck? This is where “the obedience of faith” becomes very real. Living peacefully with our fellow travelers is also important because it preserves the church’s reputation. If we are known to be Christians and also known to be nettlesome, then this brings dishonor to God. And more on this in a moment.

Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord (12:19). By nature, we crave revenge on those who do us wrong, or seem to, because we feel they have stolen honor from us. But for that very reason, only Christ has the right to judge, since he allowed his ego and honor to be crushed on the cross. Only God can make things right. We do not have that power. This is why we should “give place” to his holy wrath and not try to supplant it with our own. Any attempt to avenge ourselves will land us in Hamlet’s pickle, whether we are in the wrong or in the right. Besides, Paul says we heap burning coals on our enemy’s head when we treat him

with kindness, again echoing Proverbs. This is deep wisdom. If we respond in kind to his offense, the conflict will escalate, but if we respond with kindness, he may see he has wronged us and repent in his heart, leading to peace. Such teachings are designed to take the ego out of our interactions with others.

Be not overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good (12:21). One of the most profound pieces of advice offered anywhere and essential to the visionary church. If we try to repay the wrongs done to us, we will reap the whirlwind. Two wrongs do not make a right, and evil cannot overcome the destructive effects of evil any more than darkness can overcome darkness. The only thing that can scatter darkness is light, and the light is Christ, who did not call down legions of angels against his enemies but forgave them from the cross. Like him, we should respond to evil with good; that is, with Christ-like love. Then his light will shine in the world. We're making this sound easy, but we know it can be very, very hard.

All these instances of *genuine love* support the visionary church. The doctrine that precedes them is not doctrine for its own sake or, God forbid, for negating the value of work. It is a doctrine designed to promote the Christlike work of genuine love, which leads to unity in the church—the unity of the Spirit, who, according to the church fathers, is love.

CHAPTER 13

SUBMITTING TO THE AUTHORITIES

Paul now asks us to submit to the authorities, arguing that their power is derived ultimately from God, who put them in place to keep order among unruly mortals. To resist them, then, is to resist the will of God, which leads to judgment. Peter says the same thing and adds that by obedient submission, we “may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men” (1 Pet. 2:15). Paul exemplified this teaching in the way he conducted himself with Roman magistrates: respectfully, openly, deferentially. Those stories support his maxim that rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but only to bad. If we do not want to live in fear of them, we should do what is right and obtain their approval.

We think Paul probably intended this to be practical advice. Don’t break the law if you want to be happy and at peace. To use a modern example, if we are going 60 MPH in a 30 MPH zone and

happen to pass a policeman, our blood pressure will rise, and our wallet will be correspondingly deflated; that is, we will receive the “judgment” mentioned in 13:2. But if we do what is lawful, we will drive by the squad car stress-free. However, we should note that Chrysostom links this exhortation to Paul seeking the “obedience of faith” among Christians in Rome in order to promote order and not the disorderliness of which writers like Tacitus and Suetonius accused them. This, too, seems relevant for Christians today, as will be discussed in a moment.

Now, of course the concept that civil authority is derived from God’s will for the sake of order does not mean that civil authorities are always doing God’s orderly will. Paul would not have considered the slaughter of the innocents or the violent persecution of Christians that took place in Rome a few years after he wrote this letter or his own persecution of Christians to be approved by God. His advice does not mean we should be willing to cooperate in any immorality, cruelty, or impiety commanded by civil authorities. In fact, we have many examples in the Bible of God *blessing* resistance to the ruling authorities. God blessed Elijah’s defiant resistance to Jezebel and her prophets of Baal in a spectacular way. God blessed Daniel with deliverance from the lion’s den when he resisted the prohibition on prayer and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the fiery furnace when they refused to bow to the idol. For that matter, if Esther and Mordecai had not resisted Haman and his evil designs, the Jewish race might have been wiped out. All of the prophets resisted the abuses of the ruling powers in Israel and Judah in the most forceful terms, just as John the Baptist resisted Herod and Christ the scribes and Pharisees.

But Paul recommends submission *in general*—as a philosophical principle, not an absolute rule. Again, this strikes us

as good, practical advice meant to foster a peaceful existence. In 1 Timothy 2:2, he exhorts Christians to pray for those in authority “[so] that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.” There were many temptations to resist the authorities in ancient Rome, some trivial, some less so, just as there are today. Fitzmyer has an excellent discussion of the historical moment, both in his introduction and in his comments on this verse. Jewish zealots who migrated to the new church may have brought their art form of resistance along with them. Others may have found seeds of resistance in the new doctrines they were hearing from Paul. According to Thomas, “In the early Church some believers said that they should not be subject to earthly powers on account of the freedom they received from Christ,”¹ apparently referring to a similar passage in 1 Peter, especially 2:16. And Schreiner and others invoke the taxation controversy that became prominent in the reign of Nero.

Paul’s advice to those struggling with such issues? Submit to the authorities in order to keep yourselves out of trouble. Echoing Christ, he tells us to pay our taxes, to honor those to whom honor is due, and to respect those to whom respect is due. After all, not every Roman magistrate was like Nero. Many civic-minded men honored Roman law, which was the model of order in the non-Jewish world, and were simply trying to do a good job for the sake of the community, as shown in Acts. They should be submitted to, not just for our own well-being, but to remain free to serve the church.

Paul’s advice reflects the Jewish concept of the sovereignty of God. Sometimes, we feel the need to resist the authorities because we don’t like being told what to do; other times, we feel God needs

1 Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Romans*, 1017.

a little help in making things come out right. But it is a basic tenet of Judaism that God is in control of history and is working out his purposes by mysterious means, even in the minute details of life. To have faith in God is to believe and trust in his sovereign goodness. It is to submit to the authorities not only for fear of their wrath but also for the sake of conscience. “For because of this you also pay taxes” (13:6). Similarly, Christ: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17). If we don’t do this, we may incur the wrath of the magistrates, but we also heap on ourselves a self-limiting burden of guilt.

And to return to Chrysostom, submitting to the authorities was also a good way to keep the fledgling church out of the imperial spotlight. Christians were viewed with suspicion in Rome. Claudius temporarily expelled all Jews from Rome in or around 49 AD for making disturbances at the behest of “Chrestus,” according to Suetonius, which may refer to disturbances between Jews and Jewish Christians. Nero blamed the Christians for the fire of Rome in 64 AD; therefore, Paul’s advice to the Roman church seems prescient. And this advice may become relevant for the same reason in our own time. Christians in the West have enjoyed a long age of “Christendom” and tolerance, but there is no guarantee that this will last forever. And if it doesn’t, then we would do well to remember Paul’s advice to submit to the authorities for our own good.

DEBT OF LOVE

“Owe no man anything, but to love one another: for he that loves another has fulfilled the law” (13:8). Calvin sees the first part of this statement as being connected with the advice that precedes it, the thinking being that we have discharged our debt to the magistrates

by paying our taxes. This is reasonable, but we tend to agree more with those who see a new thought here and an admonition to avoid financial entanglements, which is good advice because of the peace of mind it brings as well as freedom from obligations that could detract from our zeal for the church. But then, because of his fertile mind, it also occurs to Paul to add “except to love each other,” which takes him down another path entirely, or returns him to the road of genuine love after his digression on submitting to the authorities.

It is interesting to see him free-associating love with debt. As he says elsewhere, “If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, fulfill you my joy, that you be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.” (Phil. 2:1-2). That is the debt to love. Some may wonder, “How can I love x or y? I don’t even like him.” But the Biblical command to love does not mean we have to be enamored of our neighbor. To ask us to be enamored of someone for whom we do not have a natural affinity would be like asking someone with a sweet tooth to relish turnips. But the Bible is asking us to love our neighbors in the ethical sense, as a deliberate act of love, regardless of how we may feel about them.

I may not “love” Bob Smith like I “love” my good friend John Doe. I may not want to go on fishing trips with him or to the ballgame. But I can certainly refrain from doing him harm. I can refrain from being surly and uncommunicative. I can refrain from stealing from Bob, slandering him, or coveting his new Escalade. I can refrain from boasting at his expense. I can help Bob if he stumbles on bad times, gets sick, or needs help fixing his barn. If Bob does some work for me, I can pay him fair wages, on time, and not grumble. If he is charged falsely with wrongdoing, I can stand up in his defense. If someone says bad things about him, I can

refrain from piling on; or better yet, speak up on his behalf.

These are *ethical actions of love*. Biblical love builds up others, just as Christ built up sinners on the cross, which is the highest example of love. It doesn't necessarily have anything to do with fond emotions, just as Christ was probably not enamored of the people who crucified him or were making fun of him. Kierkegaard has something interesting to say about this. When we obey the ethical command to love despite our natural inclinations, we step out of the temporal realm and into the eternal. We exchange changeable loves—love based on the desirability of the object—for Christian love, which is centered in Christ and his example of love on the cross; a love that is never-changing and has enduring value.

Paul penned the greatest description of love in all literature in 1 Corinthians 13. He does not depict love as emotion. He does not say love is pleasant, or warms the heart. Instead, “love suffers long, and is kind; love envies not; love vaunts not itself, is not puffed up, does not behave itself unseemly, seeks not her own, is not easily provoked, thinks no evil” (1 Cor. 13:4-5). This is a purely ethical description of love. These are actions, not feelings, and what ties them together is the *value of life*. Christian love, as described by Paul, preserves and builds up life. This is what makes 1 Corinthians 13 a beacon of clarity and light to a world filled with darkness when it comes to love.

And when it comes to the visionary church, the specific continuing debt that Paul had in mind was for the Judaizers to love the Gentiles and stop condemning them. This is why he says “he that loves another has fulfilled the law” (13:8). Love and not circumcision fulfills the law, contrary to the Judaizers' claim that circumcision was necessary to salvation. The Judaizers were boasting about being circumcised, but they were not following the

law of love, as he said all the way back in chapter two. “For this, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not kill, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, you shall not covet; and if there is any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Love works no ill to his neighbor: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.” (13:9-10). The Judaizers were harming the Gentiles by condemning them. They thought they were righteous because of their zeal for the ceremonial law, when in fact they were being disobedient to the law of love.

The idea that “love is the fulfillment of the law” forms a beautiful bridge between the Old and New Testaments. There is a tendency in some quarters to discount the Old Testament as if it had little value for us today. Supposedly, it was all about dark things like law and wrath, while Jesus was all about love. However, this reflects a misunderstanding about both Jesus and the law. In fact, the law was all about love, as Paul tries to explain. The law tells us not to commit adultery, not to steal, not to bear false witness. To refrain from doing these things is to love our neighbor as ourselves. “Love works no ill to its neighbor” (13:10). That’s what Biblical love actually is. Perhaps there would be a more positive view of the law if everyone understood that it is based on life-preserving love; that the love everyone loves so much in Christ is the same thing as the “fulfilling of the law.” We like what Schreiner has to say: “All the various commands of the law are simply expressions of love. Love is the heart and soul of the commands so that if one begins to focus on the commands and loses sight of love, then rigidity, casuistry, and legalism are sure to follow.”²

2 Schreiner, *Romans*, 692.

IT'S HIGH TIME TO AWAKE FROM OUR SLEEP

Various meanings have been found in this call to action; we will simply add (you can probably guess what's coming) that it can also be said to apply to the visionary church. To awake from our slumbers can mean it is high time to lay aside the sword of judgment we love so much, the slumber of the bondage of death which causes us to think we can use this sword to justify ourselves, and welcome one another into the church with open arms, as Paul is about to say. He recommends a sense of urgency since "salvation is nearer than when we believed" (13:10). This might refer to the widespread belief (at the time) that the end of the world was near, or that none of us are getting any younger, but it can also be taken in a positive sense. Salvation is nearer because we are closer to obtaining it in the church. Christ said, "The kingdom of God is come nigh unto you" (Luke 10:9). This is a word of encouragement. The kingdom was present in him; therefore, it is also "at hand" in the visionary church, which is the body of Christ.

Nearer. Closer than it was before we put our faith in Christ, but apparently not quite here. And it strikes us that this is just where we stand today. The unified church Paul envisioned is nearer than it was in his time, or at least we are no longer fighting over circumcision. But it is definitely not here. Maybe *now* is the time for us to "cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light" (13:12). Maybe *now* is the time to start taking steps to achieve the unity that we all agree is essential to the witness of Christ. After all, we've been fighting with each other for 700 years. The time may have come to try something new.

CHAPTER 14

DISPUTABLE MATTERS

Although he was not the founder of the Roman church, Paul is nonetheless laying a foundation for the Christian church in Rome: “For I long to see you, that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end you may be established” (1:11). In chapter fourteen he begins to distinguish between that church and the synagogue—between Christianity and Judaism. They are very different. Judaism is a closed-door religion based on the ceremonial law; Christianity has an open door based on Christ’s wide-open arms on the cross. Paul now sets expectations regarding this new inclusivity. Chapter fourteen may seem tame and perhaps puzzling in our time of rote inclusivity, but it represented a radical change to Paul’s Jewish readers. He was blowing the doors off the church.

He has just encouraged us to put on the armor of light (13:12). What is such armor and what is it used for? All sorts of things might be said about this, and have been. Paul may have a spiritual shield of some kind in mind that protects us from supernatural forces

of darkness. As he says in Ephesians 6:11-12, “Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.” In Romans, he says we should use the armor of light to prevent ourselves from falling into works of darkness. Clearly those would include such things as “rioting and drunkenness, chambering and wantonness” (13:14). We are called upon to wake up as soon as possible from whatever sensual miasma in which we may currently find ourselves mired.

But Paul also adds “strife and envy” to the list of carnal behaviors. Here, he is thinking of using the armor of light to create the visionary church—the armor of enlightenment. If we take away the unhelpful chapter break, we find that one thing weighing on his mind was something called “doubtful disputations” or “opinions” (14:1). From the examples given, these were disputations over cultural differences, Rome itself being the ultimate melting pot of the ancient world, and the Roman church being made up of Gentiles as well as Jews, so very different in so many ways. For the sake of unity, Paul asks them not to judge each other based on culturally-conditioned differences of opinion, which was the cause of much unrest and unhappiness in the early church.

He begins by asking them to receive “him that is weak in the faith” (14:1). The doctrine bar or other expectations should not be set too high for seekers who come into our fellowship. This reflects Paul’s evangelizing spirit and tender concern for the lost sheep. He wants them to be saved, and he recognizes that new believers may come into the church at different spiritual levels from mature believers. How are they “weak in the faith”? The commentators,

perhaps taking their cue from Chrysostom, seem united in thinking that this refers to converted Jews who are struggling with new doctrines and letting go of the ceremonial law. But Paul does not tell us exactly whom he has in mind, and it seems just as likely to us that he might be thinking of his Gentile flock. After all, it was the Gentiles who were having a hard time finding acceptance in the church. The letter does not hint that this was a problem for Jewish converts.

In any case, his main point is this: welcome seekers, even if they come in spiritual rags—but not to “doubtful disputations” (14:2), as the KJV translates *diakriseis dialogismōn*, which literally means judging them for their opinions. Don’t jump all over people who come into the church with harmless asymmetrical beliefs. Be tolerant of their immaturity in the faith, for so were we all at one time. We are sure mature Christians can think of many instances of this with newcomers. It is Christian charity to welcome all who come to church and offer them the balm of salvation just as Christ welcomed us.

But—do not tolerate any divisive arguing that their immaturity might occasion. “For one believes that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eats herbs” (14:2). The “weak” in this example may be Jewish converts, as the commentators say, who are either continuing to cling to meat prohibitions in the ceremonial law or shying away from meat sold in pagan markets for fear of contaminating themselves with something that has been sacrificed to idols, like Daniel in Babylon. But vegetarianism was popular with the Greeks, dating back at least to Pythagoras, being linked to belief in reincarnation, since it was thought that the animals we eat might house the souls of departed humans (see Marcus Aurelius). It seems possible, then, that those who “eat herbs” may refer to

Gentiles who view vegetarianism as a form of moral purity.

But whether the “weak” are Jewish converts or Gentile converts, zealots or advocates of vegetarianism, Paul does not want them causing disturbances in the church due to their staunchly held views. “Let not him that eats [meat] despise him that eats not; and let not him which eats not judge him that eats: for God has received him” (14:3). Those who are weak in the faith are welcome in the church because it is the mission of the church to save lost souls. However, the goal of the church is unity and loving one another, according to the founder himself, and behaviors that lead to disunity and contentiousness must be actively discouraged. Paul is asking us to refrain from judging those who are weak in the faith. This is advice for church-building in the new age of inclusivity in Neronian Rome, the age of Gentiles coming into the church without religious training. And it is advice for today, in an age when systematic doctrine has cemented itself into church life, creating a whole new template for doubtful disputations.

He wants us to discern between tolerance of cultural differences—which is good and loving and reflects the new spirit of inclusion in Christianity—and tolerance of disputation over those differences, which undermines unity. The example he gives indicates that the basis for making such discernment is whether the matter is *doubtful*—that is, whether it violates any basic tenets of the faith or whether the differences simply reflect the diversity of the new church. Perhaps this is where the armor of light comes in, helping us to make enlightened discernments of this kind. Clearly, Paul does not feel there is anything wrong with being a committed carnivore, even one who eats meats formerly considered unclean, nor is there anything wrong with being a committed vegetarian. Each one believes he is serving the Lord in what he does; therefore,

who are we to judge the Lord's servants? The Lord himself said, "Hear, and understand: [it is] not that which goes into the mouth [that] defiles a man; but that which comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man" (Matt. 15:10-11)—evil thoughts, murders, adulteries.

The carnivore and the vegetarian are both welcome in the visionary church, but the carnivore must not despise the vegetarian on the basis of what he believes, and the vegetarian must not despise the carnivore for eating meat. They must not cause trouble by trying to glorify their own predisposition. Paul wants to bring unity to the church by showing that this is simply a matter of opinion. Both sides are right—or at least not technically wrong. No harm is done by being a carnivore or a vegetarian as long as they do not attack each other and disrupt the church. The same goes for traditional Jewish feast days like Passover. Feast days were still important to many Jews, but they meant nothing at all to the Gentiles, who were not raised in those rich traditions. Paul asks for tolerance. The Jews are not wrong in wanting to observe them, and the Gentiles are not wrong to enjoy the freedom they have in Christ from such onerous obligations. In short, no law or essential doctrine is violated by observing or not observing feast days; therefore, both sides should give up their love of judging and learn to be tolerant and love each other. They should give each other the freedom to worship God in his or her own way when it comes to matters of opinion; to disputable matters. Tolerance is an entirely new virtue in the tree that has Judaism as its root and was undoubtedly dismaying to many Jewish Christians.

Christ wants his church to have wide open doors. "Come unto me, all you that labor and have heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:30). This is inclusivity sans borders. We must

tolerate cultural differences for his sake because he passionately wants the lost sheep to be saved. We must give each other the freedom to be “fully persuaded in his own mind” (14:5) about disputable matters like eating and drinking and feast days, as long as there is no harm in them. “For none of us lives to himself, and no man dies to himself” (14:7), Paul says in one of the loftiest passages in the New Testament. Instead, we live or die to the Lord. “For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living” (14:9). Christ died and rose again to open the church to all who repent and put their faith in him. We all call him Lord; therefore, we should not judge one another based on opinion.

Eating, drinking, and feast days were the disputable matters that Paul had in mind in Romans, but many disputable matters divide the church today. Paul gives us the analytical tools we need to recognize them as such and remove them when they are impediments to unity. Chapter 14 continues to be vitally important today for the visionary church, as will be discussed in more detail later on, even though most of the specific issues it addresses are no longer causing contention.

DO NOT JUDGE!

And now we come full circle from the opening prologue. “But why do you judge your brother? or why do you set at naught your brother?” (14:10). Loving unity as he does, Paul wants us to stop judging others over cultural differences or even simple differences of taste. “For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ” (14:10). Any Christian who has any sense of self-awareness should find it sobering to think of the judgment day. It is not just that we will be judged for our self-evident shortcomings, but we will be

judged by the same yardstick we use to judge others. And for the first time we plainly see from Paul's own words why he is *opposed* to judging others. It is because we "set them at naught"; we hurt them when the law tells us to do no harm to our neighbor.

"For it is written, As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God" (14:11). On that terrible day, the *dies irae*, standing before the throne of God, our outward righteousness and holiness boasting will not avail us. Our dark secrets will be shouted from the rooftops, and our confession will condemn us. "So then every one of us shall give an account of himself to God" (14:12). Paul does not quote the prophecy to indicate the vindication of Israel or eventual subjugation of her enemies, as Isaiah himself seems to do. He does not quote it to make us *proud* of our faith in God or our newfound status as God's children. On the contrary, he quotes it to remind us of our iniquity and drive us to our knees sooner rather than later. Christ is the only true judge of all creation, having earned this distinction by going to the cross. And at some point everyone will have to make his case to him—Judaizers as well as Gentiles.

"Let us not therefore judge one another anymore" (14:14). This has been the theme of the letter, from the first thing Paul says to the last. The day of reckoning is near. If we do not want our love of judging to be used against us in a very unpleasant way, then it would be a good idea to curb this unconstructive enthusiasm. In fact, let's start today! Let's wake up from our slumber and pay attention to what Paul is trying so hard to tell us. It is not enough to say we are saved by grace. Having been saved, we should be gracious to others. This is the good work Paul is calling us to do for the sake of unity and the saving of lost souls.

BUT DO NOT CAUSE OTHERS TO STUMBLE

Paul is still fine-tuning the parameters of inclusivity for the first time in church history. Having established the freedom of diverse peoples to serve God in their own diverse ways, including the new freedom found in Christ from the ceremonial law, Paul now issues a critical caveat. Yes, we are free—but this freedom must not cause others to stumble. Mature Christians know they are free from the shibboleths of the past, free to eat whatever is set before them without regard to former religious dietary restrictions—or beliefs about the inherent superiority of certain dietary practices like vegetarianism. However, we are not free to violate the law of love by harming others through our freedom. “Let us not judge each other anymore, but rather let us judge [decide] not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way” (14:13). The stumbling block he has in mind is things that might lead those who are weak in the faith into spiritual ruin.

“I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteems anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean” (14:14). Since Paul uses the word “unclean” (*koinon*) here, the commentators assume he must be referring to meats formerly prohibited under the ceremonial law. If so, then his concern might be for Jewish converts and their tender status in the faith. “But if your brother be grieved with your meat, now you are not walking charitably. Destroy not him with your meat, for whom Christ died” (14:5). No meat is unclean anymore, but don’t use your dietary freedom to drive away a devout Jew who has come to Christ and does not understand these things. Don’t be the cause of his loss of faith by reveling in your freedom, since in his own mind, this meat is unclean, and to eat it is to disobey God. Instead, make yourself a living sacrifice so others may persevere in

their faith and have life.

This seems to be the standard interpretation. Comparing what Paul says here with his discussion of the same subject in Corinthians leads to a more chilling conclusion, however. There, he addresses mature Gentile Christians who know that meat sacrificed to idols has no real malign significance. “We know that an idol is nothing in the world and that there is none other God but one.” The mature Christian, having been enlightened in his mind, has no superstitious opinion regarding meat sacrificed to idols, does not regard it as having supernatural effect from pagan gods, and is free to eat it without violating his conscience. However, those who are weak in the faith may not have this mature knowledge. Therefore, they may “eat it as a thing offered to an idol, and their conscience being weak is defiled,” the result being that “if any man sees you which have knowledge sitting at meat in the idol’s temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols; and through your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died?” (1 Cor, 8:10-11). Evidently, some Corinthian Christians were reveling in the freedom they had in Christ by going into idol temples and openly eating meat sacrificed to idols. It may be possible for them to do this without sinning as long as they know in their hearts that such meat has no occult power and they do not eat it as an act of worship. But if someone who is weak in the faith—untutored or immature—sees them doing this, he may think they are honoring idols and eat the meat to his own destruction in the spirit of idol worship.

In that case, the new convert most likely to be destroyed by the exercise of our dietary liberty would be a Gentile, since it was Gentiles who believed in those idols before coming to the faith. Also note that Paul is talking about meat eaten by Christian believers in

an idol's temple, not just meat purchased from the marketplace that may or may not have been sacrificed to idols. Thus, it is unclear to us whether the standard interpretation of the corresponding passage in Romans is accurate. But whether Paul means meat considered by the newly-converted Jew to be unclean or meat considered by the newly-converted Gentile to be an idol sacrifice with occult power—in either case, he does not want us using our freedom in any way that might bring harm to others. Luther's comment: "For although one is free to do anything, he must not make a display of his freedom, and this for the sake of the salvation of his brother."¹

The context for Paul's cautionary remarks is this: "We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but Christian love edifies" (1 Cor. 8:1). Knowledge can make us a little too proud of ourselves and cause us to act boastfully, but love builds up others just as Christ built us up on the cross. We who are mature in faith and advanced in knowledge are correct in thinking there is no blame in eating meat sacrificed to idols. "Meat commends us not to God: for neither if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse" (1 Cor. 8:8). But we sin gravely if we cause others to fall into idolatry on account of being puffed up with such knowledge. Love is the higher form of knowledge embraced in the Bible, and love makes the welfare of others our primary consideration.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The discussion of stumbling blocks inspires Paul to make one of the most amazing definitions in all literature. We should not be wasting our time on doubtful disputations over things like diet or feast days. They are not the kingdom of God of which Christ spoke. No, that kingdom is "righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy

1 Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 394.

Spirit” (14:7). Paul gifts us with a definition of the kingdom of God as part of his brief against doubtful disputation. Why does this seem amazing to us? First of all, it is not what the rabbis thought it would be. It is not a worldly kingdom like David’s, a fortified Jerusalem with walls of stone protected by an invincible army. It is three precious things that no worldly kingdom or army can give.

Another reason we find it remarkable is that the philosophers had no idea. They were wise enough to realize that “the good” is that which gives happiness, but they never managed to tell us what happiness actually is. Or they tried to define it as serene contemplation of the good, which is a tautology, or the “relative mean,” which is more like common sense than happiness itself. But Paul does us a great service by taking happiness out of the realm of philosophical speculation and giving it substance. Happiness is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit. We cannot be happy without these things. Christ described the kingdom of God in the parables of the lost coin, the treasure found in the field, and the pearl of great price. These things filled their discoverers with great delight, so much so that the man who found the treasure sold everything he had so he could buy the field.

But the parables do not tell us what the treasure signifies. We need to know what our treasure is before we can figure out how to go about finding it. That’s why Paul’s definition of the kingdom of God is so valuable. First of all, our treasure is righteousness, which we desire for its own sake, and also because of identity. This desire has been the main subject of the letter. It is evident in the Judaizers and all who judge others over meat and drink. But Paul has shown that the only way to obtain righteousness is through faith in Christ. Only he can put our conscience to rest and make us happy. This is the righteousness of God, and it excludes all boasting about

our own righteousness. “The kingdom of heaven is not meat and drink” or the judgments we make based upon such things.

The kingdom of heaven is also peace and joy. It is impossible to be happy without them. Christ is the king of peace. At his birth, the angels declared, “Glory to God on high, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men” (Luke 2:14). For our sake, he won peace with God on the cross, and the peace we have in him behooves us to pursue peace with others, as has been discussed, especially those in the church that bears his name. “Let us, therefore, follow after the things which make for peace and things with which one may edify another” (14:9). Joy, too, is essential to happiness, as Christ’s parables show. The angel said, “I bring you tidings of great joy” (Luke 2:10). Christ is our joy because he is our Savior. He dispels the darkness and gloom that covered the mountain. This is the “joy of the Holy Spirit,” who quickens believers just as he raised Jesus from the dead. Chrysostom says this joy is the “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3), found only in Christ.

Righteousness, peace, and joy. These things constitute true happiness. Paul is asking us to stop thinking we can make ourselves happy by judging others over things like meat, drink, feast days, and circumcision, and start realizing that our real treasure is in Christ and his righteousness. And the reason for pointing this out is to promote unity in the church.

CHAPTER 15

THE STRONG SHOULD BEAR WITH THE WEAK

The kingdom of God that Jesus talked about in his parables is characterized by great joy. Something precious has been found, a treasure, and its finders are delighted. For Paul, this kingdom of delight is the visionary church, where all things are united through love. He exhorts the Galatians to “stand fast therefore in the liberty with which Christ has made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage” (Gal. 5:1). The “yoke” he has in mind is the ceremonial law, the old husband, the old covenant. With this bold declaration, he removes the barriers created by the old covenant between Jews and Gentiles. Christ fulfilled the law on our behalf, and therefore we are free. No longer are we compelled to walk in the bondage of the law with its separating power in order to obtain righteousness. Instead, we are free to walk in unity and love. This is “joy in the Spirit.”

However, this freedom and openness present certain challenges in the church he envisions. He is trying to welcome people of all stripes into the visionary church; for instance, meat eaters and vegetarians. But in such a church, there will be some who are strong in the faith—mature in their understanding of the new freedom they enjoy—and some who are weak or untutored. Gentiles were coming into the church with strange and disruptive notions derived from pagan philosophy. In Ephesians 5, Paul says that the role of preachers is to “edify” them and provide them with a foundation of sound doctrine so they can withstand the false teachers and ear-tickling doctrines that were swirling about in the early church. In his other letters, this clash of cultures seems to be the occasion for issuing rules for head coverings, women speaking in church, and behavior during the Eucharist.

Here in Romans, he feels moved to try to prevent any harm from coming to the “weak” through the freedom he has proclaimed from the old covenant. He says to the mature Christian: “Have you faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he that condemns not himself in the thing he allows” (14:22). Do we know the delightful freedom we have through faith in Christ? Such knowledge makes us happy—but we should keep it to ourselves if there is any chance of it bringing harm to others. “We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves” (15:1). The welfare of the converted Christians comes first—those who are weak in the faith and cannot be expected to know what we know. “Let every one of us please his neighbor for his good to edification. For even Christ pleased not himself; but, as it is written, The reproaches of them that reproached you fell on me” (15:2-3). Christ did not go to the cross to please himself. In the same way, we should not seek to please ourselves but should

be willing to put aside the happiness of knowing what we know if there is a chance of it harming others.

But are these chapters still relevant today? We believe so; in fact, they may hold the key to restoring unity. The church is now divided into thousands of denominations wrangling with each other over doctrine. Chapters fourteen and fifteen delineate a path to the joy of unity despite our differences. It is still true that we should fling open the doors of the church for the sake of the lost sheep and seekers. But it is also true that we should not welcome any doubtful disputations they might want to bring along with them. Our concern for them should not mislead us into tolerating false teachings they may have previously imbibed. Should we, for instance, be “open and affirming,” as the Corinthians were of the man who was living with his father’s wife—in fact were proud of it? We should certainly be open, but Paul would not approve the affirmation of doctrines that have the potential to harm those who are weak in the faith. “Expel the immoral brother!” (1 Cor. 5:11).

These chapters also teach us to use the armor of light to discern doubtful disputations over things that do not violate any essential tenets of the faith. For example, it seems there is still a dispute over special days. Following Paul’s teaching, those who observe such days should not be condemned, and neither should those who do not observe them. This would promote love and unity among Christians. It is one small step, to be sure, but how can we reach our goal without small steps? Recently, we heard of some Christians insisting on keeping our bodies fit through exercise, since Paul describes them as the temple of the Holy Spirit. They should be welcome in the church, according to Paul’s doctrine, but they should not be allowed to cause harm by judging others who do not share their enthusiasm. Here’s a doubtful disputation

that may sting a few of us: should we be using contemporary songs or traditional hymns in our worship? Paul might say, “Let each be convinced in his or her own mind.” Don’t judge others based on these predilections. Don’t bring shame to God by quarreling over disputable matters.

We have much more to say about the potential usefulness of these chapters for promoting unity but will save it for our concluding remarks.

BEING LIKEMINDED

The pleasant fellowship of the saints seen in Acts 2 is something the world is craving and cannot find outside of the church. Paul describes it thus: “Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus: that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (15:5-6). This is the second time he has brought up the idea of being likeminded. We like what Calvin has to say about it, that God will not allow his glory to be proclaimed amid discords and contentions. Unity shines forth the glory of God and his reconciling love, being obtained through the patience and consolation we have via Christ and his sacrifice, as well as the power of the Spirit.

Like-mindedness is not easy to obtain in the secular world, as a perusal of any morning paper will demonstrate. However, there are two ways of reaching this ideal in the church. One is practical. We can obtain like-mindedness by humbly consenting to the essentials of the faith as seen in the creeds. It is not possible for those who affirm the Nicene Creed on Sunday mornings to be likeminded with those who deny the virgin birth, the Resurrection, or the divinity of Christ. The purpose of the creed was to produce like-

mindfulness through a consensus on matters that are vital to the faith. The battles that led to this consensus were fought long ago. Nothing can be gained from fighting them all over again.

But like-mindedness means something more in Romans. It is to seek unity by making ourselves *living sacrifices* and laying down our lives for our friends. In a church with truly open doors, it is inevitable that we will be divided by different ideas. The challenge is to be likeminded in spite of these differences and not divide into two churches or 45,000. Like-mindedness requires tolerance towards those who do not love what we love or who love things we do not love—we mean disputable things devoted to God. In order to obtain like-mindedness in a multicultural church, the meat-eater must love the herb-eater and vice-versa, not for the sake of meat or herbs, but for the sake of Christ. Like-mindedness in Romans boils down to two things. First, we must be likeminded in agreeing that we all fall short of the glory of God and are condemned under the law; therefore, no one has the right to boast of his righteousness. Second, we must be likeminded in agreeing that salvation can only be found in the righteousness of Christ, imputed to us through faith.

“Now I say that Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers” (15:8). God promised salvation to Israel, which was accomplished in Christ and the good work of the cross. And it was not just the Jews who were saved by this good work. Christ was a minister to “the circumcision” so that “the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy; as it is written, For this cause I will confess to you among the Gentiles, and sing unto your name” (15:9). These verses sum up the entire letter. Salvation is to the Jew first and also to the Greek. Paul went to the Gentiles and told them about Christ,

and they glorified God for his mercy. Therefore the Judaizers must stop condemning them and trying to keep them out of the church.

THE WELCOMING CHURCH

And what has been the point of the many arguments and argument strategies seen in the letter? “Therefore accept one another just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God” (15:7). This sums up almost everything that has been said. Paul wanted the Gentiles to be accepted into the church and not be excluded by the barrier of circumcision. As he says in Ephesians, Christ has *broken down* the wall between Jew and Gentile, abolishing in his flesh the enmity between them found in the ceremonial law and its commandments, so that the two could become one, to the glory of God and his mercy. How do we accept one another as Christ accepted us? Paul means in our sinfulness. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us; and we should accept all who come through the doors of the church in the same pitiable state.

The difference between the synagogue and the Christian church is that the church is based on the mercy found in the cross and the perfect obedience of Christ, not on the judgments found in the law. The more the church resembles the synagogue with its closed doors and the obstacles it puts in the way of the lost, the less it resembles Christ with his wide-open arms on the cross. Christ opened the doors of the church by fulfilling the law on our behalf, making it possible for *everyone* who is clothed in his righteousness to come to the feast of the Lamb. In Romans, this meant the uncircumcised as well as the circumcised. Today, it refers to everyone who calls upon his name. The soul of Christianity is salvation for the lost sheep. This is the message Jesus was trying to send to the Pharisees with his parable of the Prodigal Son. Those lost sheep are everywhere,

wandering all around us. Will we be like Christ and accept them? Or will we drive them away through our legalism?

To be like Christ and to have the spirit of Christ is to be accepting as Christ himself was. The visionary church should join him in saying, “Come unto me you weary, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28), and, having issued this sweet invitation, should strive to be as good a host as the father of the prodigal. To be welcoming is not just a matter of programs. Nametags and fellowship hours are fine, but what the lost sheep are really looking for is a spiritual haven, for acceptance and forgiveness; for a place where they can feel safe and belong; for a home, a family, a Good Shepherd. “It was appropriate that we should make merry, and be glad: for this, your brother, was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found” (Luke 15:32). A church that talks about grace but is not gracious is missing the point. It is Christ’s graciousness that makes his church stand out in the world.

MORE ON HIS MINISTRY TO THE GENTILES

Paul’s words about welcoming one another refer to the attitude of the Judaizers toward the Gentiles he was bringing into the church. Lest they miss the point he has been striving so mightily to make, he reiterates that welcoming the uncircumcised without judgment is right and good because it was prophesied in the scriptures. Psalm 117:1: “Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles! And laud him, all you people.” This looks forward to when the Gentiles would praise him because of the mercy shown to the Jews on the cross. And Isaiah 11:1: “There shall be a root of Jesse, and he that shall rise to reign over the Gentiles; in him shall the Gentiles trust.” This root is Christ—and Paul’s point is that many Gentiles do trust him; the signs of their saving faith have been seen.

Having given the Jewish Christians a bit of a scolding, he now comforts them (along with the Gentiles) like a good shepherd. “Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Spirit” (15:13). Of course, the main hope is eternal life. Abounding in this hope is the most important thing—everything else falls down without it. And Paul may also want them to hope for the dawn of the visionary church and its revelation of the glory of God.

Having been a little hard on the Romans in the foregoing chapters, Paul now soothes them with positive reinforcement: “I myself also am persuaded of you, my brothers, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another” (15:14). He might not actually believe this, or at least not entirely, or else he would not have written to them “boldly,” as he says in the next verse. But presumably he says it to soften the blow of his boldness and encourage them to come to their senses.

He is writing to them boldly because of the grace that was given to him by God, which enabled him to become a minister of Christ to the Gentiles. Far from being ashamed of this ministry—as apparently, some wanted him to be—he glories through Christ in the amazing things that pertain to God, the great mystery by which God has reconciled the Gentiles to himself through the cross, in itself a miracle beyond comprehension. He does not dare to speak of anything not wrought by him—meaning the signs and wonders through which the Gentiles were converted, which are from the Spirit—but he wants to make it clear that his purpose was to make them “obedient, by word and deed” (15:18), reassuring his Jewish critics that his goal was not merely to fill the churches with warm bodies but to reform Gentile behaviors to conform to Biblical standards of proper conduct.

It's an interesting thought experiment to imagine ourselves as first-century Jewish Christians living in the chaos and confusion of the moment. They had abandoned their sturdy ancient religion for something entirely new and radical. They see opposition from devout Jews who could not be faulted for their zeal. Meanwhile, they see heedless Gentiles crowding into the church with behaviors that are not in keeping with Jewish tradition. They are indeed the ancient cultivated tree. They are the chosen people who, after long thought on the deepest of things, and a great deal of pain and suffering and falling short of the glory of God, finally came to the conclusion that all that is required is to love mercy, do justice, and walk humbly with your God. Such thoughts become manifested in certain behaviors. It could not have been easy for the Jews to see outsiders coming into the church who did not know how to act like Godfearing people. Paul seems to reassure them that his shepherding will make the Gentiles more mature in their "deeds." He expects to see a transformation in keeping with the soulful spirit of Judaism.

But why travel abroad to evangelize? Why not stay in Jerusalem when there were so many Jews to be saved? Paul left the places where Christ had already been preached and went instead (quoting Isaiah) to people "to whom he was not spoken of, that they shall see: and they that have not heard shall understand" (15:21). Evangelism was not generally practiced in the Old Testament, as has been discussed, but it was prophesied for the time of Christ, who commanded the disciples to "go therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." Therefore Paul feels justified in going "roundabout into Illyricum" (15:19) and not staying in Jerusalem. He was the first to make an actual effort to teach all nations. He also claims he did not want

to “build upon another man’s foundation” (15:20) by staying in Judea; in other words, showing deference to the original apostles. He would go to Rome as well in the end, in chains. But for now, he is going to Jerusalem to present offerings from the Gentiles to the Judean churches. It may be that he says this to shame the Judaizers into having some respect for the generosity of the Gentiles. He asked the Roman church to pray for his protection on this trip, which, as it turned out, was needed, since the Jewish religious leaders tried to have him killed.

And this: “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which you have learned; and avoid them” (16:17). This refers to the Judaizers who claim that circumcision is necessary to salvation as well as to those who were raising doubtful disputations about things like meat and drink. Today, it can mean many things. There are many in the modern church who cause division by condemning their fellow Christians. Many are the offenses in our time against the spirit of unity that Paul wants us to embrace. And we will have more to say about that in just a minute.

FAMOUS LAST WORDS

I hope I've provided some background, however feebly, on why I see Romans as a handbook for unity in the visionary church. There is a lot of doctrine in the letter, to be sure, but most of this doctrine can be said, without doing too much violence to the text or to reason, to have a practical end in view, which is to promote unity between Gentiles and Jews. That is why so much of the letter is about holiness boasting and the love of judging that lies behind it. And it seems Romans is just as relevant as ever for this very reason. Times change, and issues sometimes change, but human nature stays the same. The spirit of emulation is the enemy of unity in our own time just as it was in Paul's, which is why Christ's sweet and sacred body is now bitterly divided into thousands of denominations.

The Bible has a certain story to tell. Adam and Eve sinned and became enemies not only of immortal God but also of their fellow beings. The paradise they had enjoyed of perfect unity was lost. Therefore, Paul describes unity as a sign that paradise has been restored: "In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace; wherein he has abounded toward us in all wisdom and prudence; having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he has purposed in himself: that in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth" (Eph. 1:7-10). According to Paul, God's plan for salvation was to restore the unity that existed in Eden before the fall. And this statement

from Ephesians can help us to understand what he is trying to accomplish in Romans as well.

Unity was extremely important to Paul, as we have endeavored to show. The purpose of our little book has been to try to lift up unity in the hearts of our fellow believers as well, if we can. But how is it possible to find a path to unity when we are divided in so many ways? We don't pretend to have all the answers, but we do have an observation. It seems that much of what divides us is a lack of communication. We talked about the question of justification by faith or works. In our view, this is largely a communication problem. It seems to us that the two sides have a tendency to talk past each other, entrenched in their separate towers, without realizing how close they actually are to agreement. Indeed, we suspect that if we could get Thomas and Luther together in the same room, all alone and perhaps with a pitcher of beer, they would eventually discover how much they have in common and become friends. For that matter, something like this has already occurred in the Lutheran-Catholic dialogues regarding justification and their remarkable joint resolutions,¹ which show broad agreement obtained through the *infinite patience* of being willing to listen to the other side and actually hear what they are trying to say.

We have suggested that one path forward in the communication struggle is to explore the model of "both/and" rather than the Western imperative of "either/or." Unity is possible, for example, if we hold onto the negation of holiness boasting seen in Paul's confession while also not letting go of the merit of human action

1 *Joint Resolution on the Doctrine of Justification by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church*. <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/luterani/dialogo/documenti-di-dialogo/1999-dichiarazione-congiunta-sulla-dottrina-della-justificazione/en.html>

articulated in Romans 10 and 12-15. The problem, of course, is that “both/and” is counterintuitive. Therefore, it requires very careful communication. In fact it requires us to become living sacrifices, laying down the entrenched positions that we love for the sake of the higher goal of unity, just as Paul asked the Judaizers to lay down their identity as “the circumcised” in order to be one with uncircumcised Gentiles.

There was a seemingly unbridgeable gap between these two groups, just as today there seems to be an unbridgeable gap between Catholics and Protestants. This can be seen, for example, in the difference between the Protestant idea of “forensic justification” and the Catholic description of justification within the scope of organic process. Is justification a unilateral one-time act based on faith only and alone—“formal righteousness”—or do we, in addition to being made just “by the justice of God,” also receive “all these infused at once, faith, hope, and love,” which enable us to continue on the path of justification through active change in our lives? Well—why not both? What is there to stop us from embracing both/and other than the law of non-contradiction, which is not a law at all but a mere invention of the philosophers? In fact, what is there to stop us from embracing the following from Paul?: “For by grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God has before ordained that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:8-10). This is both/and. We are saved by grace and not works to walk in works and not just to have faith. If both/and was good enough for Paul, why not us?

The communication problem runs very deep with this issue. Murray, for example, seems determined to hold the position that

“for Rome, justification is not a forensic or declarative act.”² He might have been better off saying it is “not *just* a forensic act.” According to Trent, the formal cause of justification is the justice of God, and the Catholic Catechism, in its very first statement on justification, says, “The grace of the Holy Spirit has the power to justify us, that is, to cleanse us from our sins and to communicate to us ‘the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ’ and through Baptism.” Surely, there is room here for these two sides to have a productive conversation about what they mean with respect to the words they are using. Perhaps they would find they are not as far apart as they think.

On the Roman side, Pohle makes the following puzzling statement in his article on justification in the Catholic Encyclopedia: “In the Protestant system, however, remission of sin is no real forgiveness, no blotting out of guilt. Sin is merely cloaked and concealed by the imputed merits of Christ; God no longer imputes it, whilst, in reality, it continues under cover its miserable existence till the hour of death.” We have never heard this preached or taught in any Protestant church, and most Protestant clergy and informed laymen would be horrified by the very thought of it. Indeed, Calvin describes baptism as “the instrument by which [the Lord] assures us that all our sins are so deleted, covered, and effaced, that they will never come into his sight, never be mentioned, never imputed.”³ Perhaps Pohle was thinking of the teaching that we are still sinners and continue to sin even after we have been justified by faith, which contradicts the view of the Schoolmen. However, continuing to sin and not being forgiven for our sins are two very different things. Here again, patient conversation would be preferable to

2 Murray, *Epistle to the Romans*. P. 360.

3 Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, 4:15,1.

staking out entrenched positions and falling into possible mutual misunderstandings.

Sometimes, communication problems arise from using certain words in different ways. One such word is “works,” which has accumulated unfortunate baggage over the ages. The Medieval church followed Aristotle and was action-oriented, as opposed to the orientation toward contemplation seen in many church fathers. This seems to have led to a concept of meritorious “works” that are action-oriented—but not necessarily Biblical. Pilgrimages, for example, became popular in the Middle Ages, as seen in the *Canterbury Tales*. As Calvin points out, they are regarded as meritorious work in other religions but not in the Bible. Similarly, many “works” in the monastic life had more to do with the seeming virtue of pure action than the intrinsic virtue of the action itself. “Good works” are works of sacrificial love that build up the lives of others. This is not the same thing as religiosity per se, as Christ points out repeatedly to the Pharisees and teachers of the law. This spiritual sensibility is reflected in Catholic doctrine regarding “works,” which is full of tenderness and very carefully expressed. Still, it is not always on display in popular manifestations of religious “works,” which in turn fuel the caricature of “works” by Protestants, making mutual understanding very difficult. But Protestants are not off the hook by any means. They, too, have interpretations of “works” that stray far from justice, charity, mercy, and obeying the commandments. For instance, you will find “works” described as Bible study and prayer in the *Institutes*. However, Paul’s description of “works” can be found in Romans 10 and 12-15. This is the guide we should follow if we desire unity.

Another type of communication problem can arise with the use of language in translation. For example, it seems well-accepted

that the divide between the Roman and Orthodox churches is at least partly due to misunderstandings arising from the translation of the Nicene Creed. The original Greek word meaning “go forth from” (*ἐκπορεύομαι*) was translated into Latin as *procedere*—proceeds from—and then “and the Son” was added. However, this shows the problems inherent in translation. The implication of *ἐκπορεύομαι* is that the Spirit originates in the Father. *Procedere* does not have this added layer of meaning. The Holy Spirit does indeed proceed from the Son as well as the Father, as we see in John 20:22, but it cannot *originate* in both the Father and the Son. But then the divide between East and West seems to have come about when the original idea was literally lost in translation, subsequently blowing up into a conflagration, in the smoke of which clear communication seems almost impossible.

The word *transubstantiation* has also become a formidable impediment to unity. We would like to use it as a case study of the types of obstacles that communication barriers pose. The Roman church continues to use this word, but not necessarily with the same connotations it once had. Today, it seems to mean simply that Christ is really present in communion. Still, in the Middle Ages, it was used to provide a scientific explanation for the great mystery of how the communion elements become the body and blood of Christ while still appearing to be bread and wine, using terminology derived from Aristotle, who was the most significant scientific philosopher of the classical world. The West had rediscovered Aristotle with a vengeance in the Middle Ages. His popularity was almost absolute, and his language and concepts as prevalent as Darwin’s are today. The word *transubstantiation* reflects this enthusiasm, making its way into the official church lexicon in the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 at the peak of the Middle Ages.

Transubstantiation simply means “across substance,” indicating a change or transformation of some kind. But the word *substance* indicates something very different to Aristotle enthusiasts than it does to us today. If someone were to ask us, “What is the substance of this table?” we would almost certainly say, “Wood.” That is because the language and thought of the modern age are dominated by materialism. Similarly, in the case of wine and bread, we would say “grapes and flour.” Aristotle referred to such things as “material substrate.” But the word he used that we translate as “substance” (*ousia*), does not mean that at all. It means “being” or “essence,” or the ultimate reality of things. When Aristotelian theologians used the word *transubstantiation*, they were not thinking of any material property of bread or wine. They were thinking of Aristotle’s laborious attempts to define “substance” in book 7 of the *Metaphysics*, as seen in Thomas’s explication. Aristotle wanted to use the concept of “substance” to go beyond the limitations of Idealism. Plato had claimed that existing things were useless to the philosopher because they were mutable, and nothing that is mutable can be good. Since it was thought that sensible things were made of form and matter, he claimed that the way to obtain knowledge of the good was to negate this uncertain marriage and seek it in purely intellectual forms, the unchanging Ideas that emanate from the mind of God and stand between him and our miserable existence. These ideas were described as self-existent entities placed in the heavens so God wouldn’t have to get his fingers dirty working with matter when informing our existence.

Plato, in his theory of knowledge of the good, glorified form (intellect) and negated matter (sense). He seems to have longed for a transcendent state of being, and this longing led him to invent

a philosophy—Idealism—that negated the value of existing things for the sake of pure intellect, which was unmixed and immutable, and, therefore, seemed to him to be “good.” However, as Aristotle pointed out, the actual result of such a method is nothingness. If we negate the value of everything that exists, then we have nothing left over on which to base our value judgments about what is “good.” He disagreed with his teacher that existing things were without value to the philosopher. In fact, in his mind, “all things aim at” the good in nature just as they do in human artifice. He showed his faith in their goodness by describing himself as a scientist who seeks to understand what is good through the study of biology, optics, politics, friendship, the arts.

He wanted to reinvest existing things with the goodness Plato had denied them and thus make them worthy of philosophical study. In the *Metaphysics*, his strategy was to make an appeal to what he called their *ousia*, or substance. Their *ousia*, their ultimate purpose, becomes an appropriate subject of philosophic investigation into the good because all things tend to the good. “Substance” in this sense was not the matter of existing things—the stuff they are made of, as we think of it today. Nor was it the intellectual forms of things that Plato characterized as their substance or ultimate reality. Nor was it the uncertain marriage of form and matter in any particular existing thing. Instead, it was their universal underlying reality. It was what we would call today their essence. The essence of a thing is not mutable; thus, existing things can be objects of inquiry into the nature of the good. Yes, this particular table, made of form and matter, is mutable. It can change shape, it can change color. But its underlying reality as a table—its genera and species as well as its causes—does not change. And these things are inherent in every table. They are not off in the heavens like Plato’s Ideas,

where no one can find them. In short, it is not beneath the dignity of a philosopher to inquire into the “substance” of existing things.

It is this specialized use of “substance” in “transubstantiation” that has resulted in such dividedness in the church. Suppose we view “substance” as the essence or underlying reality of things. In that case, transubstantiation simply indicates a change of some kind in the bread and wine. They have not changed at all in the way we moderns use the word “substance.” The appearance and taste have not changed. The chemical and molecular properties have not changed. If you take a piece of pita bread, tear it in half, put it on two plates, and a priest blesses one of them, they will decay at exactly the same rate. If you take a bite of each, they will not only taste the same but also be digested and excreted in precisely the same way. However, it is possible to say their *underlying reality* has changed in some way, which, as Thomas informs us, is miraculous and can only be understood by faith. And this is something we think even Calvin could agree with, despite his hatred of the word “transubstantiation.” They really are more than just bread and wine when taken with faith. They are, in some mysterious way, the body and blood of Christ, efficacious to wash away sins and be the food of life.

The word “transubstantiation” seemed very reasonable to the Lateran theologians in 1215 because they lived in the Age of Aristotle. They knew they weren’t talking about the matter or form of communion elements. But in a few hundred years, the fascination with Aristotle had begun to fade. An allergic reaction was setting in to the tenuous marriage of Aristotle’s synthetic method with Christianity, which led to tedious explanations and unbearable complications—a desire for a “pure” doctrine based on simple biblical truths. And one of the most effective weapons the

Reformers had against the Schoolmen was the arcane concept of “transubstantiation,” which they ridiculed endlessly. “Substance” may mean different things to different people, but one thing it never means to anyone not steeped in Aristotle or taught by a Jesuit is the essence of things. Transubstantiation uses this word in a highly counterintuitive way to mean something that is almost the opposite of what most people think of when they hear it. Thus, it was like shooting fish in a barrel for Reformers to ridicule the Schoolmen. “What?!”—thundered Luther and Calvin and many more—“Are you saying we are actually chewing on the body of Christ?” By simply setting aside Aristotle and his philosophical investigation into substance—which indeed the *Zeitgeist* had already done for them—it was possible for the Reformers to make the Schoolmen look like idiots, as can be clearly seen in the contemptuous prose of both Luther and Calvin. Now Thomas was far from being an idiot. The *Summa Theologica* is a towering monument to the genius of the Middle Ages. But he can be made to seem like an idiot by a simple change of the age, just as Darwinists consider Creationists to be idiots and love to caricature them when Creationism was the lay of the land in science not more than two hundred years ago.

And so the church became divided over this word that doesn’t even mean what it seems to say. Still today, you can hear Protestant theologians expressing anything from outrage to scorn about it based essentially on a misunderstanding. But frankly, that is not entirely their fault. The fault lies more with the Schoolmen, who used the word *substance* in a counterintuitive way under the intoxicating influence of Aristotle. As soon as *ousia* is translated into Latin as *substantia*, it has lost its original significance and become something far more concrete, Latin being a more practical language than Greek. As a result, this word continues to create

communication muddles on both sides of the Catholic-Protestant divide. Without asking themselves what the Schoolmen might actually have meant or intended by it, Protestants continue to vehemently denounce it. However, it seems that not all Catholics have the clearest understanding of what Aristotle meant by “substance” either.⁴ Thus you can find defenders of the doctrine speculating that it indicates an unseen change in the atoms that constitute the bread and wine. To Aristotle, that would simply have been a change in “material substrate,” which has nothing to do with their underlying reality. And to make things even more complicated, the idea of “transubstantiation” would have been puzzling to Aristotle himself. It uses his language and concepts, but as Aristotle defines it, *substance* does not change. That is the basis of its appeal to the philosopher-scientist. To say that the substance of the bread and wine is changed into the substance of Christ would have voided his whole philosophy and concept of investigation into what is “good.”

The purpose of our little communication case study has been to show how one word, presumably born of Christian love by scholars who thought they had discovered a scientific explanation for the real presence, became a source of bitter disputation persisting a thousand years later. Now, we are not so much like Pollyanna as to think that the highly divisive word will go away. At this point, too much has been invested in it on both sides. But having described Romans as a call to unity between Jew and Gentile, we wonder if

4 This confusion is not surprising since Aristotle’s lengthy discussion of “substance” in the *Metaphysics* is itself quite confusing. He will make statements like “substance is the essence,” which seem clear, but, somewhat like Paul in Romans, he was also trying to deal in advance with any possible objections from his detractors. He grants their position and then tries to refute it; but granting makes his exact meaning somewhat obscure.

Paul's exercise in church-building might be useful in helping us to reconstitute a unified church despite such words. After all, the differences between Jews and Gentiles were far greater than those between modern Christians. We are not divided by circumcision, a sacred rite literally commanded by God. We are not divided by anything resembling the vast cultural chasm between Judaism and paganism. We are not divided by the long-standing hatred of Jews for their Gentile conquerors. We are not divided by having one foot in an old covenant of law and another in a new one of grace. We have more to unite us than divide us, as shown by the widespread use of the Nicene Creed. And yet we are even more divided than the churches Paul wrote to in the first century. We are quite literally divided into separate siloed churches.

Personally, we have abandoned all hope for rapprochement regarding a word as historically freighted as transubstantiation. In the Catholic church, it has been used to justify the notion of the mass as a sacrifice and the adoration of the sacrament. These notions did not exist in the very earliest times of the church as described in Acts and the epistles or the Didache. They are well-meaning accretions that found their way into church teaching as a means of resisting Gnosticism. Still, Protestants will never be coaxed into accepting them, no matter how much ink or interpretive ingenuity is expended by their defenders. But does Romans have any helpful insights regarding unity despite this highly contentious word—and others like it? We believe it might. The following concepts from the letter have already been discussed in the historical context of divisions in the early church. Now we will spend just a moment speculating about how they might apply to our dividedness today over matters such as transubstantiation.

Do not judge. It seems to us that no Catholic has the standing

to judge any Protestant—nor any Protestant any Catholic—based on what one thinks about transubstantiation, or for that matter, the hyper-Protestant doctrine of memorialization, neither doctrine being found as itself in the Bible, nor in the creeds. Why? Because “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” Therefore, we who judge others based on such doctrines also judge ourselves, just as Paul said the Judaizers condemned themselves by condemning the Gentiles for not being circumcised, which actually *is* in the Bible. God has been merciful to us; we should be merciful to our fellow believers. As Christ has been gracious to us through the cross, so we should take up our own cross and follow him, welcoming one another in his name. Did he bleed for transubstantiation or memorialization? Or did he bleed to take away our sins? We all depend upon the power of his blood for forgiveness. If we depend upon our communion doctrines for salvation, we rob his blood of its power, and God’s promise is made void.

We are justified by faith and not by works. The dividing doctrines of transubstantiation and memorialization are works of the mind. But no one has ever been justified in the eyes of God by any work of this kind. Paul does not say that we are justified by our doctrines. He says we are justified by faith in the saving power of Christ’s blood and by “living a life of love” since “nothing matters but faith expressing itself through love.” If nothing matters but this, then why do we imagine we can save ourselves by fighting over Transubstantiation, Consubstantiation, Spiritual Union, or Memorialization, all works of the mind and not faith itself? By all means, let’s capitalize these things since they are capital productions of the mind—but they cannot save us from capital punishment. No one can be saved by communion without faith in the promises of God, real presence or otherwise. Faith is the saving thing, fleshed

out with justice, charity, and mercy.

He who is weak in the faith receive you, but not to doubtful disputations. Doubtful disputations are about things that are not absolutely vital to the faith—in other words, things that will cause the faith quite literally to die. There were lots of disputations like that in the early church. Jesus was not an angel, a spirit, as many were claiming. If he was, he could not have suffered for our sake. We have a whole book in the New Testament about that. On the other hand, Jesus was not just a man. If he was, he was not sinless and cannot be a perfect sacrifice. These doctrines are absolutely vital to the church. If he is not “true God and true man,” then we are not redeemed. They must be rooted out of the church, or the church will die.

The vital doctrines needed to keep the church alive have been helpfully collated for us in the creeds we recite on Sunday mornings. God the Father is the maker of the heavens and the earth, of all that is seen and unseen. This doctrine is absolutely vital to the faith. The reassuring promises seen in the Sermon on the Mount make no sense without it. Jesus Christ is the Son of God, as proven, Paul tells us, with power by the Resurrection. If Jesus Christ is not fully God—the Son of God in the tripartite union—then he does not have the power to save us. We do not have life through him, and our faith is meaningless. He was conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary. If he was not so conceived, then he was born into sin like everyone else, and again, we are not saved. He was crucified, and he was raised to life. If he was not really crucified, as some were claiming, then our sins are not paid for, and if he was not raised again, if there was no Resurrection, as others were claiming, then we are not justified.

These are absolutely vital doctrines. Without them, the

faith will wither and die. But the faith is *not* dead without the Aristotelian doctrine of Transubstantiation. It did very nicely for 1200 years without it. Nor is it dead without Consubstantiation, Spiritual Union, or Memorialization. None of these doctrines are absolutely vital to faith in the promises of God. They are disputable matters. Paul says the following to comfort his put-upon Gentile flock and silence their legalistic tormentors: "If you shall confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus, and shall believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you shall be saved" (10:9). We take comfort in these words, far more than we can say, for we find that we are put-upon Gentiles in a world teeming with earnest legalists. Please stop telling us we need to accept the capital works of capital minds when Paul plainly tells us what we need in order to be saved. Please stop trying to convince us that those works of the mind are more authoritative than Paul.

Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. Paul was talking about people who fervently believed vegetarianism was the way to serve the Lord or who believed that carnivores serve the Lord in their conviction of freedom; people who fervently believed special days were vital to religion and others who reveled in the freedom they had from the former obligation of such days; people who thought of circumcision as the seal of righteousness and people who believed they did not need to be circumcised because they were baptized and had the seal of the Spirit. These differences are far deeper than those seen among our communion doctrines. Since none of those doctrines are absolutely vital to the faith as Paul describes it or as it is described in the Nicene Creed, perhaps we should heed his advice and let each be convinced in his own mind.

Who are you to judge another's servant? Suppose vegetarians and carnivores both believe they are serving the Lord in what they

eat. Who are we to judge another's servant? It is the Lord who has died and risen again; only he has the right to judge. Similarly, all who hold to certain communion doctrines believe they are serving the Lord with conviction. If none of these doctrines put the faith in mortal peril—if they are disputable matters—then who are we to judge the Lord's servants? Who are Catholics to judge Protestants for believing in Consubstantiation, Spiritual Union, or Memorialization if none of these things threaten the faith as articulated in the creeds? Who are Protestants to judge Catholics for believing in Transubstantiation if their belief is similarly innocuous and causes no one to stumble? We describe ourselves as a Nicene Creed Christian. We fully embrace every faith statement it makes, which were consciously created to seek unity in the church. As for doctrines not explicitly contained in the creed, we reserve judgment. “Do not judge” means not judging those who are fully convinced in their own minds about doctrines that are not found in the creeds. This is not always a comfortable position to be in when religious wars are raging; quite the contrary. But Paul did say we would suffer for our faith.

For ourselves, we love the idea of the real presence. We love to think we really are eating the body and blood of Christ in some mysterious way, that the sacrament is washing away our sins and giving us life. But does this make us more Christian than those who believe they are memorializing Christ and his sacrifice, especially when he said, “Do this in remembrance of me”? The use of John 6 as a proof text for transubstantiation is inconclusive. Just as passages from Romans are taken out of context to justify certain doctrines that go far astray from Paul's intent, so the following words of Jesus are often decontextualized: “Truly, truly, I say to you, Except you eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, you have no life

in you. Whoever eats my flesh, and drinks my blood, has eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed” (John 6:53-55). Many were pressing on Jesus after the feeding of the five thousand. He accuses them of following him to obtain a full belly instead of his spiritual “bread,” which leads to eternal life. His flesh is the “word made flesh,” as John began his gospel—the incarnate word that proceeds from the mouth of God—the bread of heaven that was formerly signified by the Bread of the Presence—and his blood is the blood sacrifice of the cross. These are spiritual things that lead to eternal life for those who believe in him, while those who pressed on him were merely seeking fleshly things to satisfy mortal appetites. And there was a larger frame to the story as well: he was responding to those who doubted his divinity, which is the central conflict in John’s gospel (John 1:11). Jesus was using a figure—he is the living bread that comes from the Father—to indicate that he was in fact the Son of God. These two nested frames for John 6:51-53 are rarely discussed. Instead, the verses are taken out of context, which divides the church.

Real presence or spiritual presence or memorialization? The Bible itself does not come down definitively on one side or the other. The matter is not even discussed, either in the gospels or the epistles. 1 Corinthians 11 does not settle it or even address it. Paul is concerned about disorderly worship and the lack of unity and harmony being exhibited at communion. He wants the Corinthians to take communion seriously and stop exposing their fellow Christians to shame and embarrassment by rushing forward with their eating and drinking. He scolds them for their rude and entitled behavior on behalf of Christian love, which he will describe in a moment as the “more excellent way” (1 Cor. 12:31).

Would Paul want us “biting and devouring each other” over our communion doctrines, as we do today? It seems unlikely. He asked his fellow Jews to set aside circumcision—something directly and unambiguously commanded by God—for the sake of unity in the church. Can we, for the sake of that same unity and of our Lord who desired it, find it within ourselves to refrain from condemning those who disagree with us over the exact nature of communion? Don’t those who believe themselves to be eating the actual body and blood of Christ believe they are serving the Lord? Don’t those who feel that this actuality is spiritual also believe they are serving the Lord? And also those who believe they are memorializing? If they all believe they are serving the Lord, then who are we to judge another’s servant?

Indeed, the principle of not judging another’s servant has broad applicability to the pursuit of unity today. To choose just one prominent example, how can we obtain unity when there is such a deep divide between Catholics and Protestants over praying to Mary and other saints? Following Romans 14, we believe this can be categorized as a disputable matter. The New Testament says nothing about praying to saints, nor the Didache, and no vital doctrine in the Nicene Creed is broken by praying or not praying to them. We ourselves do not. In order for Mary to hear the prayers of a billion Catholics, she would have to be omniscient. But we are not at all dismissive, not in the slightest degree, of the multitude of sincere Catholic Christians who do pray to the saints in the devout spirit of *ora pro me*, shown so affectingly in *Otello*. They fervently believe they are serving the Lord by so doing; who are we to judge another’s servant? But by the same token, it seems to us that there should be no judging of those who do *not* practice this acculturated form of piety. They believe they are serving the Lord by directing

their prayers exclusively to the triune God. “Let us, therefore, come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16). They should not be judged for serving the Lord according to their own conception of service when they have not violated any moral law or principle of Scripture or any vital doctrine of the faith as seen in the creeds. Let each be convinced in his (or her) own mind. And there are many other examples we could give. Romans 14 strikes us as a very important chapter for those who long for unity today, as Paul did when he wrote it.

For there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Are Baptists who go to church faithfully and tithe and are charitable and merciful and fervently love the Lord in their hearts—in short, who walk in the Spirit—are such good folk to be condemned for believing in memorialization? Are Catholics of the same devout seal to be condemned for believing in transubstantiation? “But why do you judge your brother? or why do you set at naught your brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ” (14:10). Why are we Christians so eager to judge each other over what we believe about communion? Why are we not heeding Paul’s call to live a life of love and seek the unity of the Spirit? Do we imagine it is possible for us to be spiritual without this unity? Does it mean nothing to us that Christ prayed that “they may all be one” and that “they may be made perfect in one” on the very night in which he was betrayed? How can we be made perfect if we are not one? Why would we want to betray him and his spirit all over again with our divisions? He prayed for us to be one so that “the world may know that you have sent me, and have loved them, as you have loved me.” How is the world going to know that Christ is sent by the Father if we are not willing to be one and continue to cling to

our dividedness? How will it know that the Father loves the Son if we cannot love each other? How can we glorify the mercy of God when we refuse to be merciful to our fellow professing Christians? “And I have declared unto them your name, and will declare it: that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” He means declare it on the cross—the name that God is love. But how can we declare this holy name if we refuse to love one another?

Therefore, accept you one another, as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. The mercy of God is glorified in our welcoming spirit. That is what Paul means by walking in the Spirit and not in the flesh. It is the point of the letter and most of its doctrines. According to Paul, love is the fulfilling of the law. He wants us to take up the loving cross of Christ and be reconciled to one another by making ourselves into living sacrifices. Now, we realize our plea for a welcoming spirit will not be heard by those who have drawn their lines in the sand. No, our plea is meant for the ears of the little flock. “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life, and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.” The flock wishes to dwell together in his sheepfold in peace, knowing there are sheep of many hues. They do not despise their fellow Christians for being convinced in their own minds that they are serving the Lord in their own way. They are not jealous of them for the love of Christ they enjoy. They want nothing more than to be sheep following their Shepherd in diverse ways, according to Romans 10:9, and united by sincere love. Our little book’s purpose is to encourage them to “love one another” based on Scripture and not be cowed into thinking they must despise each other for the sake of some boastful doctrine or denominational chest-beating.

We hope it will also encourage them in the suffering they are likely to experience if they put the love of Christ and unity of the Spirit ahead of contentious doctrines not found in the creeds.

Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honor preferring one another. This is Paul's description of the visionary church. Does it describe the church today? Are Protestants kindly affectioned to their Catholic brothers and sisters in Christ? Do they give them an honored place in his kingdom, or are they clamoring to take the highest seat for themselves? Are Catholics kindly affectioned toward Protestants and willing to concede that they love the Lord and are justified by faith? If Paul's letter wasn't written to overcome difficult divisions like the one between Catholics and Protestants, then why was it written at all? To bring together Jews and Gentiles? It seems many believe this, for they have decided it is safe to put Paul's main message aside. They pick out verses they like, verses that seem to them to justify their views on the nature of God and man, and ignore the plea for unity and mercy upon which the entire letter is based. But the letter itself is a call to unity. And it seems to us that this call should not be ignored if we want to glorify God.

To this end, Christ both died, rose, and was revived so that he might be Lord both of the dead and living. Do sincere, devout Catholics belong to the Lord? Do sincere, devout Protestants belong to the Lord? Do they both "confess with their mouths that he is Lord and believe in their hearts that God raised him from the dead"? If so, then are they not saved? Doesn't Paul say that they are? "No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost" (1 Cor, 12:3). If both Catholics and Protestants say Jesus is Lord, then aren't they speaking by one and the same Spirit? Why is it that we seem so eager to exclude others from the sheepfold, as if we were

the gate by which the sheep are let in? Catholics and Protestants are divided by birth, affections, heritage, and history. Catholics love the culturally rich church in which they were raised, the church that was the cradle of Western civilization, as reflected in sumptuous aesthetics, made to bring a sense of the glory of God not just to the mind but to the senses. Protestants tend to be more like Thomas á Kempis. They like to meet God in their nakedness and in what they perceive to be the purity of an austere aesthetic, which they feel is conducive to contemplation and prayer. They love white, plain churches and are turned off by ornate churches with statues. Yes, people are different! But does this mean they love the Lord any less? If they both say “Jesus is Lord,” and they can only say this by the Spirit, then who will judge another’s servant?

Well, enough ranting for now. We’ve written this little book to promote unity in the church. We are in love with unity and are not ashamed to say that our efforts reflect this childlike love. But should we let Paul have the last word?

“Therefore if there is any consolation for you in Christ, any comfort in his love, any fellowship in the Spirit in you, as well as any tenderness and mercy, then fulfill my joy, that you be likeminded, having the same love, and being of one accord, one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or selfish ambition, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others more highly than themselves” (Phil. 2:1-3).

This is the visionary church.

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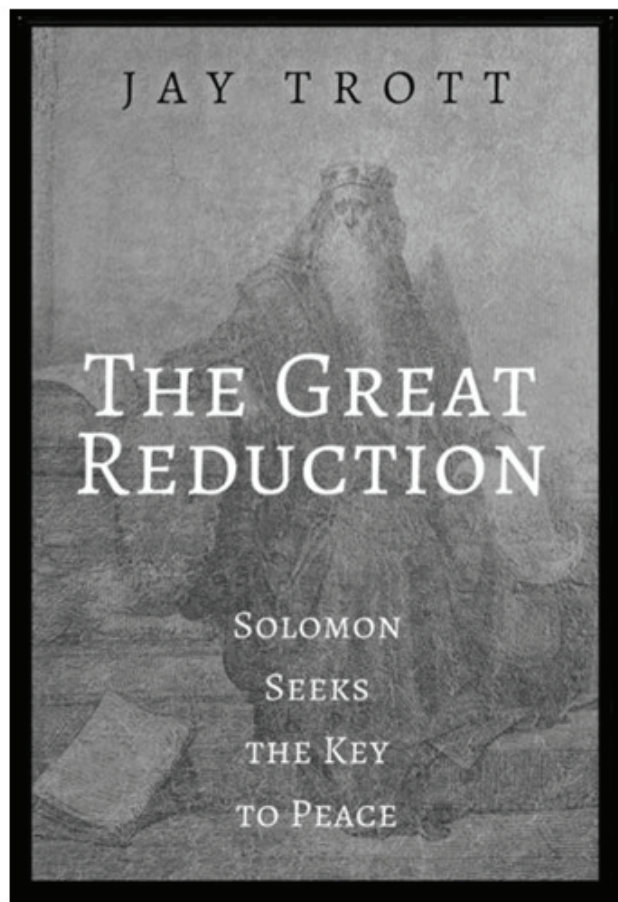
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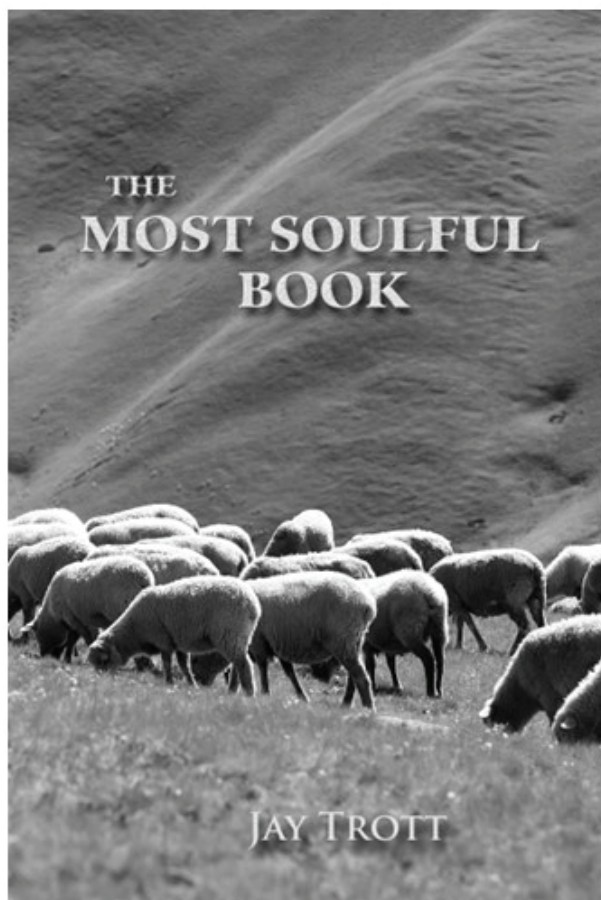
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