

Recent Studies of the Epistle to the Romans

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The English translation of Anders Nygren's *Commentary on Romans* (S.C.M., London, 1952) made accessible to us a modern exposition of the Epistle in the true Lutheran tradition, it is a truism to say that the Epistle to the Romans is most effectively interpreted by scholars who know from their own experience what Paul's argument really means. We can think of one or two commentaries, quite commendable in many ways, which fall down precisely here, because their authors fail to grasp what the apostle had in mind when he spoke about being justified by faith. The idea that he meant what his words, taken at their face-value, seem to suggest, is passed over, presumably because it is so preposterous as to be unacceptable.

It is remarkable how many movements of spiritual reformation and revival have been initiated by a fresh appreciation of this Epistle, and the part that the Epistle played, in the religious thinking of Martin Luther and in the work which he accomplished is a matter of common knowledge. The reason was that Romans spoke directly to Luther's condition, and he entered for himself into the experience of which it speaks. A commentary on Romans 'in the true Lutheran tradition', therefore, is likely to be one which brings out the essential message of the Epistle; and this Nygren's work does in a notable degree.

One point that Nygren makes early in his commentary excited some surprise among reviewers; that is his insistence that Paul understands the words of Habakkuk quoted in Romans 1:17 in the sense: 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.' But the whole course of Paul's argument makes it plain that this is how he read his text; and the RSV and NEB renderings of the verse are in line with Nygren's insistence.

A key which Nygren uses skilfully in the exposition of some of the knottier parts of the Epistle is the doctrine of the two aeons. The distinction between the two aeons appears in Romans 3:21-26, where the former age, the period of God's forbearance, is set in contrast with 'the present time' in which God's righteousness has been manifested in Christ. It appears again in Romans 5:12-21, where the old aeon, the kingdom of death 'in Adam', stands over against the new aeon, the kingdom of life 'in Christ'. And yet again it appears in the supreme *crux interpretum* of the Epistle, Romans 7:14-25, where the Christian is portrayed as living in a state of tension between the two aeons; for, says Nygren, the tension which exists, in the Christian life, between will and action, between intention and performance (is) an expression of the Christian's status as participant in the new aeon even while, at the same time, he is also in the old' (p. 293). One day the new will come to consummation, the old will be done away; but so long as the Christian is simultaneously 'in Christ' and 'in the flesh', the tension between the two must endure.

In Nygren's volume the exposition of the first eleven chapters is about eight times as long as the exposition of the remaining five. Many questions of exegetical importance are passed over in these five chapters without comment. But it is pointed out that the distinction between the two aeons dominates the ethical section of the Epistle as it does the theological; Christian

behaviour, according to Romans 12:1f., is a matter of not being conformed to the old aeon but of being transformed so as to live according to the standards of the new aeon.

C. K. Barrett's volume, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Black's New Testament Commentaries, London, 1957), is probably the most useful commentary on the Epistle to have appeared in this country for many years. Like other commentaries in the same series, it is based on the commentator's own English translation of the text. Odious as comparisons are, this volume challenges comparison with C. H. Dodd's work in the Moffatt series; and it must be said that Barrett is less disposed than Dodd to read

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his own theological views back into the mind of Paul. So, at least, it appears (*salva reverentia*) to the present writer. This might easily mean, of course, that Barrett's position is at the outset closer to Paul's than Dodd's is. Perhaps it is apposite to recall that Barrett, like Nygren, is heir to a tradition which owes a large debt to the Epistle to the Romans. The Methodist who could misunderstand the main thrust of Romans would be a very odd Methodist!

Barrett insists that *dikaioō* must be understood as a true causative (like the Hebrew *hitziq* which lies behind it)—in other words, it means 'make righteous'; but at the same time he points out that 'righteous' does not mean 'virtuous' but 'right', 'clear', 'acquitted' in God's court. In Romans 3:24 *apolytrōsis*, the eschatological act 'by which God finally sets men free from bondage to evil powers and to corruption', is seen from the context not to have 'completely lost its original sense of "ransoming", emancipation by the payment of a price' (p. 76). And while *hilastērion* in the following verse is understood as expiation rather than propitiation, 'it would be wrong to neglect the fact that expiation has, as it were, the effect of propitiation: the sin that might justly have excited God's wrath is expiated (at God's will), and therefore no longer does so' (p. 78). Barrett throughout his exposition takes the Pauline view of the wrath of God quite seriously, and is not inclined to accept the view that it is an impersonal and almost automatic force. 'Wrath is God's personal (though never malicious or, in a bad sense, emotional) reaction against sin' (p. 33).

In 1959 we welcomed the long awaited commentary by John Murray in the New London Commentary series (M. M. & S.); even so, we were given but the first instalment. The scale of Murray's treatment of the Epistle demands two volumes; the first volume takes us to the end of the eighth chapter, but the second volume has yet to appear. Here we have an exposition such as we might expect from a Professor of Systematic Theology in the best Reformed tradition; yet it must be said at once that, systematic as Murray's theology is, it is consistently based on sound and painstaking exegesis. He does not assume with little or no discussion that Paul was simply a Reformed theologian before his time; he makes a penetrating examination of each stage in the apostle's argument, paying attention, where necessary, to individual words and forms. One might consider, for example, his treatment of *pantes ... hēmarton* in Romans 3:23 and *pantes hēmarton* in Romans 5:12, and note how carefully he reaches the conclusion that in the former place the sins of men universally are referred to in terms of a historical fact, whereas in the latter place the reference is to the primal sin of Adam and his posterity's involvement therein. His commentary finds room for ample and discriminating mention of the interpretations of other exegetes, ancient and modern. 'We cease to be exegetes,' he says, 'when we try to pour Paul's teaching into moulds

other than his own' (p. 181); this is well worth bearing in mind. Four appendices deal with 'justification'; 'from faith to faith' (Rom. 1:17); 'Isaiah 53:11' (in which he concludes that the 'knowledge' mentioned in this verse is the Servant's knowledge and not others' knowledge of him); and 'Karl Barth on Romans 5'. The last of these appendices is a critique of Barth's monograph *Christ and Adam* (1957); it is an interesting exercise to compare it with Rudolf Bultmann's critique of the same work recently made available in English in the *Festschrift* for Otto Piper! (*Current Issues in N.T. Interpretation*, ed. W. Klassen and G. F. Snyder (S.C.M., London, 1962), pp. 143ff.).

The English translation of F. J. Leenhardt's commentary (which first appeared in the French series *Commentaire du Nouveau Testament*) was published in 1961 by the Lutterworth Press, London. The tradition in which this commentator stands is indicated in his dedication to the University of Geneva 'for the better understanding of that Pauline text which abundantly inspired John Calvin, founder'. Leenhardt considers that the Epistle has commonly been read in a mistaken perspective, as though the justification of which it speaks were 'a doctrine designed to save individualism—taking the word in a pejorative sense' (p. 21). It is the people

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of God that Paul has in view throughout, and if he does not make explicit reference to the *ekklēsia* it is because he presupposes it everywhere. As First Corinthians deals with the ongoing church, Romans envisages it 'in the moment of its genesis' (p. 22).

In particular (and this is the high spot of Leenhardt's commentary) the three chapters Romans 9-11 are integral to this theme; 'what we do about these three chapters is the touchstone of our interpretation of the entire work' (p. 20). His own exegesis of these chapters has the undoubted merit of taking Paul's words in their natural sense.

An important monograph on Romans 9-11 by Johannes Munck, *Christus und Israel* (Aarhus, 1956), gives a more expanded treatment to this phase of Paul's teaching than appears in his larger work, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (English translation, S.C.M., London, 1960). He links the argument of these chapters with Paul's understanding of his own responsibility as apostle to the Gentiles. If the coming in of the fullness of the Gentiles was to be the signal for the salvation of all Israel, then the more faithfully and energetically Paul fulfilled his apostolic task among the Gentiles, the sooner would the salvation of his own people and the consummation of the age to come he realized. Paul is thus seen to be a figure of eschatological significance. But such a compressed account of Munck's thesis falls far short of doing justice to one of the most stimulating approaches to Paul to have been made in a generation.

The first seven verses of Romans 13 form the subject of a monograph by Clinton D. Morrison, *The Powers that Be* (S.C.M., London, 1960). These seven verses, with their reference to the existing *exousiai*, have been much discussed in recent years. Are the *exousiai* to which Christians are commanded to be subject the 'principalities and powers' in the spiritual realm of which Paul has so much to say in certain other Epistles? Morrison shows that, while Romans 13:1-7 is written against the background of that close association between civil authorities and spiritual powers which was taken for granted in contemporary Graeco-Roman thought, Paul's point is that Christians, liberated in Christ from bondage to the spiritual forces, still owe the duty of obedience to the civil authorities, who are servants of

F.F. Bruce, "Recent Studies of the Epistle to the Romans," *Terminal Letter of the Theological Students' Fellowship* 35 (Spring 1963): 8-10.

God while they fulfil the functions for which they have been ordained by Him. The whole monograph, which combines a survey of recent work on the passage with a detailed exegetical study of it, carries discussion of Paul's meaning a good stage farther, although the last word has yet to be spoken.

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Prepared for the Web in August 2009 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

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