

"LETTER TO OUR GENERATION"

A Series of Sermons on the Letter of Paul to the Romans

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by

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"First Discovery"

On December 9, 1968, the greatest Christian theologian of our century died. Karl Barth, the most dominating theological figure since Calvin and Luther, began his distinguished career with a commentary on the Book of Romans, written in 1918. Nothing has been the same in Protestant thinking since that event. Barth saw in Paul's letter to the Romans a contradiction and challenge to many of the presuppositions held by the Christendom of the early Twentieth Century. As he sought to interpret Paul within the context of contemporary thought, the result has been a new reformation which to this day is very much under way.

Barth's first edition of the Romans Commentary was followed with six revisions dating from 1918 to 1928, all of which means that this gifted man spent a large part of ten years of his life, from age 32 to 42, in the attempt to grapple with the Apostle Paul's letter to Rome.

I think that this fact in itself deserves our reflection. Why would a bright young man spend so many important years of his life with the Bible? It is odd in a way because in granting the Bible such a high priority, he was going against a strong tide in Protestantism. The Protestantism of 1918-1928 had been infected by a decided lack of interest in the Bible and that low-grade infection still persists. When did you last read a whole paragraph in the ancient book?

Why is it that people do not read the Bible? Why is it that such a large army in Christendom is marching here and there without any serious grappling with this Bible that we piously honor as our battle orders, our chart, our guide? It seems to me that there are at least three reasons for this noticeable lack of interest in the Holy Bible:

(1) First of all, we presume that we already know it. The sentences of the Holy Bible have a familiar ring so we rarely struggle with them. Have you ever pondered the fact that many great truths are in effect lost to us when we presume to know them simply because the words are familiar?

Most Americans have memorized the words of the Gettysburg Address, and yet the incredible content of that brief thesis is not really well known. The same is true of the 23rd Psalm, the Lord's Prayer, the Beatitudes, etc. And so the Holy Bible has been victimized by a common pedagogical phenomenon in men. We tend to honor great things into oblivion. A great painting is reproduced in thousands of copies, placed in public buildings, made so familiar to us that we do not really see it. A national hero like Rizal is honored by means of postal stamps, money, statues, to such an extent that people confuse the picture with the man; we begin to assume that we know him because we know what he looks like. We Protestants have been very eloquent about the Bible. We have frequently pointed with pride to the fact that Protestant Christianity has placed the Bible into the hands of the people and not only that, but a Bible translated into the language of the people. But, we should today restrain our self-congratulations in view of the fact that most Bibles sit unopened in our homes. What we may need is a law making the Bible an illegal possession to somehow really get the Book into the hands of the people.

(2) A second reason for our lack of interest in the Bible is that we presume to have outgrown it. "Yes, I learned all of those concepts as a boy." Many people set aside great things as they grow up thinking foolishly that they have gone stale or out of date. This tendency has harmed us all. When we feel that we have outgrown laws that once had an influence over us, then we have assumed that our present basis of judgment and evaluation, now set free from the earlier influences, is superior by virtue of being later. But this can be a bitter self-deception. Many Christians have in practice treated the Bible as if it were a starting block in the great track or stadium of life, we consider it as an initial reference point to begin things while we are young and amateur; but then we quickly move out toward our own specific race desiring no further encounter with the beginnings. We outgrow the Holy Bible and having reached our adult stride, we begin the process of forgetting what had been inscribed on the ancient tablets.

(3) A third reason why people do not read the Bible is that very many of us have discounted it for various reasons as a valuable option. It is disqualified by virtue of being an old book, over 30. It is a different kind of book, telling without any hesitation of the intervention of Almighty God in the affairs of human history. It is a book with many uncomfortable parts: the Genesis account of creation is an embarrassment to some with its apparent six-day timetable. The same could be said of Adam and Eve, Noah's Ark, Moses and old Israel on the march out of Egypt, the accounts of our Lord asserting his authority over the natural order -- these are exciting, concrete events that are troubling to our expectations. The Bible is a radical book with as much about it that upsets us as comforts us.

Karl Barth was like almost everyone else in the Europe of the early Twentieth Century. He had bought the proud presuppositions of the Protestantism that was so sure of itself and its ability to build the kingdom with a few selected thoughts from the Bible chosen on the basis of what

we liked and, therefore, controlled by the same point of view. Everything that interferes with our own sense of beauty or our own theological/historical perspective was purged.

But something happened to the young Swiss pastor and a whole company of other men as well. (1) He became disillusioned with the proud towers of his generation, whether they were religious or secular; and (2) he discovered the brief book Paul had once written to the Romans.

"I have, moreover, no desire to conceal the fact that my 'Biblicist' method--which means in the end no more than 'consider well'--is applicable also to the study of Lao-tse and of Goethe. Nor can I deny that I should find considerable difficulty in applying the method to certain of the books contained in the Bible itself. When I am named 'Biblicist,' all that can rightly be proved against me is that I am prejudiced in supposing the Bible to be a good book, and that I hold it to be profitable for men to take its conceptions at least as seriously as they take their own."

He decided to read this book as if it had something to say which at least deserved as much attention as his own thoughts. What a fascinating way to begin a study of the Bible! Let the Book speak for itself, defend itself, make its own points, challenge the reader as any other book would, on the basis of its worth and the impact of what is said. When young Barth read it from this frame of reference, the impact upon him and all of Christendom was startling.

Only sixteen verses into Paul's book and the first explosive chain reaction occurred. This is what Paul says:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live."

Romans 1:16,17

If what Paul says is true, then the gospel is more important than Christendom. He is saying that God has spoken for himself in a joyous and radical event which is universally relevant and startling. Is Paul right or wrong? If he is right, then God can do without our proofs, our speculation, our religious confinements, our houses of cards. He has acted in Jesus Christ quite apart from our rules and expectations. Therefore, we had better come to grips with that word/event. Barth put it this way:

".....The Gospel is not a truth among truths. Rather it sets a question mark against all truths. The Gospel is not the door but the hinge....."

".....If anything Christian () be unrelated to the Gospel, it is a human by product, a dangerous religious survival, a regrettable

misunderstanding. For in this case content would be substituted for a void, convex for concave, positive for negative, and the characteristic marks of Christianity would be possession and self-sufficiency rather than deprivation and hope. If this be persisted in, there emerges, instead of the community of Christ, Christendom, an ineffective peace-pact or compromise with that existence which, moving with its own momentum, lies on this side resurrection. Christianity would then have lost all relation to the power of God. Now, whenever this occurs, the Gospel, so far from being removed from all rivalry, stands hard pressed in the midst of other religions and philosophies of this world. Hard pressed, because, if men must have their religious needs satisfied, if they must surround themselves with comfortable illusions about their knowledge of God and particularly about their union with Him--well, the world penetrates far deeper into such matters than does a Christianity which misunderstands itself, and of such a 'gospel' we have good cause to be ashamed. Paul, however, is speaking of the power of the UNKNOWN God, of--Things which eye saw not and ear heard not, and which entered not into the heart of man. Of such a Gospel he has no cause to be ashamed."

Karl Barth saw Paul's point and pressed its implications into our minds and wills as a thrilling new discovery. He discovered early in the book the good news of the freedom of God.