

Romans 1:8-15

The Essence of the Letter

A. Notes on the Text

Verse 8

"First": before anything else. It is not followed by a chronological second, and third.

"I thank my God": note the beginning of all Paul's letters carefully, especially the beginning of the letter to the Galatians! The giving of thanks does not take place at the end but at the beginning. An Israelite did not start the meal with prayer but with a doxology. It is Christian to give thanks at the beginning.

"All over the world": in the entire then-known and populated world. That was the world around the Mediterranean with Rome as its political and cultural centre. (For the word "world" in the New Testament, see Glossary #35.)

Verses 9, 10

"With my whole heart": with all my heart! Together with "serve" it means "spiritual worship service."

Verses 11, 12

"Some spiritual gift": when Christ comes it will be clear which gift is meant. The *charismata* (gifts of grace) ought always to strengthen the faith. (For *charismata* see 1 Corinthians 12 and Galatians 5:22-23.) In 1 Corinthians 12, *glossolalia* (speaking in tongues) does not come first in the list of spiritual gifts, but last.

"To make you strong": in 1 Corinthians 14 this is called edifying. In the New Testament this word always means: the upbuilding of the congregation in the faith, and never refers to experience or emotion! D. Holwerda reads v.12 as follows: "on the other hand to be mutually encouraged whilst among you by the faith that you and I find in each other." This clarifies the meaning of the text.

Verse 13

"I do not want you to be unaware". It means: I want you to be fully aware. In the Greek the expression is negative (as in the NIV), in order to have a more positive effect. We, too, know similar expressions; for instance when we say "not by half!" we mean "completely." We encounter such linguistic usage quite often with Paul. It is called *litotes*, "simplicity."

Why does the apostle say that he has long had the intention of coming to Rome? Had malicious rumours been spread? And also: what prevented him from doing what he intended? Probably his work in the east was not yet done (cf.15:22).

Verses 14, 15

"Greeks and barbarians" [RSV]. The latter word does not suggest cannibals! The Greeks of that time divided the world's population into Greeks and non-Greeks. The former were referred to in that manner because they were part of Greek culture and civilization (Hellenes: Greeks and Romans), while the latter were not (Spaniards, Celts, Carthaginians, Egyptians, Persians, natives of Malta, see Acts 28:1, etc.). Greeks had contempt for "barbarians" (discrimination!).

"The wise and the foolish": in Greek philosophy the highest ideal was to be "wise." Non-Greeks were considered incapable of understanding spiritual things!

Verse 16

"Not ashamed" is another *litotès* (see note to v.13): one must proclaim it publicly. No false modesty!

"Of everyone who believes": this tells us definitely that salvation is only gained in the way of believing acceptance. The apostle does not have to be ashamed of the gospel, for it is an unprecedented and immeasurable power for salvation.

Verse 17

This verse explains to us how the gospel is a power of God for salvation: it is the revelation of the "righteousness from God." For him who believes the gospel, it is the judgment of acquittal from guilt and punishment, and it gives a claim to eternal life. That is what justification through, or by, faith is. (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 23)

In the preaching of the gospel, God's righteousness is revealed "through faith for faith" [RSV]. These last words have been explained in various ways. A fairly common explanation is: there is progress in faith from weak to strong, from taking refuge in faith to assured faith. The expression would, thus, point to the growth of faith and trust. Others explain it this way: the starting point of justification is faith ("through faith" is in contrast to the Jewish "through works"), for justification starts with accepting God's righteousness; but also: where God's righteousness is revealed, faith breaks forth, for the revealed Word works faith (Heidelberg Catechism, A. 65). The latter explanation seems better to me.

Paul quotes Habakkuk 2:4b as scriptural proof: "The righteous will live by faith." Dr. D. Holwerda says the following about this text:

In verse 17b Paul does not quote a fragment of an Old Testament text just to support a dogmatic thesis. No, he reminds his readers of a historical situation, similar to what was happening in his days, to reinforce his message. Just read Habakkuk from the beginning. The prophet asks (1:2-4) if God will just leave the wrongs committed by his people unpunished. The Lord replies (vv.5-11) that he will most certainly punish them through

the Chaldeans, who will commit even greater wrongs. Habakkuk finds this a perplexing answer.

Is God going to punish wickedness with even greater wickedness? He resumes his complaint (vv.12-17) and looks forward to a new revelation. Then he is told that a promise of life remains for him who believes. Paul maintains the validity of that promise also for today ("the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes") for, he says – thereby forging a connection with verses 18ff. – wrath is revealed today, just as it was then. This consists of punishing evil with evil (cf. v.24).¹

We must realize that the evils listed in detail by the apostle are not just sins on the part of man, but also God's punishment.

When the passage from Habakkuk is considered in its context we see how meaningful the quotation is in the circumstances in which Paul is preaching.

Verses 16 and 17 do not give the theme of the letter so much as its essence. Everything that follows has to do with this essence.

B. Main Thoughts

1. As shown in v.14, Paul nips in the bud the idea that he takes his teaching only to civilized peoples, as if he were seeking spiritual elite. That would be sinful discrimination against uncivilized and undeveloped nations. Paul swears (v.9): civilized or uncivilized, wise or foolish, learned or uneducated, it does not matter to the gospel (1 Corinthians 1:23). Human classification must be rejected.

The influence the gospel has on our lives should be pointed out: it makes us wise also in daily life. It teaches us, for example, how to work and what the objective of our work is. The gospel brings with it a Christian civilization and a Christian culture. This is still observable today on the mission fields!

2. It is true that in v.16 the apostle does make a distinction between Jew and non-Jew (Greek). It is not a distinction between higher and lower orders, however, for in the gospel they stand on the same plane (Romans 10:12; Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11). Rather, it is the difference between sooner and later: the revelation of salvation came first to Israel (the old covenant) and only afterwards to the Gentiles (the new covenant). For the New Testament makes it clear that salvation in Christ is from the Jews (John 4:22). That was God's order. Paul respects this revealed order, also in his missionary work (cf. Acts 13:5,14ff.; 14:1; 18:4-6, also Romans 9:1-4).

¹ Ed. Note: Quote is from *O diepte des rijkdoms*, (1949).

3. Man is righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith in God's Word and work. Grace is juxtaposed to works, freely given righteousness to self-earned righteousness, Christian righteousness to the righteousness the Jews claimed because of their works.

C. The Division of the Letter

I am now able to give you an outline of the division of the letter to the Romans I promised earlier. Different commentators have suggested different divisions. Almost all adopt their own. A division has only limited value, however, because Paul does not construct a Western-style scientific argument. Hence each division is only relative, also mine. At this point you should refer to the table at the beginning of this book which lists the divisions of the letter.

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