

July 6, 2008
Third Sunday after Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Because it appears first in his corpus--and is the longest of his letters--I suppose it is natural to begin studying St. Paul by reading Romans.

I want to suggest, nonetheless, that there is a serious problem--perhaps even a theological danger--in taking this approach, especially if it involves (as often is the case) using Romans as the master key to the interpretation of Paul as a whole. Perhaps the best way to identify this problem is to describe the defining characteristics of the Epistle to the Romans:

Romans is unique in the amount of attention given to what we may call phenomenological anthropology. That is to say, no other New Testament work goes to such lengths to describe the experience of living as a human being. Romans represents, in short, Paul's most extensive and mature reflection on the human condition.

There were apparently two germinating seeds that found rich fruit in that reflection: Paul's conversion (ca. 32) and the Galatian crisis (ca. 53).

First, there was Paul's experience of conversion. In the overpowering light revealed on the road to Damascus, he recognized, not only Jesus as Lord, but also himself as a deeply sinful man, someone at enmity with God: "Why do you persecute Me?" Until that point, where the searing truth of his condition was made manifest to him, Paul had imagined himself to be the Lord's faithful servant, a loyal adherent of the Law, and a man pleasing to the Most High by reason of that adherence.

After the revelatory experience of his conversion, however, Paul knew that he had been deceived. He realized, in a radical way, that his very adherence to the Law had caused him to fancy himself a righteous man. That is to say, the Law had not only failed to justify him before God; it also proved to be the occasion of his offending God.

In sum, the Apostle's conversion revealed to him, not only the lordship of Jesus, but also his own sinful state and the disadvantage of the Law.

Second, there was the Galatian crisis, in which Paul had to contend with the Judaizers, those who professed the observance of the Law as obligatory for Christians. Paul understandably examined and criticized that profession from the perspective of his conversion, and, in doing so, he adjusted the theological rudder that would guide the future history of the Church.

The crisis in Galatia laid bare two opposing views of salvation history. The Judaizers regarded the latter solely in term of continuity. Although they apparently accepted Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy, they did not regard Him as also the fulfillment of the Law--in the sense of rendering superfluous the future observance of the Law.

Paul, however, whose experience of conversion was marked by a deep sense of "before and after," was disposed to look at salvation history from the same perspective--a before

and an after. The first covenant, that of the Law, was symbolized in Abraham's elder son, Ishmael, the child of the slave girl. The covenant of the Gospel, on the other hand, was expressed in Isaac, the child of Sarah, the son of promise. These covenants were distinguished as representing two stages in history, divided by what Paul called "the fullness of time" (Galatians 4:4-31).

Between the writing of Galatians and the composition of Romans in early A. D. 58, Paul had had almost five years to think more deeply on the content of that earlier epistle. In particular, he had reflected on the anthropological implications of its thesis: justification by faith apart from the works of the Law. He deeply explored the psychology of man with and without Christ. This is the reason why Romans lays such immense stress on phenomenological anthropology, the experience of human existence with and without divine grace. This existential and psychological preoccupation is usually taken to be the chief characteristic of the Epistle to the Romans.

I want to suggest that it also poses the major difficulty of using Romans as the key to understanding Paul's theology. To put the matter simply, the existentialism of Romans presupposes an ontological basis of redemption, to which Paul gave greater attention in his earlier letters, notably the Macedonian and Corinthian literature. Inasmuch as these works laid greater stress on the objective work of Christ, I suggest they serve as better introductions to Paul's theology--his soteriology in particular. Otherwise, there is a danger that an anthropological preoccupation may overwhelm and dominate Christology in the study of Paul.

Indeed, as St. Paul has been interpreted throughout history, one may observe several instances in which the Christological center of soteriology has been displaced by considerations of religious psychology. It is easy to document, I believe, that some readers of Paul, taking Romans as their interpretive key, have reduced Christology to a mere subcategory of anthropology. They forgot that the letters to the Thessalonians and Corinthians (and, it seems to me, Philippians) were written before Romans. Romans should be unlocked with the key of those earlier letters, not the other way around.

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