TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

by

John Owen

from

Commentary to the Romans

by

John Calvin

On no portion of the New Testament have so many commentaries been written as on The Epistle to the Romans. We have indeed no separate comment extant by any of the Fathers on this Epistle; though it has been explained, together with other parts of Scripture, by Origen in the third century; by Jerome, Chrysostom, and in part by Augustine, in the fourth; by Theodoret in the fifth; by Cœcumenius in the tenth; and by Theophylact in the eleventh century. But since the Reformation many separate Expositions have been published, beside a learned Introduction by Luther, and Notes or Scholia by Zuingle and Melancthon.

The first complete commentary, as it appears, was written by Bullinger; the second by Bucer, a Professor of Theology at Cambridge for a short time in the reign of Edward the Sixth; and the next in order of time was this work by Calvin, composed at Strasburg in the year 1539. The fourth was by Peter Martyr; and this was translated into English in the year 1568. Another was afterwards published by Rodolph Gualter, Minister at Zurich.

Early in the next century the learned Pareus delivered lectures on this Epistle, as Professor of Theology in the University of Heidelberg--a work of great learning and of great merits, though written in a style too scholastic to suit the taste of the present day. His special object was to rebut the arguments and expose the sophistries of Popish writers, particularly those of Bellarmine, the acutest, the subtest, and the most learned of all the Jesuits of his own age, and perhaps of any in after ages. There is hardly a subject in any measure connected with the contents of this Epistle which Pareus does not discuss: at the end of every chapter a number of questions are stated and answered, especially such as refer to the disputes between Papists and Protestants. He also controverts the perversions of Socinianism.

The next work that requires particular notice is that of Turrettin, a Professor of Theology in the University of Geneva. It was published about the commencement of the last
century; the author died in the year 1737. The doctrine of Calvin had somewhat
degenerated in his time, though his work on the whole takes the side of orthodoxy. It yet
shows a leaning to those views, which commonly issue in sentiments subversive of the
essentials of true Christianity.

The first commentary published in this country, composed in English, was by Elnathan
Parr, B.D., Rector of Palgrave in Suffolk. He was, as it appears, the personal friend of Sir
Nathaniel Bacon, an elder brother of Lord Bacon. He dedicated his work to Sir Nathaniel,
and speaks of him as having been a hearer of what he published when delivered from the
pulpit. His style is that of his age, and appears quaint now; but his thoughts are often
very striking and truly excellent, and his sentiments are wholly in accordance with those
of the Reformers.

Since that time until this century no work of any note has appeared separately on this
Epistle. But within the last thirty years several Commentaries have been published.
Besides those of Flatt and Tholuck in Germany, three at least have appeared in this
country, and three in America. The authors in America are Moses Stuart, M.A., Professor
of Sacred Literature at Andover in Massachusetts, the Rev. Albert Barnes, and Charles
Hodge, Professor of Biblical Literature at Princeton. Those in this country are the Rev. J.
Fry, Rector of Desford, Leicestershire, Robert Haldane, Esq., and Dr. Chalmers. The
doctrine held by Calvin is essentially maintained in all these works, and in most of them
in its fullest extent.

Of our American brethren, the most learned and the most versed in criticisms is Professor
Stuart; the fullest and the minutest expositor is the Rev. A. Barnes; and the acutest and
the most concise commentator is Professor Hodge. The two first seem, in some instances,
like Turrettin, to deviate somewhat from what may be considered strict orthodoxy, at least
in their mode of explaining some subjects: the last is liable to no charge of this kind.

Respecting our own countrymen, there is a more perfect unanimity, though they belonged
to different Churches. The Lectures of the Rev. J. Fry are those of a strict Predestinarian,
and yet replete with remarks both experimental and practical. The layman, R. Haldane,
Esq., has displayed very high qualifications as an expositor; he is strictly and even stiffly
orthodox and can brook no deviation from what he regards as the truth. Of Dr. Chalmers’
Lectures, comprised in four volumes, 12mo, it is difficult to pronounce an opinion. They
are the productions of a philosopher, and one of the highest grade, who, at the same time,
possessed the heart and the experience of a humble Christian. He expatiates over the
whole field of truth with the eye of an eagle, and with the docility of a child, without ever
overleaping the boundaries of revelation. He was evidently a man by himself, taller by his
shoulders than most men, either in this or in any other age, having a mind as sound as it
was vigorous, an imagination as sober as it was creative, and a capacity to illustrate and
to amplify quite unequaled.

All these works have their peculiar excellencies, adapted to different tastes and capacities,
and no doubt they have their defects. The same must be said of Calvin's work. But as a
concise and lucid commentator he certainly excels. He is not so much an expounder of
words as of principles. He carries on an unbroken chain of reasoning throughout, in a brief and clear manner. Having well considered the main drift of a passage, he sets before us what it contains by a brief statement or by a clear process of reasoning; and often by a single sentence he throws light on a whole passage: and though his mind possessed more vigor of intellect and sound good sense, than what is called imagination, yet there are some fine thoughts occasionally occurring, beautifully expressed, to which that faculty must have given birth. There is also a noble grandeur and dignity in his sentiments, rarely to be found in others.

Professor Stuart has justly characterized this work by saying that it contains "fundamental investigation of the logic and course of thought contained in the Epistle;" and that it embraces "very little verbal criticism. Many a difficulty is solved without any appearance of effort, or any show of learning. Calvin," he adds, "is by far the most distinguished of all the commentators of his times."

It was mainly to supply the defect named above, the want [lack] of verbal criticism, that NOTES have been added in the present Edition. They are also designed to furnish the reader with such expositions as have been suggested by posterior critics and commentators. And as we are generally desirous of knowing the names of authors, they have been for the most part given. Much light is thrown on a passage by conveying the full meaning of the original. This has been done partly by giving such different versions as seemed most entitled to approbation, and partly by referring to other passages where such words occur: so that a common reader, unacquainted with the original, may, to a certain extent, have the advantage of one well versed in the Greek language.

Variety of meanings given to words, and also to passages, has been deemed by some to lessen the certainty of truth, but without any solid reason; for this variety, as found in the works of all sound and judicious critics, seldom or ever affects anything important, either in doctrine, experience, or practice, and tends often to expand the meaning and to render it clearer and more prominent. There has been indeed sometimes a pruriency in this respect, an unholy ambition for novelty, a desire for new discoveries, an indulgence of mere curiosity, which have been very injurious. Much of this sort of mania prevailed among some of the German divines in the last century, as Wolfius clearly shows in his works, in which he notices and disproves many vagaries assuming the name of critical expositions; and much of a similar kind of spirit seems to prevail still in that country. It is a mania for criticism, for its own sake, without any concern or solicitude for the truth: and ingenious criticism has often been resorted to by the oppugners of vital Christianity as means for supporting heterodoxical sentiments. But there is a palpable difference between men of this character, the mere gladiators of criticism, and those who embrace the truth, and whose object it is faithfully to explain it in consistency with the general tenor of what is revealed, and who have what is indispensably necessary for such a work, a spiritual experience, which often affords better assistance than any critical acumen that can ever be possessed. The man who has seen a thing has a much better idea of it than the man who has only heard it described.

Attempts have been made by various authors to show and prove that the style of the
Epistles, especially those of Paul, is consonant with that of classical writers. Blackwall labored much to do this in this country, as well as many German divines, particularly in the last century. In common with some of the Fathers, they thought to recommend in this way the Apostolic Writings to the attention of literary men. But it was a labor not wisely undertaken, as it must have necessarily proved abortive: for though some phrases may be classical, yet the general style is what might have been naturally expected from the writers, brought up as they had all been in the Jewish religion, and accustomed as they had been to the writings of the Old Testament. Hence their style throughout is Hebraistic; and the meaning of many of the Greek words which they use is not to be sought from the Classics but from the Greek Translation of the ancient Scriptures [the Septuagint], and sometimes from the Hebrew itself, of which that is a translation.

Much evil and no good must result from a claim that cannot be supported: nor is it at all necessary to make such a claim. It has been long ago repudiated, and repudiated by Paul himself. Writers have often ascribed to Paul what he himself distinctly and entirely disclaimed, and never attempted to attain or to practice, and that on principle, “Lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect.” It was not by “excellency of speech” that he courted the attention of the classical and refined Grecians, that he recommended the gospel to them; it was not by the tinsel of mere eloquence that he succeeded in his preaching, nor by the elegance and beauty of his diction; but by something much higher, much greater, much more powerful and efficient. We ought to follow his example, and stand on his high ground, and not to descend to that which is no better than a quagmire. It is a happy thing, and no doubt so designed by God, that the shell should not be made of fine materials, lest men’s minds should be attracted by it and neglect the kernel. God might, if he chose, have easily endued his Apostles with eloquence more than human, and enabled them to write with elegance more than Grecian; but He did not do so, and Paul expressly gives us the reason, “that our faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.”

It is generally agreed that the Epistle to the Romans was written at Corinth and about the end of the year 57, or at the beginning of the year 58, and that it is the fifth Epistle in order of time; the two Epistles to the Thessalonians, the Epistle to the Galatians, and the first to the Corinthians having been previously written. Then followed the second Epistle to the Corinthians, the Epistles to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, and the Hebrews, the first to Timothy, the Epistle to Titus, and the second to Timothy.

The common date assigned to Paul's conversion is A.D. 35. He wrote his first Epistle, that is, the first to the Thessalonians, in 52, seventeen years after his conversion. His second Epistle to Timothy, his last, was written from Rome in 65. So that he wrote his fourteen Epistles during these thirteen years. The whole extent of his ministry seems to have been about thirty years; for it is not supposed that he long outlived the date of his second Epistle to Timothy. Tradition says that he was beheaded at Rome, June 29, A.D. 66.

Paul's first coming to Rome was in the spring of the year 61. He continued there as a prisoner for two years. When he was released, most writers are of the opinion that he
returned early in 63 to Judea, in company with Timothy, and left Titus at Crete; that he visited the Churches in Asia Minor, then the Churches in Macedonia; that he wintered at Nicopolis, a city of Epirus, in 64; that afterwards he proceeded to Crete and also to Corinth; and that early in 65 he again visited Rome, was taken prisoner, and beheaded in the following year. This account clearly shows that he did not accomplish his purpose of visiting Spain, as tradition has recorded.

The first introduction of the Gospel into Rome is involved in uncertainty. The probability is that some of the "strangers of Rome," present at the day of Pentecost, were converted, and at their return promoted the spread of the Gospel. Paul mentions two, "Andronicus and Junia," as having professed the faith before him, and as having been noted among the Apostles. He makes mention, too, of another eminent Christian, "Rufus," whose father, as it is supposed, carried our Savior's cross, Mark. 15:21. It is not improbable that these were afterwards assisted by such as had been converted under the ministry of Paul; for he speaks of some of those whom he salutes at Rome as being "beloved," and as having been his "fellow-workers."

What some of the Fathers have related was in the first instance a tradition, as there was nothing recorded on the subject before the latter part of the second century, except was has been ascribed to Dionysius of Corinth, preserved by Eusebius. Irenaeus and Tertullian were the first retailers of the tradition that Peter, in conjunction with Paul, was the founder of the Church at Rome. This tradition increased considerably by the time of Jerome, who, in the fourth century, says that Peter had been bishop of Rome for twenty-five years! But this account is so clearly inconsistent with what we learn from the Acts of the Apostles respecting Peter that some of the most reasonable of the Papists themselves have given it up as unworthy of credit.

It appears next to a certainty that Peter was not at Rome when Paul wrote his Epistle in 57 or 58, for he sends no salutation to Peter; and also that he had not been there previous to that time, for it is wholly unreasonable to suppose that had he been there Paul would have made no reference to his labors. It further amounts almost to a certainty that Peter was not at Rome when Paul was for two years a prisoner there, from 61 to 63, for he makes no mention of him in any way, not even in the four or five Epistles which he wrote during that time. And that Peter was not at Rome during Paul's last imprisonment in 65 or 66 is evident from the second Epistle to Timothy, for he makes no mention of Peter; and what he says of Christians there, that they "all forsook him," would have been highly discreditable to Peter if he was there. So that we have the strongest reasons to conclude that Peter had no part in forming and establishing a Church in Rome during Paul's life, whatever share in the work he might have had afterwards. But the first tradition, or the first account, given by Irenaeus and Tertullian, refers only to a cooperation; and yet this cooperation is wholly inconsistent with what has been stated, the force of which no reasonable man can resist.

The learned Pareus proceeds in a different way to prove that Peter was never at Rome. He shows from different parts of the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistle to the Galatians, that Peter was in Judea at the time when tradition declares that he was at Rome. Peter
was in Judea when Paul was converted (Acts 9) and three years after this, that is, in the year 38 (Gal. 1:18). He was in Judea in the year 45 when he was imprisoned by Herod (Acts 12) and in 49, fourteen years after Paul's conversion (Acts 15; Gal. 2:1-9). Had he been to Rome during this time some account of such a journey must surely have been given. After this time we find that he was at Antioch (Gal. 2:11). If it be asked, where did he afterwards exercise his ministry? Where more likely than among the Jews, as he had hitherto most clearly done; for he was the Apostle of the Circumcision and among those to whom he sent his Epistles. The dating of the first at "Babylon," has led some to conjecture that it was a figurative term for Rome; but why not for Jerusalem, or for Antioch? For Christians were at that time treated everywhere like captives or aliens, and especially in the land of Judea.

What then are we to say as to this tradition? The same, according to the just remark of Pareus, as what we must say of many other traditions of that age, that it is nothing but a fable, which, like many others, would have passed away had it not been allied to a growing superstition. With respect to what Eusebius says of the testimony of a presbyter, named Caius, that about the beginning of the third century he saw the graves of Peter and Paul at Rome, it may be easily accounted for: it was the age of pious fraud, when the relics of saints could be found almost everywhere; and, in the next century, the wood and the nails of the Cross were discovered! Those who can believe these things may have a credulity large enough to swallow up the testimony of Caius.

The most probable account, then, of the commencement of a Christian Church at Rome is what has been already stated. The condition of that Church, when Paul wrote to it, we may in a great measure learn from the Epistle itself. It had a high character, viewed in a general way; but there were some defects and blemishes. Its faith had been widely reported: there were at the same time some contentions and divisions among its members, arising especially from the prejudices of the Jewish believers. To remove the causes of this dissension was evidently one of the main objects of Paul in this Epistle.

The order and arrangement of the Epistle have been somewhat differently viewed by different authors. Pareus includes the whole in this brief summary--"The Jews and Gentiles are equally guilty; they are equally justified freely by faith in Christ, without works; they are equally bound to lead a holy life, to be humble, and to love one another." Stuart says that the whole of what the Epistle contains may be expressed in a single brief sentence--"Christ our justification and sanctification."

In giving a more specific view of the contents of this Epistle, the former author divides it into two parts--doctrinal, 1-11; and hortative, 12-16: but the latter divides it into three parts--doctrinal, 1-8; answers to objections, 9-11; and hortatory, 12-16. The analysis of Professor Hodge, who takes the same view with Professor Stuart, is the following:--

"The Epistle consists of three parts. The first, which includes the first eight chapters, is occupied in the discussion of The Doctrine of Justification and its consequences. The second, embracing chapters 9, 10, 11, treats of The Calling of the Gentiles, The Rejection and Future Conversion of the Jews. The third consists of Practical Exhortations and
Salutations to the Christians at Rome.

A more particular analysis may be thus given:--


II. Justification,--

1. A proof of its necessity--the sin and guilt of both Gentiles and Jews, 1:18 to 3:20.
3. Its Effects or Fruits--Peace and Fulness of Grace, ch. 5; Death unto Sin and Eternal Life, ch. 6; Immunity from The Law and The Reigning Power of Sin, ch. 7; Holiness, the Spirit's help, Patience in Afflictions, Perseverance, ch. 8.

III. God's Dealings Vindicated,--

1. Election and Reprobation, ch. 9.
2. Unbelief and Faith, ch. 10.

IV. Christian Duties,--

2. Obedience to Authority, Love to all, Purity, ch. 13.

V. Conclusion,--

2. Salutations, Avoiding Disturbers, Promise of Victory, Praise to God, ch. 16.

We have set before us in this Epistle especially two things, which it behooves us all rightly to understand--the righteousness of man and the righteousness of God--merit and grace, or salvation by works and salvation by faith. The light in which they are exhibited here is clearer and brighter than what we find in any other portion of Scripture, with the exception, perhaps, of the Epistle to the Galatians. Hence the great value which has in every age been attached to this Epistle by all really enlightened Christians; and hence also the strenuous efforts which have often been made to darken and wrest its meaning by men, though acute and learned, yet destitute of spiritual light. But let not the simple Christian conclude from the contrariety that is often found in the expositions on these two points that there is no certainty in what is taught respecting them. There are no contrary views given of them by spiritually-minded men. Though on other subjects discussed here such men have had their differences, yet on these they have ever been found unanimous: that salvation is from first to last by grace and not by works has ever been the conviction
of really enlightened men in every age, however their opinions may have varied in other respects.

It may seem very strange, when we consider the plain and decisive language, especially of this Epistle, and the clear and conclusive reasoning which it exhibits, that any attempt should ever be made by a reasonable being, acknowledging the authority of Scripture, to pervert what it plainly teaches and to evade what it clearly proves. But a right view of what human nature is, when unrenewed, as exhibited in God's Word and as proved by history and made evident by observation, enables us fully to account for what would otherwise remain an enigma. No truth is more fully confirmed by facts (and it ought ever to be remembered) than that "the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God," and that he "cannot know them, because they are spiritually discerned." This declaration clearly accounts for the fact that men of great learning have often misunderstood many things in Scripture, and such things as are plain enough even to the unlettered when spiritually enlightened. The learned Scribes and Rabbins were blind leaders of the blind, when even babes understood the mysteries of the kingdom of God: and no better than the Scribes are many learned men professing Christianity in our day.

There is indeed a special reason why, on these points, unenlightened men should contrive means to evade the obvious meaning of Scripture; for they are such things as come in constant contact with a principle, the strongest that belongs to human nature in its fallen state. Other doctrines may be held as speculations and kept, as it were, at a distance; but when we come to merit and grace, to work and faith, man's pride is touched; and as long as he is under its prevailing influence he will be certain, in some way or another, direct or evasive, to support merit in opposition to grace, or works in opposition to faith. When the authority of tradition supplanted the authority of Scripture, the doctrine of merit so prevailed that the preposterous idea that merits were a saleable and a transferable commodity gained ground in the world. A notion of this kind is too gross and absurd to be entertained by any who acknowledge God's Word as the only umpire in religion; and yet what is not essentially different has often been maintained; for to say that salvation is partly by faith and partly by works is really the same thing, inasmuch as the principle of merit is thereby admitted. Man naturally cleaves to his own righteousness; all those who are ignorant are self-righteous, and all the learned who understand not the gospel; and it is wonderful [astonishing] what ingenious evasions and learned subtleties men will have recourse to in order to resist the plain testimony of Scripture. When they cannot maintain their ground as advocates of salvation alone by merits, they will attempt to maintain it as advocates of a system which allows a part to grace and a part to works—an amalgamation which Paul expressly repudiates, Rom. 11:6.

But it is remarkable how the innate disposition of man has displayed itself in this respect. Conscious, as it were, in some measure of moral imperfections, he has been striving for the most part to merit his salvation by ceremonial works. This has been the case in all ages with heathens; their sacrifices, austerities, and mechanical devotions were their merits; they were the works by which they expected to obtain happiness. God favored the people of Israel with the rituals of religion, which were designed merely as aids and means to attain and preserve true religion; but they converted them to another purpose,
and, like the heathens, regarded them as meritorious performances, and expected God’s acceptance for the very religious acts which they exercised: and in order to make up, as it were, a sufficient quantity of merit, they made additions to those services which God had appointed, as though to multiply acts of this kind was to render their salvation more certain. The very same evil crept early into the Christian Church, and still continues to exist. The accumulation of ceremonies is of itself a sufficient proof that salvation by faith was in a great measure lost sight of: we want no other evidence; it is what has been ever done whenever the light of truth has become dim and obscure. We see the same evil in the present day. Outward privileges and outward acts of worship are in effect too often substituted for that grace which changes the heart, and for that living faith which unites us to the Saviour, which works by love and overcomes the world. The very disposition to over-value external privileges and the mere performances of religious duties is an unequivocal evidence that salvation by faith is not understood, or very imperfectly understood, and not really embraced.

The only remedy as means for this evil is that which we find employed by Paul in this Epistle. He begins by showing what every man, Jew and Gentile, is by nature; he proves by the clearest evidence that all have sinned and become guilty before God. And having done this he discloses the way of salvation which God himself has planned and revealed; and he teaches us that it is altogether by grace and through faith that we can be saved, and not by works. In order cordially to embrace this latter truth, it is necessary to know the first, that we are sinners under condemnation. It is impossible, according to the very constitution of man’s mind, that he should really and truly accede to the one without a real and deep knowledge of the other. The whole need not a physician, but the sick. It is only he who is really convinced of sin and who feels its guilt and its burden intolerable that ever will, or indeed ever can, really lay hold on that free salvation which God has provided. And when this free salvation is really known, all other things compared with it will be deemed as nothing; and then all outward privileges will be viewed only as means, and all outward acts of religion only as aids and helps; and then also all our works, however great and self-denying, will be regarded in no way meritorious, but imperfect and defective, and acceptable only through the merits of our High Priest at God’s right hand.

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