

Akron Christian Reformed Church

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Isaiah 49.1-7; Romans 14.1-15.13; John 1.29-34

The Lived Theology of Romans

Prayer: Merciful God, remove from us the temptation to make you into the abstract God of our hypothetical faith. Teach us what it means to be united with our Lord, Jesus, the King. Amen.

The temptation for any of us is to make theology into an abstraction. We make it into a list of propositions that express what we think.

Such a list eventually becomes rules. And those rules then become a litmus test to determine who's in and who's out. Which allows us to label some as orthodox and others as heretics.

For example, Reformed Christians from the Dutch tradition, have for centuries passionately debated supralapsarianism versus infralapsarianism. (You've all heard me make fun of this before. It's my favorite example of ridiculous theology.) Supralapsarianism teaches that God elected those who were saved before the creation. Infralapsarianism teaches that God elected those who were saved after the fall. (As if anyone has any idea what they're debating.) And families have split over such ridiculous theological abstractions. It's a theological argument that has no relevance to us. And truly this is not discussed by most of us anymore, however, I looked at the internet this week and there are Reformed Churches who still seriously talk about these theories on their websites. (This was the fifth hit. It's an exCRC that schismed over women in office. <http://www.christurc.org/blog/2011/08/17/supra-infra-and-biblical-theology>) The temptation for any of us is to make theology into an abstraction.

The letter to the Romans has been used in this manner for 2000 years. It's been abstracted, and by that, I mean it's been removed from its story, so that rules have been extracted from its words. Rules that were then used to erect a hedge around a church.

But originally, the letter to the Romans was immersed in the actual story of a handful of people in Rome who began to follow the Christ. Scott McKnight calls the letter to the Roman Church "lived theology." Paul isn't talking about propositional theology. He's offering the framework of what it means to follow Jesus as King. There's nothing hypothetical here.

The letter to the Romans is "lived theology." Which I would tend to call "kingdom theology." It's theology connected to a story.

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The overwhelming story of this Roman church is the struggle between the Jewish believers and the Gentile believers. The entire letter is peppered with this struggle. A fact that I never really realized until I started to read Romans from the back forward. (I probably should have. If we read the entire letter at once we will also hear this theme.)

Now, this struggle makes perfect sense. It's probably the case that the earliest believers in Rome were converted Jews who began to define what it meant to follow Jesus as the King (Christ). But Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from the city, so that the Roman house churches began to be shaped by the Gentile Christians who remained in Rome. So that, when the Jewish converts return to Rome, when Nero becomes emperor, the house churches no longer look the way they did when the Jewish converts left. The Gentiles have taken over.

And this new shape is disconcerting to these Jewish Christians. So, they reenter the Roman house churches and begin to attempt to remold them to look, and act, and think like Jews. Jews who happened to find the Jewish Messiah.

They want the church to adopt the customs of the Temple. They want to drag the Temple rules, the Temple Theology, the Jewish Law, into the Roman church and make it their Church Theology. After all,

- These Jewish Christians may assert that God made a covenant with them to be their God and for them to be God's people. A covenant that began with Abraham and continues to this day.
- They may point to their history and illustrate all the instances where the LORD God stepped in to rescue them, or to bless them, or to even discipline them.
- They may point to the Torah itself as the LORD's revealed truth about their relationship with God.
- They may teach the Gentile's about the means of atonement in their sacrificial system.
- They may talk about the gift of the Sabbath given to the Jews alone. A Sabbath where the Jews rested from work the same way the LORD God rested at creation.
- They may tell the stories of the LORD rescuing them from the Egyptians, from the Canaanites, from the Assyrians, from the Babylonians. And they're still able to name the individual kings from whom they were rescued.

And then they could end their argument with, "following the Jewish (Christ) King Jesus is just a continuation of the relationship the Jews have had with God all along." And they're not wrong on any of this. It's all true.

To the Jewish Christians in Rome, being a Christian Jew meant following the rules, following the law. It meant keeping kosher by only eating meat properly prepared and that has not been offered to the pagan gods. It meant observing the Sabbath. It meant circumcising their sons and every male convert. It meant memorizing the Torah, especially Leviticus, and combing it for every little law that must be kept in order to be a good Jew, and to keep God satisfied. That's what they want to drag back into the church.

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And Paul understands, he understands, why they're doing this. And he understands that if this thinking, this Temple Theology takes root in the Roman Church, it will drive all of the Gentiles out and the Roman Church will eventually become another Jewish Temple with the Jesus Messiah added to it.

Paul understands that the Jewish legal system is not the definition of the Christian faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. He can't allow this thinking to survive.

So, he puts his foot down in a rather shocking way, he refers to the Jewish Christians as the "weaker" sisters and brothers. This had to send shock waves through the Jewish Christians in Rome.

Can you imagine how offensive this was to them? I'm sure that the Jews in Rome thought of themselves as the backbone of the new church, not the weak part. I'm sure that they thought of themselves as the true people of faith. I'm sure that they thought that anything other than complete observance of the old Jewish ways is modern liberalism creeping in. I'm sure that these Jewish Christians in Rome are deeply offended by Paul's teaching, because in their mind, who they are is wrapped up in how well they follow the rules.

But Paul ends the discussion by saying, "I'm convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself." (14.14) Paul, who is himself a Jew, rejects the Jewish trajectory of the church in Rome and puts in on a new track. A track that is much more appealing to Gentiles. (Which illustrates to us the stature of Paul. He's able to reorient this church without creating a rebellion.)

I watched a video this week about keeping kosher. And they said that many scholars now think that the kosher laws may have been created by God as a way of making it very difficult for the Jews to associate with Gentiles. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LYmWbgcE744>) Kosher laws may have been purposefully alienating laws. I'd never thought of that before. Perhaps that's true.

Paul understands that if the Jews are allowed to synthesize Jewish law into the church, the Gentiles will be alienated, and Paul believes that the whole point of Jesus is to include the Gentiles. So, he says, "I'm convinced ... that nothing is unclean in itself."

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Paul's forceful. He's insistent. He isn't giving any leeway on the lived theology of this church. And yet at the same time, he's gracious.

He doesn't insist that all of the weaker Jewish sisters and brothers believe like he believes, or act the way he acts. They may continue with their own private observances. They may continue to avoid the meat offered to idols. They may continue eating only vegetables. They may continue observing Jewish holy days. Paul understands that living as a community does not mean that everyone must think the same thing and act the same way.

Nonetheless, he isn't going to allow them to define the Christian faith as: "Temple Theology plus Jesus." If the Jewish Christian's faith needs to hang on to the past, fine, hang on, but that faith is not going to become the Roman church's faith.

At the same time, however, Paul also turns towards the Gentiles in the church. They appear to be mocking the Jews who won't eat the unkosher meat sacrificed to idols, which may very well be the only meat they could buy in Rome. And Paul encourages the Gentiles, who Paul says have a "stronger" faith, to be considerate of their weaker siblings. "Be kind people. Be kind." That's his message.

He even encourages the Gentiles to abstain from eating meat when they gather at the table of the Lord. But Paul doesn't create a rule. He simply points to the law of love. "If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you're no longer acting in love." (14.15) So stop it. Not because God cares, but because it's the loving thing to do.

And that's it, isn't it? This new Kingdom Theology that Paul is leading the church into is not composed of rules and regulations. Kingdom Theology has only two laws. Love God and love one another. That's it. Love God and love your neighbor. Paul tells them, "For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval." (14.17-18)

Following rules and laws are not at the heart of the Kingdom of God. What you eat or what you drink isn't of any concern within God's Kingdom. So too with all of the other rules and laws that the church likes to make up to corral people. That stuff isn't what defines the Kingdom.

You know, when I was growing up the Christian Reformed Church seemed to be defined by rules and regulations. My parents were converts and my mother recently told me that they lived in fear that they were going to break the rules and get into trouble. She said, "we didn't grow up in the church, so we didn't know all of the rules. We were afraid." But it's shocking how so many of the rules of my childhood have been discarded. And it's not so much that the church caved in to society. But the church discovered that many of their rules were nonsense. They didn't have anything to do with people

following Jesus. And yet the CRC still has a plethora of silly rules to define what it means to be Christian Reformed. We're still trying to get everyone to think exactly alike without taking into consideration that particular churches will need different lived theology than other churches. In time we'll shed more rules, but it's a painful process because we all have a tendency to abstract theology.

Well, Paul believes that God's Kingdom is defined by the blowing of the Holy Spirit through us and among us. A Spirit who makes us righteous. It's the Spirit who cleanses us -- not our lawkeeping. It's the Spirit who makes us children of God -- not our heritage and denomination following. It's the Spirit who brings peace and joy into our lives -- not the fearful fretting of doing everything right or wrong. Righteousness, peace and joy are gifts from God. They are not created by us.

To Paul, God's Kingdom is what the church is all about. Not the creation of a new and better Temple.

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As I sat and thought about this this week I kept running into the thought that Paul didn't win this argument in the Roman church. The Roman Church eventually became filled with rules and regulations that alienate people. I mean, I still can't take communion at the Monastery because the Church of Rome has created purity rules to protect itself. They even adopted dietary rules that aren't as strict as kosher laws, but also had a way of separating its people from others, even other Christians. I grew up hearing, "Oh the Catholics can't eat meat on Fridays." It was a way of separating groups of people from one another.

But this isn't only a Catholic tendency. This is an issue for the entire church. Our denominations all have ways of defining faith propositionally through creeds and confessions and faith statements on the backs of bulletins. (I always chuckle at those.) They're the rules of the church. The corral of the church. And it's a way of keeping people within the fold and keeping others outside.

Within our own tradition the theology of guarding the Lord's table falls into this category. Guarding the table is nonsensical thinking in Kingdom Theology, but it makes perfect sense in Church Theology. But who are we to stand in the way of someone who's led by the Spirit of God to the Lord's table? It's not our table. It's not the church's table. It's the Lord's. And if the Lord's Spirit leads someone to the table, no matter who they are, we should honor the Spirit.

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I keep wondering what our internal lived theological struggle is? What would Paul point at? Where do we tend to make our faith an abstraction rather than an integrated part of our day to day life? What do we use to keep people separated from one another? Who are the weak among us? Who are the strong among us? I keep wondering, who would Paul be like if he were here with us?

Who we are as a church has very little to do with the rules we keep or the thoughts we hold that are beyond loving God and loving our neighbor. Who we are as a church has everything to do with the work of the Holy Spirit among us.

Now, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in God, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." (15.13)

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.