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Paul's Epistle to the Romans - Part 6: The Christian's Ethical Responsibilities

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[This article is based on Romans 12-16. A careful review of these chapters before reading the article will prove rewarding.—EDITORS.]

THE last main section of the Epistle to the Romans is devoted to the responsibilities of the Christian toward his fellow men. This is very different from the rest of the Epistle where Paul is largely concerned with various aspects of the doctrine of salvation. The fact, however, that Paul completes his Epistle with a large section on ethics shows that the Christian cannot divorce ethics from theology.

Christ's prayer for His disciples, "I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one" (John 17:15, R.S.V.), means that the Christian must live a life of responsibility in the world. It is to these responsibilities as they impinged on Christians in his day that Paul now turns. Having established that we are saved, he now takes up a series of practical matters upon which this fact has a bearing.

Paul begins his appeal with the admonition "to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1, R.S.V.). In view of the broad, comprehensive meaning of the term "body," as pointed out in a previous article, we must understand the present statement to mean that we must present our *whole selves*. The Christian cannot divide himself, part for God and part for the world. Thus Paul speaks in the following verse of a transformation "by the renewal of your mind." While the care of the physical body is important, concern for the body as such has no religious meaning apart from the renewal of the whole person through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul's practical counsel for Christian life is always characterized by a concern for healthy balance. He recognizes that Christians have different gifts, and he urges that each be used cooperatively for the upbuilding of the church, the "body of Christ." As the various organs of the body work in balance and harmony, so must the members of the church. It is not difficult to imagine that the Romans could well understand these words of advice. Living at the center of world government, they were part of a highly organized society. Paul is concerned that as they enter into the "freedom" of Christ they not feel that this has made organization and cooperation of little importance.

We know of more than one instance

The Christian's Ethical Responsibilities

By Earle Hilgert

in the history of the Jews of Rome in Paul's time where there seems to have been disorder. Suetonius (*Claudius* 25) reports that during the reign of the Emperor Claudius (A.D. 41-54) the Jews of the city of Rome were involved in a riot that resulted in their banishment (cf. Acts 18:2). There is evidence to suggest that this riot may have been connected with Jewish reaction to Christian preaching. Similarly, a short time after Paul wrote to the Romans the Christian church there evidently was torn with strife, a situation which may possibly have been instrumental in bringing about his own death.

Paul seems to allude to some such problem in Philippians 1:15-18 where, probably writing from Rome, he declares: "Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. . . . The former proclaim Christ out of partisanship, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment" (R.S.V.).

If the early Christian legends regarding the controversy at Rome between Peter and Simon Magus can be held to contain a kernel of truth, we have here further evidence of disruption at an early date in the tranquillity of the church, arising specifically out of a misuse or pretended use of the gift of the Spirit. In view of all this it is understandable that Paul is concerned to urge a sensible, balanced approach to the gifts of the Spirit and indeed to all Christian endeavor.

The Christian and Government Authority

Beginning with Romans 13 Paul discusses the responsibility of the Christian to government. He is positive in his point of view. "He who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed. . . . For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad" (chapter 13:2, 3, R.S.V.). It has often been pointed out that Paul was writing this at a time when the Ro-

man government was reasonably strong and just. In Nero's earlier days as emperor the philosopher Seneca was his prime minister. Most of the stories of Nero's notorious and evil deeds come from his later life, after the fall of Seneca. It has been suggested that had Paul written a few years later, when conditions at the imperial court had deteriorated, he might not have written as positively as he did.

To us it seems that such an explanation places this passage in a much too narrow context. Although in his last days Nero did persecute the church bitterly, the principles that Paul lays down here can hardly be subjected to the vagaries of Roman policy toward Christians. Too often it is forgotten that although the Roman imperial court many times was shamelessly corrupt, conditions at court probably affected very little the everyday life of the average man in the street. The highly organized Roman civil service continued to govern the lives of the people with the greatest efficiency the world had thus far known, regardless of conditions at the highest level.

Apart from all this, however, there is a deep theological basis for the admonition Paul gives regarding Christians and government. He declares, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God" (chapter 13:1, R.S.V.). The familiar word "authority" (Greek *exousia*, also often translated "power") immediately reminds us of many other instances in which Paul uses this term to refer not only to human beings but also to the supernatural angelic powers that direct the affairs of men (cf. Titus 3:1, 2: "Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates"; Eph. 3:10: "the principalities and powers in heavenly places").

As Paul and other early Christians

looked at the world, there probably was no sharp line of distinction between the power administered by worldly rulers and that given them by God through the mediation of these heavenly "principalities and powers" or "authorities." Thus Paul can assert that "there is no authority except from God" (chapter 13:1, R.S.V.).

Closely related to this is Paul's conviction that Christ is triumphant over all other spiritual powers. They are subservient to Him (Eph. 1:21, 22; Col. 2:15). By means of this line of thought, which was familiar to the early Christians, Paul is able to show that rulers carry an authority granted by God and that the Christian's allegiance to God demands allegiance to government. While today we are not apt to think of "principalities and powers" in quite the same way as did people in Paul's time, the principle nevertheless remains the same. A good citizen may not necessarily be a good Christian, but a good Christian must be a good citizen.

These words must also have been meaningful to those early Christians in times of persecution. Understanding as they did that governmental authority was rooted in the power of God as mediated by angelic beings, when they came to the point of having to choose to obey God rather than man they did this in the knowledge that Christ had indeed triumphed over all supernatural powers of darkness. In His resurrection He was exalted "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come" (Eph. 1:21, R.S.V.).

Strong and Weak Brethren

In Romans 14 and 15 Paul discusses another problem that was widespread in the church. This was the question of various ceremonial and liturgical observances. Long before becoming Christians, both Jews and Gentiles were accustomed to religions filled with ritual practices and taboos. Inevitably as they came into the Christian church they brought with them many of these ingrained attitudes, and these immediately became apparent in their practice of Christianity. This was particularly true of Jewish Christians. Thus in chapter 14 Paul speaks of various Christians who had problems of conscience in regard to what they ate and to their various times of religious observance.

The apostle is very general here in his reference to these customs and does not pick out any particular Jewish or Gentile practice for either condemnation or commendation. He is concerned rather with the practical issue of harmony among brethren within



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From earliest times Christians have been persecuted for their faith. In spite of this, the apostle Paul counsels Christ's followers to be "subject unto the higher powers." How can this be?

the church. He characterizes the one who insists on ritual observances as "weak in faith," and then warns the brother who does not follow those practices not to despise his brother who does. (See verse 3, R.S.V.)

The basic principle is that "God has welcomed him." Minor matters of religious practice should not be inflated into major ones. That which counts is *faith*—a man's relationship to God in Jesus Christ. Ritual observances have meaning only in terms of this relationship of faith. The observance of a day can be meaningful to the Christian only when he observes it in reference to his faith in Christ as his Saviour. The mere mechanics of any ritual are meaningless.

This means that the brother who is "strong" has an added responsibility toward the brother who is "weak" (chapter 15:1). A man who is able to live the Christian life and enjoy union with Christ without the help of certain "props" or observances dares not count himself better than his brother who may still need to structure his religious life more in terms of specifics that have always been meaningful to him. Spiritual pride is as dangerous for the one as for the other. A humble acceptance of the fact that equally conscientious people will express their relationship with Christ in different ways can only promote the unity of the church. Paul can declare then, "Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (chapter 15:7, R.S.V.).

Paul the Friend

The last chapter of Paul's Epistle to the Romans is a kind of appendix. There is the possibility that it may

originally have been written as a separate Epistle. In any case, it constitutes a letter of introduction for a deaconess named Phoebe, a member of the church at Cenchreae, a seaport near Corinth. It appears probable that this Christian woman was about to make a trip to Rome and that Paul took this opportunity to write a letter of introduction for her by which he might also greet his many friends there. He asks them to see that she is taken care of while in the great capital city. Perhaps Phoebe had never been to Rome before and if so, anyone coming from the provinces to the capital would indeed appreciate such a letter as this, opening up a new world of friends who could help her in a new experience.

It has often been pointed out that Paul here seems to have an unusual number of friends in a church that he had never visited. This is not so surprising when we remember that in his day "all roads led to Rome." During the late spring, summer, and early autumn the sea lanes of the Mediterranean were crowded with ships plying to and from Italy. Travel, especially to the capital, was by no means uncommon. This makes it easier to believe that Paul, who had himself traveled widely throughout the eastern Mediterranean world, might after these many years of ministry have a large company of former friends now living in Rome.

Only a few of the persons whom Paul greets here are familiar names from other references in the New Testament. Prisca (or Priscilla) and Aquila, whom he mentions in verse 3, are old friends from the book of Acts (see Acts 18:2, 3, 18). Here we learn something that we would not otherwise have known about them—that they had risked their lives at some time for Paul. Apparently this Christian couple had returned in the meantime to Rome and had put their home at the disposal of other Christians for services. Christians, of course, at this early date had no church buildings.

Even though the other persons mentioned in the letter are not referred to elsewhere in the New Testament, we can get from this list of names an unforgettable impression of the warmth of the apostle Paul as a personal friend. He not only remembers people's names, he knows events of their lives. Epänetus (verse 5) was doubtless one of Paul's earliest converts at Ephesus. He remembers Mary's hard work (verse 6). Andronicus and Junias are of particular interest because Paul speaks of them as "my kinsmen" (verse 7).

The word he uses here for "kinsmen" may mean either members of his family or simply "fellow country-

men." Perhaps these men were from Tarsus, Paul's birthplace. On the other hand, they may actually have been his relatives. If so, his statement that "they were in Christ before me" is of great significance. If Paul had relatives who were Christians when he was persecuting the church, he must have been under tremendous psychological tension as a result. It may throw added light on Jesus' words to him, "It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks" (Acts 26:14).

A particularly touching reference is made to Rufus and his mother (verse 13), to whom Paul refers as "his mother and mine." This does not mean, of course, that Rufus was Paul's

brother but rather that his mother was truly a mother in Israel who doubtless many times had entertained Paul in her home and cared for his needs. Near the end of his long list of friends Paul thinks of a girl whose name he obviously has forgotten, for he can say only that she is Nereus' sister. The great warmth and friendliness of the apostle is manifested here, however, in that even though he cannot recall the name of this girl, he does not want to leave her out. He sends her his greetings anyway.

In this passage of greetings, even though almost all the names are those of unknown persons, we get a rare

view of the friendliness of the apostle Paul. A fiery preacher of the gospel, absolutely dedicated to the service of his Master, overwhelmingly involved in a life of controversy, he nevertheless remained also a paragon of Christian warmth. His life consisted of meeting with people for the sake of Jesus Christ, and in this chapter we see that those contacts were genuine and personal. This must always be the way in which a representative of Christ meets the people about him. Servants of God are also servants of their fellow men, and their life of ministry is for each person as an individual. This was the work of the apostle Paul. [End of articles on Romans]

Stewards of God's Bounties—2

The Deeper Meanings of Tithe Paying

By Cree Sandefur

President, Southern California Conference



WHAT is the Lord's purpose in asking His people to pay tithe? Does the Creator need the one tenth? Is His reserve in heaven running out? Does one necessarily prosper in material possessions because he tithes? Is tithing an act of faith or of works? Such questions might be multiplied.

Whatever a person may call tithing—faith, legalism, or good business—the fact remains that the Lord plainly asks His people to pay tithe. "Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it" (Mal. 3:10).

"And all the tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land, or of the fruit of the tree, is the Lord's: it is holy unto the Lord" (Lev. 27:30).

As with God's other requirements,

His command to tithe contains a promised blessing. God lives to bestow, not merely to receive. The only thing that created beings can offer their Creator is the evidence of love. It was appreciation and love that caused Jacob to exclaim, "Surely the Lord is in this place. . . . And Jacob vowed a vow, saying, If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, . . . then shall the Lord be my God: . . . and of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee" (Gen. 28:16, 20-22).

Jacob was fully acquainted with the tithing command, but there is every indication that his commitment at Bethel was the spontaneous overflowing of his heart in gratitude to his Creator and Sustainer. His love for the Lord, however, far from relieving him of his obligation to obey the tithing command, provided both incentive and motivation for faithful-

ness in this spiritual exercise. Jacob recognized a deeper significance in his relationship with God, and joyfully committed a portion of his increase to his Sovereign.

Even though the Jews in Christ's time were extremely rigid about the tithing system in their religious ritual, Christ reminded them of its significance: "Ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted . . . judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone" (Matt. 23:23). There is no comfort in these words for the selfish person who would try to ignore his financial obligation to God.

The apostle Paul further emphasized this principle: "Do ye not know that they which minister about holy things live of the things of the temple? and they which wait at the altar are partakers with the altar? Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should live