

## **KARL BARTH AND BEN WITHERINGTON ON ROMANS 7:1-14**

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Karl Barth's influential commentary, *The Epistle to the Romans*, was first published in 1918, and has been likened to "a bomb bursting in the playground of the theologians."<sup>1</sup> In it he contradicted the prevailing liberal theologians of his time who considered Scripture as no more than an account of human religious experience. Throughout his commentary, Barth did not appear to regard historical-critical research into the Roman church of Paul's time as essential and his extensive work on Romans is empty of any historical-cultural reference to the early church and consideration of first century Judaism. In his Preface to the First Edition, Barth acknowledges the validity of the historical-critical method of biblical investigation but states that if he were forced to choose between it and the "doctrine of Inspiration" which does not confine itself to any historical-critical tools, he would adopt the latter.<sup>2</sup> His entire object in interpreting Paul was to "see through and beyond history into the spirit of the Bible."<sup>3</sup> Witherington, on the other hand, provides an extensive introduction in his book on Romans<sup>4</sup>, viewing the entire epistle through the lenses of the historical and cultural context of first century Judaism and the infant Christian church. "Text without context is just pretext", he announces.<sup>5</sup>

The most striking difference between Barth's and Witherington's approaches to Romans 7 is enshrined in Witherington's title of his work. Witherington maps out the whole

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in lecture notes by Glen O'Brien from *MA101 Research into Biblical Studies*, Kingsley College, Glenroy, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1968.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Ben Witherington III with Darlene Hyatt., *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 1-29.

<sup>5</sup> Adapted from notes taken from a lecture by Ben Witherington on "A New View on Romans 7,"

[http://baptistnsw.asn.au/ministry/Resources/CMS\\_files/Romans\\_7\\_Lecture.mp3](http://baptistnsw.asn.au/ministry/Resources/CMS_files/Romans_7_Lecture.mp3)

of Romans with socio-rhetorical insights into the text.<sup>6</sup> Socio-rhetorical interpretation is a multi-dimensional approach and Witherington has produced a commentary that uses social and rhetorical strategies of interpretation within a historical theological hermeneutic.

Based on an understanding of Greco-Roman rhetoric, that is, the ancient art of persuasion, Witherington considers Paul to be a master of rhetoric who uses the whole range of persuasive devices in use in antiquity. Witherington believes that Paul's audience in Romans was in the majority illiterate and that theirs was not a text-based culture. Rome was regarded as the rhetorical centre of the Roman Empire and coupled with the fact that the epistle to the Romans was originally meant to be presented orally, Paul intended to utilize this rhetorical basis in this passage. Accordingly, one cannot treat Romans like the rest of the New Testament as Romans was an oral proclamation, a sermon Paul would have preached had he been in Rome.<sup>7</sup>

Witherington develops the idea that Paul employed the common rhetorical forms of the day within this passage, namely the particular devices of impersonation or speech-in-character and personification.<sup>8</sup> The speech-in-character form of rhetoric is where one assumes the identity of another person. The "I" when used is not the speaker but speech-in-character offered of somebody else. A sub-rhetorical device of impersonation is where one takes an abstract quality (eg. fame, virtue, sin) and gives it human character such as in 7:11.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the "I" of Romans 7, Witherington posits, is a personification of "Adam" first identified in Romans 5. The "I" in Romans 7 is not an autobiographical struggle of Christian living. Rather, it is Adam's narrative of his own experience.<sup>10</sup> The reference in Romans 7:8 to "commandment" can hardly be a reference to the Mosaic Law in general, which Paul regularly speaks of as "a collective entity."<sup>11</sup> Rather, "the commandment" refers to the single commandment given to Adam before the Fall, regarding coveting. Then there is the presence of the

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<sup>6</sup> Examples include Witherington's view that in 2:1-16 (Ibid, 75) he is engaging in the ancient practice of diatribe and in 2:17-3:20 (Ibid, 85-97) Paul addresses an imaginary interlocutor.

<sup>7</sup> Witherington, *Romans*, 179.

<sup>8</sup> Witherington, "A New View on Romans 7."

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Witherington, *Romans*, 190.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 189.

personification of sin, especially in v.11, which recalls the temptation in the Garden. Witherington's analysis of Romans 7 is that it is not about the struggle of the Christian life but is instead a story told by Christians (in this case, Adam) about the pre-Christian experience when Adam was awakened to the consciousness of sin upon hearing the first commandment, "Thou shalt not covet."<sup>12</sup> Witherington describes the law in relation to sin as a goad whereby sin used a good thing, the law, to create evil desires in Adam which consequently led to the Fall and separation of humanity from God.

Barth's commentary on Romans 7 comes from an entirely different approach. European theology in Barth's time had become anthropocentric so that to speak about God was to speak only about humanity and its religious experience of piety.<sup>13</sup> "God was in danger of being reduced to a pious notion: the mythical expression and symbol of human excitation oscillating between its own psychic heights or depths, whose truth can only be that of a monologue."<sup>14</sup> For Barth, "the law" is used interchangeably with "commandment" in Romans 7:8 to mean any system of pious religious orderings such as regulations, prohibitions, or codes of conduct.<sup>15</sup> He refers to these "religious orderings" as those that one practices in order to attain good standing with God. Barth interprets Paul's "law" as religious law in the broadest sense and not just the Mosaic law of the Jews – indeed, as religion itself and all its accompanying "moral and legal ordering."<sup>16</sup> To Barth, the "I" in Romans 7 is not Adam retelling his story but is a very present cry of collective humanity against the illusion of religion offering any salvation in itself. Sin is not being personified here, rather "the union between men and God [has been] broken."<sup>17</sup> In fact, according to Barth, Adam and Eve in the primal state before the Fall did not have any preconception about the possibility of the fallen state. Religion has a purposeful meaning in that it uncovers the true human condition; that we are dead on the inside and are

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<sup>12</sup> Witherington on "A New View on Romans 7."

<sup>13</sup> Glen O'Brien, lecture notes.

<sup>14</sup> Clifford Green, ed. *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 48.

<sup>15</sup> Barth pictures a plethora of such moral and legal orderings in the "emporium of religion and ethics" from which store we cannot escape as those living in this world, *Ibid*, 230.

<sup>16</sup> Barth, *Romans*, 232. He entitles these sections of his commentary "The Frontier of Religion" (7:1-6) and "The Meaning of Religion" (7:7-14), *Ibid*, 229-240, 240-257.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 250.

powerless to save ourselves no matter how we try.<sup>18</sup> Thus, Barth's interpretation of Roman 7 in terms of religion brings us to the acknowledgment of our need for redemption outside of our own efforts, to the saving grace of Christ.<sup>19</sup>

Witherington and Barth, then, take two divergent approaches to Romans. One, guided by historical, cultural and rhetorical context, proposes a Romans 7 that retells Adam's experience. Sin manipulated the law to create evil desires in Adam and in that we see that sin is potentiated in the presence of law. The other reaches through and beyond history to carry "the mighty voice of Paul" forward to us today to proclaim the meaning of religion so that we see that freedom is inexorably potentiated in the presence of the law.

Many Jews in Paul's time regarded the Mosaic Law as God's great and good gift and believed that through obeying and keeping the law, sin would be overcome and salvation could be attained. In such a context, Paul's words in Romans 7:1-14 are disturbing. Indeed, throughout this epistle, he has continually maintained that the law cannot justify nor sanctify and that salvation is independent of keeping the law.

In 7:1-6, Paul writes of being released from the law using the illustration of marriage where death discharges a spouse from his or her marital vows. Accordingly, what has discharged Christians from the law is our death in Christ. Since we are dead in Christ, we are no longer bound under the written code but we live in the new life of the Spirit. This does not mean however that the law is invalidated and that now we are free to live however we choose. Freedom in Christ does not lead us to live in ways that contravene the law. The law of God is now written on our hearts and we live by the Spirit in obedience to the law of Christ. The law is not invalidated but now, the Spirit writes the law on our hearts which leads to freedom to bear fruit for God.

As we have seen, for Barth, "religion" refers to any system of regulations, codes of conduct and prohibitions that we practice and adhere to in order to attain good standing with God. It is in this way that humanity strives to enter into communion with God on its own terms, and it is here that "the supreme competence of

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 246, 248, 253.

<sup>19</sup> "The moment we become aware of ourselves and our position in the world through the commandment of God which meets us in the known uncertainty of our present existence, we are led onwards to the final possibility of religion." Ibid, 255-256.

human possibility attains its consummation and final realization.”<sup>20</sup>

Far from grandeurising it, Barth has stinging comments about religion. He charges religion with being an insidious opiate on people that “acts upon them like a drug which has been extremely skillfully administered,” and tranquilises us into “an alternative condition of pleasurable emotion” by imagining that we can know God and justify ourselves by our own efforts.<sup>21</sup> Barth’s view of religion is that in the end, far from being the “loftiest pinnacle of all human achievement,” it is instead “the most radical dividing of men from God” for it is the antithesis of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ who came to humanity as an act of grace.<sup>22</sup>

Until verse 6, Paul is marginalising the law by reinforcing its limitations with regard to salvation.<sup>23</sup> In verses 7-14, he now argues for the benefits of the law, beginning with the rhetorical question, “Is the law sinful?” (7:7) The purpose of law is to reveal sin as sin and that we are indeed sinners. Left to ourselves, we will never admit we are sinners and have fallen short of the glory of God. The law also bring us to the end of ourselves. There was a time when Paul himself by his own efforts, ensured that he was in good standing with God, justified and secure in his salvation by acting “religiously.”<sup>24</sup> Ultimately, the law has its goal in Christ. Notwithstanding that it is limited in that it cannot deliver us from the sinful condition it reveals to us, it ultimately drives us to God for mercy as revealed in Christ.

Suppose I made an attempt to walk across the Nullarbor from Melbourne to Perth. Along the way, the signs inform me of my position in relation to my destination, whether I am near or far or lost. Not only do they keep me on the right track and keep me from going the wrong way, some signs can even alert me to danger. None of these signs has any power in itself to bring me to Perth because my human physical condition makes it impossible

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p.236

<sup>21</sup> When a person acts “religiously...it is widely supposed that he does well, and is thereby justified and established and secure. In fact, however, he merely establishes himself, rests upon his own competence, and treats his own ambitions as adequate and satisfactory.” (Ibid, 236)

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 234; 241; 240.

<sup>23</sup> Barth has been unrelenting in his critique of religion vis a vis the law thus far as well.

<sup>24</sup> Paul acted “religiously” before his conversion and thus the opiate effect of religion that Barth describes is seen in Paul as he “supposed that he does well, and is thereby justified and established and secure.” Barth, *Romans*, 236 and footnote 6.

for me to get there on foot. But they are not invalid for the purposes described earlier. Likewise the law is a signpost, first telling us our sinful condition, alerting us to our sin and then pointing us to God's goodness. The law can tell us what we ought to do but it does not enable us to do it. It is powerless in itself to save us; however it is good because it reveals our sin and has its goal in Christ.

Despite his earlier stinging critique of religion, Barth now dredges meaning from it. According to Barth, "it is precisely in religion that men perceive themselves to be bounded as men of the world by that which is divine. Religion compels us to take the perception that God is not to be found in religion. Religion makes us know we are competent to advance no single step."<sup>25</sup> "What is the meaning of religion?" he calls out. "[T]hat our whole concrete and observable existence is sinful. Through religion, we perceive that men have rebelled against God. We are now driven to the consideration of that freedom which lies beyond the concrete visibility of sin – the freedom of God which is our freedom."<sup>26</sup>

So, to follow Paul's rhetorical question "Is the law sin?" we chorus emphatically "By no means!" "The law is holy, and the commandment is righteous and good," (7:14) since it does exactly what God sent it into the world to do, which is to show us that we are truly sinners and to uncover our aching need for redemption in Jesus Christ.<sup>27</sup> The wonder and beauty of our relationship with Jesus Christ is that it is not a relationship based on regulations and rules but on grace and grace alone.

So what do we learn from Barth's approach to this passage? Indeed, we must take care that any attempt to develop a practice of our faith or a discipline in our spirituality does not become in itself a "religion" lest we lock ourselves into legalistic rules and prohibitions that have nothing to do with our relationship to God. In our zeal to be good Christians, we may set and strive for good standing in God for ourselves which borders on this "religion" of Barth. We may even be lulled into a false sense of spiritual superiority and mesmerise ourselves into thinking we become

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 242.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 246.

<sup>27</sup> Barth is congruent with Paul here as he says "...religion is without doubt holy because it points from humanity to divinity. it is without doubt righteous, because it is correlated with the will of God and parallel to it and it is without doubt good, for it is that concrete, observable, mediated experience which bears witness to the immediacy which has been lost." Ibid, 254.

better Christians by our adherence to instructions, prohibitions and codes of conduct. This is not to say that we should live under no moral law, code of behaviour or spiritual discipline. One difficulty with Barth's approach to the law as "religion" is that he does not seem to provide any concept of a religionless way to live the Christian life. As soon as practices, methods and regulations of a "religionless Christianity" are specified, we form yet another set of moral and legal ordering. Specifying that we must live without code becomes a code in itself and we fall again into this abyss of Barth's "religion." Barth concedes this difficulty in his concept of a religionless religion in some measure by declaring that oversimplification of "any war against religion" is only "pseudo-radicalism."<sup>28</sup>

A measure of order in our Christian living will always be needed. Law is good but we do not develop and pursue such ordering for its own sake. Laws, regulations, codes or discipline are impotent to change our hearts, due to our spiritual condition. We can only keep the moral law of God by an inward motivation and an inward power which Jesus Christ alone can produce in us through His life by having a deeper communion with Him and by living this relationship daily and consciously. For Karl Barth, the good news of the Christian gospel is that God saves humankind from religion by the act of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. There is a wonderful reconciliation of Barth's concept of religion with the redemptive work of Christ when he states that "all human possibilities, including the possibilities of religion have been offered and surrendered to God on Golgotha. Golgotha is the end of law and the frontier of religion."<sup>29</sup> When we come to Christ, we begin a spiritual, living relationship with Him. We have a union with Him through grace, and it is only as we draw upon this union and experience His life, by the Spirit, that we can live the law that is written on our hearts. It is in this free grace of God as revealed in Christ and received in faith that the "law" of Paul transcends legalism and the "religion" of Barth takes us beyond the frontiers of religion into freedom.

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<sup>28</sup> Barth, *Romans*, 241.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 233.