

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 47: The Apostle Paul & His Times

---

## Legacy of Liberty

Paul's teachings on grace and freedom have shaken the church in every age.

F.F. Bruce was professor of biblical criticism and exegesis at the University of Manchester, England, until his death in 1990.

***"Time and again, when the gospel has been in danger of being fettered and disabled in the bonds of legalism or outworn tradition," wrote the late F.F. Bruce, "it has been the words of Paul that have broken the bonds and set the gospel free to exert its emancipating power once more in the life of mankind."***

***At the end of his Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free, Bruce discusses Paul's influence on four key individuals, and therefore his continuing impact on the church age after age.***

### Augustine and the Middle Ages

***Augustine is the author of Confessions and City of God, two of the most read works in Christian history. He was the church's most influential theologian through the thirteenth century, and some say beyond.***

In the summer of A.D. 386, 32-year-old Augustine sat weeping in the garden of his friend Alypius at Milan. He had been for two years professor of rhetoric in that city and had every reason to be satisfied with his professional career thus far, yet he was conscious of a deep inner dissatisfaction. He was almost persuaded to begin a new life, but lacked the resolution to break with the old.

As he sat, he heard a child singing in a neighboring house, ***Tolle, lege! Tolle, lege!*** ("Take up and read! Take up and read!") Taking up the scroll that lay at his friend's side—a copy of Paul's letters, as it happened—he let his eye fall on what we know as the closing words of Romans 13: "... not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy; but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."

"No further would I read," he says, "nor had I any need; instantly, at the end of this sentence, a clear light flooded my heart, and all the darkness of doubt vanished away."

The colossal influence which Augustine, "the greatest Christian since New Testament times" (as one patristic scholar has called him) has exercised on the thought of succeeding ages can be traced directly to the light which flooded into his mind as he read the words of Paul.

### Martin Luther and the Reformation

***Luther began the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, which reasserted the primacy of faith and Scripture.***

In 1513 Martin Luther, Augustinian monk and professor of sacred theology in the University of Wittenberg in Saxony, endeavored to prepare a course of lectures on the Psalms while his mind was preoccupied with the agonizing endeavor to "find a gracious God." He was struck by the prayer of Psalm 31:1, "In thy righteousness deliver me." But how could God's ***righteousness*** deliver him? The righteousness of God was surely calculated rather to condemn the sinner than to save him.

As he thought about the meaning of the words, his attention was more and more directed to Paul's statement in Romans 1:17 that in the gospel "the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'" The result of his study is best told in his own words:

"I had greatly longed to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans, and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, 'the righteousness of God,' because I took it to mean that righteousness whereby God is righteous and acts righteously in punishing the unrighteous.... Night and day I pondered until ... I grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is that righteousness whereby, through grace and sheer mercy, he justifies us by faith.

"Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before 'the righteousness of God' had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gateway into heaven."

The consequences of Luther's grasp of the liberating gospel according to Paul are writ large in history.

#### **John Wesley and the Evangelical Revival**

*Wesley was the founder of Methodism and an early leader of church renewal in the eighteenth century, a movement that spanned the Atlantic.*

In John Wesley's well-known account of the event that is usually called his conversion—but which he himself later described (in Pauline language) as the occasion when he exchanged "the faith of a **servant**" for "the faith of a **son**"—he tells how, in the evening of Wednesday, May 24, 1738, he "went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street [London], where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans."

"About a quarter before nine," he goes on, "while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: And an assurance was given me, that he had taken away **my** sins, even **mine**, and saved **me** from the law of sin and death."

If there is one event more than another that marked the birth of the evangelical revival of the eighteenth century, it was that. But similar awakenings were being experienced by others around the same time, and it is remarkable in how many of them Paul had a determinant part to play.

A week before John's awakening, his brother Charles came for the first time upon Luther's commentary on Galatians, and "found him nobly full of faith." Later in the same day, he records, "I spent some hours this evening in private with Martin Luther, who was greatly blessed to me, especially his conclusion of the second chapter. I labored, waited, and prayed to feel 'who loved **me** and gave himself for **me**.'" Four days later, his prayer was answered.

#### **Karl Barth and the Revival of Orthodoxy**

*By rediscovering the Bible and the theology of Calvin and Luther, Barth did more than anyone else to topple the moralistic Christianity that dominated the late nineteenth century.*

One of the most epoch-making theological publications of the twentieth century was Karl Barth's exposition of the Epistle to the Romans, first issued in August 1918 when he was pastor of Safenwil in Canton Aargau, Switzerland.

"The reader," he said in his preface, "will detect for himself that it has been written with a joyful sense of discovery. The mighty voice of Paul was new to me, and if to me, no doubt to many others also. And yet, now that my work is finished, I perceive that much remains which I have not yet heard."

But what he had heard he wrote down, and others heard it too. He compared himself to a man who, clutching in the dark at a rope for guidance, finds that he has pulled on a bell rope, making a sound fit to wake the dead. The Catholic theologian Karl Adam said that the first edition of

Barth's Romerbrief fell "like a bombshell on the theologians' playground." The repercussions of that explosion are with us still.

Copyright © 1995 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

---