

## Covenant Relationship

Romans 10:5-15

My field of theology, systematic theology, is about the big themes in theology and how they develop over time. With that – and I think my favourite part of it – is the question of what has influenced the way these different themes are expressed... and therefore how we reinterpret them for today.

As a systematic theologian, I find the letter to the Romans very interesting. Most of Paul's letters are written in response to a particular situation, and typically that situation was some form of conflict in the church. The letter to the Romans is different. Paul did not know the Roman church prior to writing this letter. He wasn't writing in request for advice on a topic of concern. Instead, he is writing to introduce himself because he wants to use Rome as a launching place for a mission to the Western half of the Empire, specifically to Spain.

The Christians in Rome probably know Paul by reputation. Some years before this letter was written, the Jews (and Jewish Christians) were expelled from Rome. Now they are allowed to return and some of those who returned would have met or heard of Paul during their exile.

So, Paul is writing, not to address a church problem, but to introduce himself. In doing this introduction, he is aware there might be people who have heard different views on what he teaches, so he is also introducing his theology. The letter to the Romans could be called a systematic theology written by Paul – and is our earliest writing in this field of theology!

Today's reading is something of an excursus within an excursus. Paul has outlined his theology – whether we are Jew or Gentile, we have all sinned and it is Christ who saves us. His first excursus is that God is faithful and will keep all promises, which means the Jewish people, even those who are not Christians, will be saved. Paul is not quite sure how this will happen, especially when there is conflict between Christians and Jews, but he is certain it will be the case. To give up on the Jewish people, means that God can change God's mind and therefore promises are not worthwhile. Now Paul changes tack again.

In this passage Paul draws extensively on the Hebrew Scriptures to make his point about covenantal renewal. He is not the only Jewish thinker of his time to make similar points about the covenant; the author of Baruch, a book in the apocrypha, apparently explores similar issues. Like these other authors of his day, Paul sees the renewal of the covenant in his particular movement – in this case being one of the People of the Way. Paul draws on Deuteronomy 30 and Jeremiah 31 to make his points.

Deuteronomy 30 was probably written following the exile and added the pre-Exilic book of law that Josiah found sparking a renewal. This chapter follows the list of blessings (for following Torah) and curses (for failing to do so).

Chapter 29 looks to the renewal of the Covenant itself, whilst chapter 30 looks to the offer of life and death. In verse 4 we hear:

Even if you are exiled to the ends of the world, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will take you back.

Which Paul later echoes in our reading. Both Deuteronomy and Jeremiah develop the image of the law being written on the heart rather than taught. People will innately know God's law. Paul picks up this image as he reminds his readers in verse 10:

For one believes with the heart, leading to righteousness, and one confesses with the mouth, leading to salvation.

We are given a better understanding of what Paul means here, when we consider some of his other writings that allude to the same idea. In Galatians, where he is arguing against those who say Christians should keep the Torah. In one of those passages that we probably all memorised in Sunday School, Paul reminds us

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

In short, if we are showing the fruit of the Spirit, we are keeping Torah in its spirit, if not in its letter.

It's easy for us to get caught up in rules and regulations, how things "should" be or what is the "right" way of doing it. Sometimes the ways we do things are for good, practical reasons. The alter rail, originally to keep dogs from wondering over and stealing the Communion bread, becomes an important theological symbol. Prayer books, originally so illiterate people could join in the liturgy become the only acceptable way of praying during a church service. Or the way we serve communion, or what is or isn't on the walls of the church. There are many other examples scattered throughout church history, both as a whole, as well as for every individual congregation. Away from our church services, it is tempting to see certain behaviours as "right," rather than reflecting on how context may make it the best choice in the circumstances.

So, what does it mean for us today to continue to be part of that covenantal renewal that Paul looked towards. What does it mean for us to have God's law written on our hearts or to respond with the fruit of the Spirit, rather than with rule and regulations. Another way of considering this is what is it that we do that is because it is tradition, or even is simply a traditional way of expressing our theology? How do we also create space for those who wish to explore their relationship with God but don't connect to our traditions? What, in today's world, is holding us to law rather than allowing us to respond with freedom to God's Spirit?