

CONFIDENCE IN THE WORD OF GOD

by Pr. William P. Terjesen

Romans 1:8-17

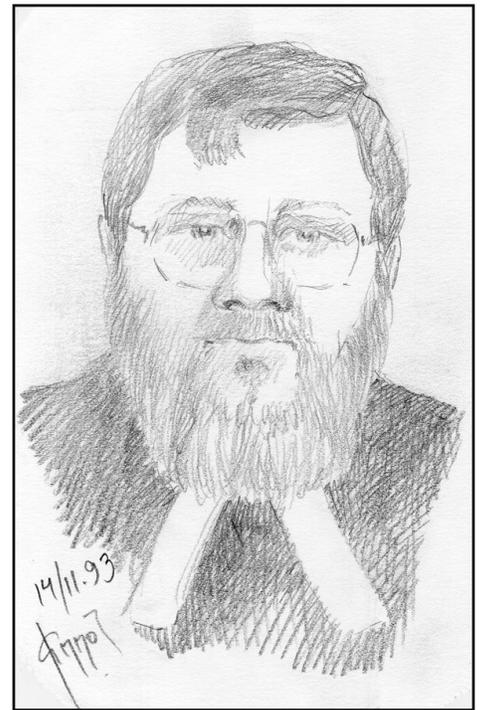
Romans 1:8-17 First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world. 9 For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers; 10 Making request, if by any means now at length I might have a prosperous journey by the will of God to come unto you. 11 For I long to see you, that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end ye may be established; 12 That is, that I may be comforted together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me. 13 Now I would not have you ignorant, brethren, that oftentimes I purposed to come unto you, (but was let hitherto,) that I might have some fruit among you also, even as among other Gentiles. 14 I am debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians; both to the wise, and to the unwise. 15 So, as much as in me is, I am ready to preach the gospel to you that are at Rome also. 16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. 17 For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.

We live in a time when confidence in the Word of God is getting rare. These are desperate times for the church. Many churches and pastors have forsaken God's Word in favor of the words of men. Other churches have a reputation of honoring the Scriptures, but have largely pushed them aside in favor of programs, gimmicks, and entertainment. The Church Growth Movement and the Contemporary Christian Worship Movement offer user friendly techniques and styles to bring in large num-

bers of people, but into what? Churches where God's Word is muzzled, sanitized, packaged, and spun until all that's left is a combination of religious happy talk and self-help messages! Finding a church in which God's Word is believed, taught, and confessed in its purity is not easy.

Why is this? Why is there so little confidence in God's Word? I think there are two reasons for it. The first is that the second half of the 20th century was not a golden age of catechetical instruction. Memorization was rejected as an outmoded learning tool, and modern experimental educational techniques replaced time honored methods that worked. I have in my possession a collection of Sunday School and Confirmation materials from the 1930s and 1940s. When I compare these with modern equivalents, the difference is jarring. Today's college junior would find a Sunday School workbook from 1940 designed for 5th graders to be a challenge! Rather than a catechetical program that sought to weave together Catechism, Bible, and Hymnal into an intensive instructional experience, activity oriented, hoop jumping curricula were developed and adopted. The result of all this is that as we enter the 21st century, our churches are peopled with an ever dwindling number of people who have only a vague idea of what God's Word actually teaches. Is it any wonder they have no confidence in it?

The second reason confidence in God's Word is so low is that we are living in a time when our culture has in large part rejected God's Word and become thoroughly secularized. The cultural revolution of the 1960s with its rejection of biblical truth and morality has filtered its way throughout society. Modern attitudes toward marriage and divorce, abortion, homosexuality, and gender roles indicates how far the average person is from biblical faith. The way that people readily individualize and privatize



their religious beliefs indicates how thoroughly relativized people have become with regard to truth. What people want today is not the message of sin and grace found in the scriptural gospel of salvation for sinners through faith in Jesus Christ; they want to feel good about themselves, they want some self-help advice, and they want to be entertained.

Now when poorly catechized Christians face a secularized world that is hostile and disinclined to listen to God's Word, one of a number of things can happen. One possible outcome is that the Christians will return to the Word, grow in faith and understanding and speak God's Word more aggressively to the lost. Another possible outcome is that the Christians will do nothing other than maintain the status quo. A third possible outcome is that Christians will turn to man's way of doing things: God's Word will be toned down, and humanly devised programs and gimmicks will take its place. It is the latter two outcomes that we see so often today. But in our text from Romans 1, the Lord is urging us to a renewed faith in the efficacy of His Word. The Gospel of Christ is the power of God unto salvation.

Rome was the center of a huge pagan empire. It was a place of great immorality and wickedness. Unwanted infants were simply thrown to the elements to die. Homosexuality and fornication were common. Every weird doctrine and 'ism' found a hearing in the city. When Rome wasn't

indifferent to the Christian faith, it was actively and frighteningly hostile to it. But none of this dampened St. Paul's spirits. He earnestly desired to preach the Gospel in Rome. He informed the Roman Christians that he has been praying that he might have a prosperous journey to visit them by the will of God (1:10). Then he told them that he had often purposed to visit them so that he might preach and win converts to the faith in the great city, but had been unable to do so (1:13). But now at last he is ready to preach the Gospel in Rome (1:15). There is no trace in St. Paul's words of hesitation or intimidation. He eagerly anticipates the opportunity to preach the Gospel in the pagan city. He fully expects to "have some fruit among" the Romans "even as among other Gentiles" (1:13). That is, he expects that sinners will be converted to faith in Jesus Christ. Nor is there any indication that Paul was relying on any program or gimmick as he prepared to visit Rome.

Paul was coming to Rome to preach the Gospel; the Gospel of Christ crucified, "unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness" (1Cor 1:23). But though this Gospel was despised and rejected by many, Paul was not ashamed of it. He said, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (1:16). His attitude and stance was indicative of a strong faith in the efficacy of God's Word to accomplish the purposes for which God gave it.

Paul says of the Gospel, "It is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth" (1:16). The Word is powerful. In Heb 4:12 we are taught that the Word of God is quick (living) and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword; that it discerns the thoughts and intents of the heart. Other passages are similarly instructive:

1 Thessalonians 1:5 For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake.

Speaking to the Thessalonian Christians, Paul reminds them that the Gospel was not a matter of words alone. The Gospel words came in power and in the Holy Ghost, creating and sustaining the assurance of faith. It is important to notice the

connection between the Gospel and the Holy Spirit who works through it that hearers may be confident in salvation through Christ.

1 Thessalonians 2:13 For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received *it not as* the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe.

Now in the 2nd chapter of the same epistle, Paul expresses thanks that the Thessalonians received God's Word for what it is in truth, not merely a human message, but God's Word which works effectually in those who believe. Notice: God's Word works effectually.

Colossians 1:5-6 For the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel; 6 Which is come unto you, as *it is* in all the world; and bringeth forth fruit, as *it doth* also in you, since the day ye heard *of it*, and knew the grace of God in truth:

Writing to the Colossian Christians, Paul speaks of the Gospel as bringing forth fruit. It produces something: faith, hope, and godliness.

Jeremiah 23:29 Is not my word like as a fire? saith the LORD; and like a hammer *that* breaketh the rock in pieces?

Here we have the words of God spoken through Jeremiah the prophet, who speaks of God's Word being powerful like a fire or like a hammer.

1 Corinthians 1:18-24 For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. 20 Where *is* the wise? where *is* the scribe? where *is* the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? 21 For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. 22 For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: 23 But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; 24 But unto them which are called, both

Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.

Here is a passage that we could spend lots of time on. But for our purposes, let's look at just a few highlights. In v. 18 we are told that those who are perishing consider the preaching of the cross (the Gospel) foolishness. But to us who are saved it is the power of God; it is that means through which God has brought us to faith in Christ and imparted salvation to us. Later, in v. 21 we are told that it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. This means that what looks foolish and weak to the world, preaching life and salvation for all through the death and resurrection of a Jewish carpenter, is precisely the way that it pleases God to save sinners. God wishes to confound the power and wisdom of the world by a weakness and foolishness that are actually the power and wisdom of God at work.

Romans 10:17 So then faith *cometh* by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

Finally, Paul says later in Romans, that faith comes by hearing the Word of God. God works through His Word to enable faith in those who hear it.

To sum up: Paul's confidence about his upcoming Gospel mission in Rome has its source in the efficacy of the Word of God. Paul knew the Word for what it is: not just a story, or a philosophy, but a Word of God which is powerful to save. Therefore, the preaching of the Gospel, despised by the world, is the power of God resulting in the salvation of those who believe. If we believe and are saved it is because God has acted upon us through His Word.

But too often today, when people talk about the Gospel, it becomes clear that they think of the Gospel as an uplifting, motivational speech, religious happy-talk, a self-esteem building message. Just the thing that goes along with our permissive, indulgent age. Paul does not think of the Gospel as anything so shallow. The Gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth because in the Gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed.

Human beings are fallen creatures in a fallen world. We are conceived and born in sin. The only righteousness that we have is a human righteousness, by which we may compare ourselves, favorably or unfavorably, to other people. But none of us has any

righteousness before God. In His eyes all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags (Isa 64:6) and there is nothing we can do to change this. And so all people by nature are sinners under the wrath of God. The wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23). But God in love and mercy has made a way of salvation for lost sinners: Redemption in Christ Jesus! God gave His only Son to redeem the world by giving His life as a ransom for sinners. God set Him forth to be a propitiation. By bearing our sins in His body on the cross, Christ paid for them with His suffering, blood, and death. He atoned for the sins of the world. God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself. Through Christ's incarnation, life, death, and resurrection, salvation for all is fully accomplished and complete, offered and delivered in the Gospel and sacraments, to be received and enjoyed by faith.

Therefore, through Christ an exchange has taken place. He has taken our sins upon Himself, and His perfect righteousness is reckoned, imputed, credited to those who believe. Through this wonderful plan of salvation completed by Christ, God has declared His righteousness: that He is just (not overlooking sin but punishing it in His Son), and the justifier of the one who believes in Jesus (the righteousness of God is God's verdict of righteousness and acquittal upon a believer for the sake of Jesus Christ). Because Christ has conquered sin in our stead and on our behalf, the righteousness of God is ours by faith. We are given a new status by the judicial verdict of God made possible by the redeeming work of Christ, and that new status is: Righteous. (Rom 3:21-28)

So the Gospel reveals the only way out of our lost and condemned condition. The world doesn't want to hear this. Speaking of his fellow Jews who reject the Gospel of Christ, Paul says that their zeal for God is based on ignorance. They are ignorant of God's righteousness (through faith in Christ the redeemer), and they therefore go about to establish their own righteousness (based on good works), and thus fail to submit themselves to the righteousness of God. This is the way it is all over the world. Man wants to establish his own righteousness. But it is all sin in God's eyes. Paul, on the other hand, after listing a number of advantages he possessed by virtue of his birth and upbringing, says this:

Philippians 3:7-9 But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for

Christ. 8 Yea doubtless, and I count all things *but* loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them *but* dung, that I may win Christ, 9 And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.

Whatever advantages life, training, and conduct may have given him, Paul pushes them aside and desires rather to be found in Christ, having the righteousness of God which is through faith in Christ. He has no desire to commend himself to God by his own obedience to the law. Without Christ, the best he has is "but dung". But in Christ, he is righteous before God through the forgiveness of sins. And so is everyone who believes in Him.

In the Gospel the righteousness of God is revealed "from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith" (17). The Gospel of grace enables faith, and this faith receives the blessings of the Gospel. The Gospel also continues to nurture and strengthen faith so that we go from faith to faith. Salvation is a gift of grace fully accomplished through Christ. Receiving and enjoying its benefits is a matter of faith from beginning to end. The Christian glories in Christ, never in his own works.

As Paul planned by the will of God to visit the Roman Christians, his thought was to preach and teach the Word of the Gospel so that lost souls in the city of Rome might be won and saved. When Paul speaks in v. 13 about the salvation of souls as "having some fruit among you" he is speaking of the power of the Gospel of God to save sinners by revealing God's righteousness to them that they may trust in Christ and not in themselves. Paul was sure that God would do this work wherever the Gospel was preached, and so he planned his trip confident in what God does and gives, and not in the plausible words of men's wisdom. All the power of pagan Rome could not discourage Paul because God's power is greater even though it is manifested in the "foolishness of preaching".

Paul also anticipated that his ministry among the Roman Christians would result in their being further established and comforted in the faith of Christ (v. 11-12). Christ not only saves the lost through His Gospel, He also strengthens and keeps His

believers through the same. Paul was confident that as the Word of Christ dwelt richly among the Roman Christians, their faith would grow stronger, and they would be ever comforted in their trials. The Gospel was sufficient for this.

So, away with program-ism and gimmick-ism! Away with dummied down semi-gospels! Trust in the efficacy of the Word of God, preach and proclaim that message, and leave the results up to the Lord. The temptation is great, in an age of ignorance and rebellion, to turn to substitutes when we see the Gospel rejected by our culture. But we must remember that God has not promised that the Gospel will produce outward success alike in every place and time. Full churches built on programs, gimmicks and other gospels are not necessarily a sign of God's blessing. Indeed, some of the most successful religious organizations today are cults such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons. It is our duty and delight to trust the Word of Christ, and to proclaim it in all its fulness, even to a culture that doesn't want to hear it. God will do His work where His Word is preached. He reminds us: "My Word... shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it" (Isa 55:11).

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