

Editorial: Righteous by Faith Alone

Michael Kimmitt

BOOK REVIEW

Righteous by Faith Alone

Herman Hoeksema

RFPA, 2002, pp. 702, Hbk, £22 (inc. postage within the UK)¹

Introduction

This volume contains ninety-seven sermons expounding Paul's epistle to the Romans, preached by the Reverend Herman Hoeksema (1886-1965) to the First Protestant Reformed Church of Grand Rapids in the late 1930's. Subsequently an extended version of the sermons on chapters 9-11 was published under the title *God's Eternal Good Pleasure* (RFPA 1940, 1979).

Apart from that, the sermons have never before appeared in print—and we owe their existence to Martin Swart (1891-1977) a member and elder of the church who took them down and subsequently transcribed them into notebooks whence David Engelsma has edited them for this volume.

Discussion

Now we are reminded: “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.” Our Lord taught, “It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.” So we may not despise any, but clearly in Romans we are at the heart of the gospel. Augustine was converted by reading it; Chrysostom had it read over to him regularly; Luther rediscovered the doctrine of justification here; and Tyndale said “that every Christian man not only know it, by rote and without the book, but also exercise himself therein evermore continually, as with the daily bread of the soul.”

The reviewer has to hand the commentaries of Calvin, Haldane, Hodge, Moule, and John Murray on this epistle, as well as the first 10 volumes of Martyn Lloyd-Jones' magisterial exposition. The importance of Romans lies in its exposition of the cardinal doctrine of justification by faith. This Paul had had to

¹The book is available through the CPRF Bookstore, 78 Millfield, Ballymena, N. Ireland, BT43 6PD, or tel. (028) 25 641200.

expound polemically to the Galatians when they started to slide away from the grace of Christ to another gospel. Now in Romans, from the relative comfort of Gaius' house in Corinth with his amanuensis Tertius at hand and with the visit of Phoebe to Rome coming up, he can tackle the whole didactically and more relaxedly. "For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith." Why do we need to know this? "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold down the truth in unrighteousness." We are sinners! We are "ungodly" having broken the first four of the ten commandments; and "unrighteous" over the remaining six towards our neighbours. "And it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment."

We need justification before we die and come to judgment—the issue is quite simply life or death, heaven or hell! Of course we need all of Scripture: to reveal creation and the fall; the Cainite line of reprobation—and the Sethite one of salvation down through Noah to Abraham; the twelve patriarchs; David; and finally David's greater Son: "Our God contracted to a span / Incomprehensibly made man."

So we come to:

The Epistle

"Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God, (Which he had promised afore by his prophets in the holy scriptures,) Concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh; And declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead." That is why Romans is of the first importance—for here all is explained. I welcome then this exposition which I found edifying and enlightening, helpful and urgent.

Hoeksema's technique is not to give a verse by verse commentary but to grab the main idea or ideas in a chunk of Scripture—the passage quoted above being the text of the first sermon—consider them in the context of the surrounding verses, explain them including the relevant theological issues and conclude with a brief application. Sometimes he will add a striking illustration. So on 12:2: "And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God." "We may compare life in the world to people drifting on a strong current in a rowboat. They are drifting just above the falls. On this current are

three kinds of people. There are people who help the current along. They row with the current, laughing, singing, and having a good time. There are also people who row desperately upstream. And there are people who let the oars rest and drift downstream. The Word of God says to them, ‘Don’t drift downstream! Row against the stream!’ This is the text. Are you going downstream? Don’t copy the world! Don’t be conformed in your life and walk to the forms of the world! If you do conform your life to this world’s forms, you go to destruction.”

Sin

I found the explanation of Romans 2:6-8, “Who will render to every man according to his deeds: To them who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, eternal life: But unto them that are contentious, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, indignation and wrath,” the first I had met which actually clarified it. Sermon 12 on “The Vain Boast of Self-righteousness” is a searching piece on our standing: “Our religion, our piety, our baptism, our doctrine, our Reformed convictions; still more, our repentance, our faith, and our hope are taken away as the basis of our righteousness in the day when God shall judge the secrets of men.” On pages 100ff. is a searching piece on “What if some did not believe?”

Justification

In the first part of the epistle, the apostle has been establishing the fact that “all have sinned.” Then at 3:21ff. come the blessed words: “But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference.” The doctrine of justification is developed through to the end of chapter 8. On the word “manifested” Hoeksema has some interesting reflections on eternal justification.

Thus the argument is unfolded. “God has set forth Jesus Christ as a propitiation”; “all boasting must be excluded”; “by faith we do not ‘accept,’ by faith we ‘receive’”; “God does not forget the fact of sin, but He dismisses it from His mind as sin”; “The Jews are not children of Abraham at all, not scripturally. Abraham is the father of believers”; “we continually stand before the face of God and are judged by Him.” It would be very easy to go on quoting Hoeksema as he develops the argument.

Chapters 9 and 10

Here Hoeksema takes a high (not hyper) calvinistic position. We listen to the apostle as he wrestles with his sadness concerning Israel's rejection of their Messiah. In fact there is no particular problem with chapter 9! It is clear enough. I read recently an article on reprobation which listed nine objections to the Calvinistic doctrine. But our business is simply to expound Scripture—problems of theodicy may safely be left with our Creator. But, Hoeksema reminds us: "We are to imitate the apostle in this when we speak of election and reprobation, we must not rejoice in the damnation of the reprobate. The apostle did not. Paul assumed an attitude of great sorrow and heaviness of heart."

He then brings out the truth with respect to our situation. "All the children of God are the seed of believers. I do not say that other believers cannot come in, but the children of God come in the line of the generations of believers. The Word of God to Abraham, 'I will be thy God, and the God of thy seed,' is true today. This is why we have our Baptism Form. This is why we are proud of our seed. This is why we have as many children as possible. This is why we have nothing to do with the damnable practice of birth control." But he recognizes that we face the same problem. "They are all called the church of Christ. As such they are known. All have the same treatment from their infancy ... And yet there arises out of this church a carnal seed. And you and I bring them forth." The discussion continues through "Jacob's Election" to "God's Raising up of Pharaoh." "For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth. Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth." Here we have a searching piece on the doctrine of reprobation.

In John 6:37 we read, "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out." As we pass from chapter 9 to chapter 10 we meet a similar contrast as we are reminded of the universality of the gospel. There is a splendid sermon on "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth." Hoeksema holds that the "usual interpretation of 'end,' that Christ terminated the law," is wrong. "*End* here has the same meaning as when we speak of the end we have in view ... The ceremonies, the temple, the altar, the priest, the sacrifices—all had Christ in view."

At verse 9: "That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved," we are reminded that the "emphasis falls on the resurrection of the

Lord. This is also the heart of the apostles' preaching. They preached the resurrection of Christ. This is even far more the centre of their preaching than the cross." And this must be a matter of the heart, and to "confess that Jesus is Lord is to insist that Christ shall be Lord over us in our whole life."

Having then spoken of the universality of salvation, he then considers "The Mission of the Preacher." Two points of the first importance are brought before us here. First, there is a mistranslation at verse 14: "How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe *in* him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?" The second "in" is not in the Greek and should be omitted. In true preaching we do not hear about Christ, but we hear Christ!² Second, a preacher is someone sent by Him—a sobering reflection for those of us who have from time to time sought to speak in His name. "In these words, Scripture makes salvation dependent on the preaching"—a point Hoeksema develops in three further sections.

Chapter 11

Throughout these three chapters the apostle has been considering with some anguish the particular position of Israel but here he comes to his solution. Hoeksema rightly rejects dispensationalism. "I say then, Hath God cast away his people? God forbid. For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin." What then is the solution?

Essentially it is to be found in the olive tree. The branches represent generations and the root is Christ. Some natural branches are broken off. These represent those who rejected Him. The ones who remain are those who received him. Gentiles were grafted in, the believing Christians in their generations. But "Thou wilt say then, The branches were broken off, that I might be graffed in. Well; because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith. Be not highminded, but fear: For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee. Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God: on them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off. And they also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be graffed in: for God is able to graff them in again."

²John Murray in his commentary confirms that "there is no need to insert the preposition 'in' before 'him'". All the English translations retain it except the latest. The ESV has, "Or him whom they have never heard" as a footnote.

Now what do we see? All around the olive tree on top of the lopped Jewish branches lie heaps of cut off Gentile branches: either as unbelieving churches or simply a folk memory of the past. The recent UK census revealed that 71% of the populace still called themselves Christian!

Of course there remain a gracious remnant with occasional outsiders being converted and coming in, but the decline is obvious to all. Meanwhile there are down the centuries additions of Jews being grafted back in. Back in their own olive tree they readily assimilate and are no longer recognized as Jews. When the fulness of the Gentiles has come in "so all Israel [that is the final Jewish convert] shall be saved."

I fear this bald summary scarcely does justice to the argument but almost I am persuaded. The result is "life from the dead," i.e., the resurrection, and this brings forth the apostle's exultant concluding *paean*.

This is Most Excellent

"Practice and doctrine are inseparably connected. They cannot be divorced from each other"—so preached Hoeksema as he turned from the doctrinal intricacies of chapter 11 to the practical injunctions of 12 to 16. "In what follows in Romans, we must prepare ourselves for something to which we may have many objections. For the Word of God is not according to the flesh."

In looking over my notes, I see remarks such as "excellent," "practical," "useful discussion," "warnings," etc. Space limits me to a few points. Speaking of the "gifts" he reminds us "that the apostle is not speaking exclusively of the special offices ... for all have the office of believer."

Under "be of one mind": "Preeminent is the one great calling of the church to maintain, defend and propagate the truth."

We are to be *subject* to the higher powers. On page 623, I came across the following: "In the sword-power is also the right to wage war. We must not go along with those who cry 'pacifism.'" The state has the sword, and though it may not use the sword for aggression, it has the right to use it against aggressive nations.

Because the authority of the state is a derived authority, it is limited. The American power is limited to America. The higher powers of America have no authority except in America. The authority of the civil government is limited to its own domain.

Romans 13:11-12 reads: "And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we be-

lieved. The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light.” I was intrigued to find our author confirming my own thinking: “For the individual believer the day of the Lord is much *nearer*. For the individual believer, the day of the Lord comes when we die. This is true because the death of the Christian is his salvation.” Then comes a significant remark: “I suggest that after we die and enter into eternity, time must be changed ... it will seem to be but a short stretch of time from the day of our death to the day of the Lord.” I thought the treatment of the “weaker brother” wholly admirable. He has an important practical application to make on “Greet one another with an holy kiss” (p. 686). And he concludes: “If we, by our study of the book of Romans, may have attained a little more knowledge of God’s wisdom by contemplating the mystery of God in Jesus Christ, God will be pleased, and we will rejoice.”

Discussion

I agree with the book’s editor that we have here an excellent example of homiletics. The preacher has carefully pondered his text and in his exposition brings out the coherence and exposition of it before making clear application. May I also, as a voice from the pew, add my wish for continuous exposition of the totality of Scripture. I have over more than fifty years been successively a member of five churches in Ireland, England and Wales and must have heard over 6000 sermons. In only two of them—thankfully one is the current church—has the general practice been followed of consecutive exposition. There are some 1500 chapters in Scripture, but I find great chunks of Scripture, e.g., Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and others on which I have heard few if any sermons. I believe Matthew Henry, during his residence in Chester, preached through the whole Bible and had started again before his removal to London. Three centuries later his commentary is still the praise of all the churches.

Conclusion

I am happy to recommend these sermons. The reading of them has been profitable—indeed at times something of a challenge. They would serve well for devotional reading, being relatively short, but even the scholar will find material here to interest and challenge. Our thanks go to Hoeksema and Swart for the preaching and transcribing and Professor Engelsma for the editing. The RFPa have done their usual exemplary work in their production.