

Thursday Theology: On Reading Paul's Letter to the Romans. A Review of Romans Disarmed

Co-missioners,

We are “justified by faith.” What does this mean?

The classic Lutheran answer to this Luther-style question is up for grabs these days in mainline Protestant circles. This includes much of the ELCA, where the term “justice” is replacing “justification” as the focus of teaching and proclamation. This shift is due in part to New Testament scholars who have argued strenuously in recent decades that Luther's reading of Paul was skewed, preoccupied as he was by the issues of his own day.

Thursday Theology has paid too little attention to this argument. Today's post, Part One of a two-part series, is a step toward correcting this. Our writer is Ronald W. Roschke, a retired pastor and former assistant to the bishop of the ELCA's Rocky Mountain Synod. Ron was a member of the first class to graduate from Concordia Seminary in Exile, aka Seminex. Early in his career he spent eight years on the Board of Directors of the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, half of these served as Board Chair.

Ron is a gifted exegete and a superb, prolific writer who these days is churning out weekly analyses of forthcoming lectionary texts for those who ask. They are rich, meaty, and thorough. His work here seeks to bridge the apparent chasm between current Pauline scholarship and the confessional theology that anchors Crossings. For more on the latter, see next week's Part Two.

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

Law, Gospel, and Empire Considering *Romans* *Disarmed*: Part One



From Canva

Paul's letter to the Romans is one of a pair of go-to sources

for those of us who want to consider the biblical origins of law and gospel theology. It lacks most of the fiery passion of the other source, the letter to the Galatians, and for good reason: Paul needs to be more “polite” with the Romans. In the Galatians letter, Paul is passionately defending his ministry in congregations he has founded. These congregations are under attack by opponents who want to undo the radical ministry Paul had begun there, in which gentiles [1] have been invited into full membership in the community without a demand they follow Jewish laws such as circumcision and dietary restrictions. But Paul has not yet visited the house churches in Rome; they were not started by him. Thus, his letter serves as an introduction preparing them for a hoped-for face-to-face visit in the near future. At Rome, Paul is not under personal attack, and this frees him to lay out his theological understandings more “cooly.”

Sylvia C. Keesmaat and Brian J. Walsh have coauthored an important book that invites us to read Romans from a fresh perspective. *Romans Disarmed: Resisting Empire, Demanding Justice* [2] asks us to think about Paul’s letter in ways that invite us to consider the go-to lenses we usually use as we read this piece of Christian Scripture. Keesmaat teaches in biblical studies in a variety of venues around Toronto. Walsh, her husband, is a Christian Reformed campus pastor and adjunct theology professor at Trinity College, Toronto. Together they operate an off-grid permaculture farm and have also co-authored *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire*.

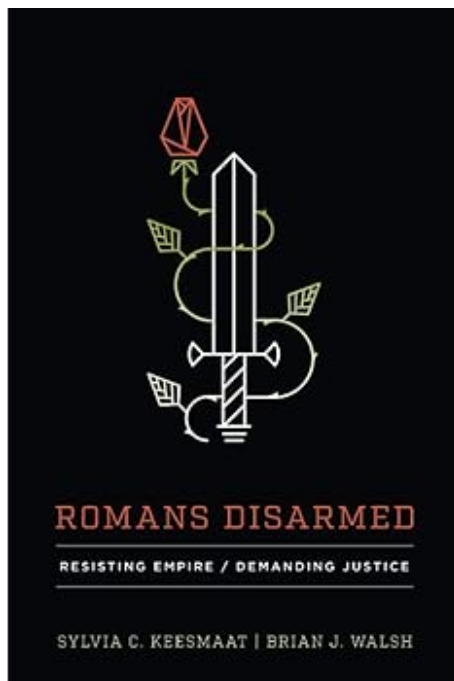
When Lutherans read Romans, Paul’s letter tends to become a manifesto for theological points and issues that were critical in Western Christianity in the sixteenth century. However, Keesmaat and Walsh invite us to read the letter as best as we can from the perspective of the first-century recipients to whom the letter is addressed. This requires a deep exercise of

imagination which, the authors suggest, lies at the heart of all attempts to hear and understand Scripture. Keesmaat and Walsh propose that, when Romans is read this way, it is “disarmed” from theological debates that lie a millennium and a half into the future after the letter’s creation.

The authors’ opening exercise in *Romans Disarmed* is an extremely creative attempt to ground this letter in its social context. They do this by inventing two fictional characters who hear the letter read to them in their house church in Rome. The identity and fictional life stories of these two characters are built upon a great deal of painstaking research that includes close analysis of the names of persons Paul greets in the closing chapter, and what those names might reveal about the make-up of the Roman churches’ membership. The book also includes the treasure trove of recent scholarship into the life situations of people living inside the cultural matrix of Roman society in the first century CE.

And so, we meet Iris, a gentile slave who has found her way into the Jesus community. We learn about the violence of her life, the indignities and despair she faces, the vicious disruption and brutal dissolving of her family and the loss of contact with her own children because of her status as a slave. We also meet Nereus, a Jewish artisan in Rome who came there as a slave and has found his way into the Jesus fellowship as well; we learn of the challenges he faces living as a Jew in Rome. Gentile and Jew, Iris and Nereus are bound together not only by their shared faith in Jesus Messiah, but also by what it means to be victims of the violence of Empire. Over and over in their book, Keesmaat and Walsh bring us back to the importance of Empire’s all-encompassing power to define life in that world through imperial violence. Their emphasis upon this and its importance for understanding the letter is extremely compelling; Romans deserves to be heard out of *this* reality so that we can

understand it as Paul intended it to be read. Two examples, immediately below, will help to illustrate this.



Romans Disarmed
Resisting Empire, Demanding
Justice

by: Sylvia C. Keesmaat, Brian J.
Walsh

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As Keesmaat and Walsh discuss the text of Romans, they consistently refer to *justice* rather than *justification*. They note that Paul's Greek term *dikaiosynē* is used to translate two Hebrew words: *righteousness* (*tsedaqah*) and *justice* (*mishpat*). For those who originally heard Paul's letter in its own first-century context, the importance of *justice* in the Roman Empire would have been self-evident. Rome considers *justice* as perhaps the principal gift it has graciously bestowed upon the world. In the social context in which Romans is composed and heard, *justice* will be far more critical than *justification*, which is a

deep theological concern for sixteenth-century Western Christians.

The second example is deeply related to the first: How are we to understand Jesus' death? Keesmaat and Walsh repeatedly remind us that Jesus' death is an instance and application of *Roman justice*. Jesus is crucified. Sentence is passed by Pontius Pilate, the Empire's appointed governor. The titulus on Jesus' cross announcing Jesus' crime does not say "Blasphemer!" and Jesus is not stoned to death, as Jewish law would demand. Rather, the titulus announces that Jesus is a "king," and therefore a threat to the stability of the Empire. Jesus is the victim of Roman justice and totalitarian control—the same violence experienced by Iris and Nereus. Jesus is tortured to death as a particularly grizzly imperial teaching point. And so, when God raises Jesus from death, Jesus' deep solidarity with those who suffer the Empire's violence means that his resurrection is a sign of hope for a new way to configure human life apart from the Empire's death-dealing ways. God is up to something new in the world!

Keesmaat and Walsh point out the necessity for robust imagination as we read Scripture. Their creation of fictional characters to help us focus our attention is both winsome and effective. And this raises a further important question for us: What narrative lens do we as Lutherans use as we read and understand Romans? I think the answer to that question is both simple and profound. We read Romans while we're watching Martin Luther. We hear Paul's arguments and claims as the answer to Luther's own fear of a righteous God who asks of Luther—and us—the impossible and then rescues sinners by radical grace received through faith. And because we read Romans in this way, it means we understand this book through Luther's experience and story. Luther's core issues are theological, spiritual, existential, and profoundly psychological. We find Luther's

experience to be a portal through which Paul's document, now nearly two millennia old, can speak to us, analyze our own experience, and proclaim God's grace revealed in Jesus.

But rather than analyzing law and gospel parsed as categories of Luther's (and our) personal, psychological experience, Keesmaat and Walsh invite us to recognize that for Paul and his original audience the issues raised in this letter were profoundly cultural, social, economic, and political. The motivating question is not "How will I make peace with an angry God?" but rather "Is there any hope—an alternative to the totalitarian brutality of the Empire?" This question helps us to understand their shift from *justification* to *justice*. This shift is a two-fold reality. First, *justice* is the immediate, concrete issue for the members of the Roman house churches. Paul's audience is composed of people who have been victims of Roman "justice," just like Jesus. Second, justification, as understood by Luther, depends on an evolving understanding of what it means to be human and, therefore, what it means to relate to God.

The question that Crossings folk are sure to ask is, "Does this social/imperial reading of Romans challenge Luther's experience or story?" Or to ask it a little differently, is there more than one way to parse the grammar of law and gospel in this letter? Keesmaat and Walsh frame the issue this way:

While the church has wielded this epistle as a sword within its own theological wars, the letter itself has been strangely (and paradoxically) rendered powerless in the real conflict that Paul names to be at the heart of the gospel of Christ. While the church has been preoccupied with the "justification" of the "sinner," it has lost the radical message of how in Jesus Christ those who are unjust are made to be just anew,

equipped and empowered for lives of justice. (p. 252)

This would seem to pit Keesmaat, Walsh (and Paul) against the Lutheran passion for “justification by grace through faith apart from works of the law.” So, are these two interpretive options mutually exclusive? Next week, we’ll explore how *Romans Disarmed* relates to Lutheran approaches to Paul’s faith convictions.

Endnotes

[1] I am following Keesmaat’s and Walsh’s practice of leaving “gentile” lower case. The word is not a proper, but rather, a generic noun and adjective. To capitalize “Gentile” and make it equivalent to “Jew,” points in a direction that can overly racialize Christian Scriptures.

[2] Grand Rapids MI: Brazos Press, 2019

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
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