

Simple Christianity

by Ray C. Stedman

I hope you already have your Bibles open to Romans as we are beginning our study of this most powerful human document in the world: The Letter of Paul to the Romans.

- This book lit the fire in Martin Luther's heart that began the Protestant Reformation and changed the history of the western world.
- This book lit the fire in John Wesley's heart, resulting in the great awakening in England that saved England from the fate of France in the French Revolution.
- This book lit the fire in Karl Barth's heart in our own day and caused him to write his study on Romans which called the theological world back from the cold, barren deadness of liberalism to a much more vital and powerful Christian message.

This book, therefore, has become one of the most revolutionary books of all time. The Communists think that the writings of Karl Marx are revolutionary, but the writings of Karl Marx look like a Boy Scout manual when compared to the revolutionary power of the book of Romans! I mean that!

It is just because this book has become so familiar to us that we have lost some of the sense of its revolutionary power, but I hope we will approach it now with a sense of freshness and newness – as though we had never read it before. Perhaps we will see and sense once again the tremendous vitality, vividness, and power of this book.

As you know, this is a letter. It was written by the Apostle Paul to the Christian community in Rome. As best we can determine, he wrote it while he was in the city of Corinth, which was the cultural center of the Roman world. Paul had never been to Rome when he wrote this letter, yet he knew many of the people there. He had met them in various other places and some he had even led to Christ. There is a tradition that says Paul began the church at Rome, but this is most certainly not true. It is difficult to tell how the church began. Some have felt that perhaps it began with the remarkable visit from God in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. Strangers from Rome were present that day. Some were possibly among the 3,000 who were regenerated and became the first members of the Christian Church on the Day of Pentecost. At any rate, a Christian church had begun in the city of Rome, the capital of the empire, and it is to the band of Christians there that this letter is addressed.

This letter is a magnificent explanation of Christianity. If you had nothing but the book of Romans, you would have every vital Christian teaching in the New Testament – in capsule form at least. It touches upon all the basic truths of Christian doctrine and teachings. So, if you master the book of Romans, you have the key to all the Scriptures, Old and New Testaments alike. This is why this is such a wonderful book with which to begin studying the Scriptures.

The first seventeen verses are the introduction to Paul's letter, and, like any good introduction, they sum up the major themes of the letter. We are calling this introductory message *Simple Christi-*

anity. As you know, there are several very brilliant writers who have attempted to explain Christian faith to non-believers, and they have written excellent books along this line. C. S. Lewis has put out a book that he calls *Mere Christianity*. J. B. Phillips has written a book that he calls *Plain Christianity*. J. R. W. Stott has written a book that he calls *Basic Christianity*. But we have chosen *Simple Christianity* because that is more in line with our mentality – mine at least! I think it catches the idea that this is simply putting forth the basic truths of what Christian faith is all about.

In this introduction, you find these truths summarized for us. Paul writes about three things: He writes about Christ, the Roman Christians, and himself:

- He writes about Christ because there can be no Christianity without him. Christianity is not a creed, it is a person. It is the life of that person relived in our lives today. Therefore, you can't talk about Christianity without talking about Christ.
- Paul writes about the Romans because these Roman Christians were just like us. They were the basic material within which God began his transforming work in human life, just as we are the basic material within which God intends to show his work today.
- Paul writes about himself because he is the pattern of what Christ will do. He is a living example of what God's grace can do.

In summary, there is a new power to appropriate, an old problem to be solved, and a clear pattern to follow. Now that is *simple Christianity*, and these three themes find themselves repeated in every setting forth of what Christianity is – a new power, an old problem, and a clear pattern.

Now let's look at it in detail:

First, Paul writes about **Christ**, in Verses 1-7:

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh

and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ out Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about obedience to the faith for the sake of his name among the nations, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ;

To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. {Rom 1:1-7 RSV}

Since Christ is simply indispensable to Christianity, Paul sums up what we might call **the credentials of Jesus Christ**. Now you have not been in a Christian church very long before you have heard Christ set forth as the only one who is capable of solving the human dilemma. Christians everywhere stand fast and firm on the proposition that Jesus alone, of all the religious voices that have ever been heard, is the only one who is capable of solving the human dilemma. And anyone who has heard this claim who is not a Christian, if he is thoughtful at all, has the right to say: "How do you know this? What are the credentials of Christ that can make me believe that he can do this?" Well, here they are:

1. First, he was **predicted** long before he appeared. Now that is an amazing thing. Notice in Verse 2:

... he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures,

Jesus Christ was predicted long before he appeared. And I may say that no other 'manufacturer' of religious leaders can make that claim. He alone fits the pattern, fulfills the outline, and matches the test. This is one thing that sets him apart as unique among all the religious voices of the world. None other was predicted long before he came.

During the days of World War II, in the French underground, they often had occasion for agents to meet one another at various places to exchange information and to carry on the work of the underground. Of course, it had to be clandestine, and some of the agents had never met each other before. They had a very

simple means of identification so that each agent would know without a doubt that the man he met under certain given conditions was the man he could trust. All they did was to take a piece of paper and tear it in half; they gave one man half of the paper and mailed the other half to the other man. When they met, all they did was compare the two pieces of paper. If the papers matched, the agents were identified and there was no doubt about it!

This is the way that Jesus Christ fulfills the predictions of the Old Testament. He himself said that he came by the accepted way {cf, John 10:1-3, 10:27-28}. The sheep heard his voice and they knew that this was the one that came by the predicted route, and men could test his claims on the basis of the Scriptures they had. Paul brings this out before us as one of the unique marks that Jesus Christ is indeed God's intended deliverer of the human race: He came according to the prophets and the predictions.

2. The second mark of his uniqueness is that he combined in himself the nature of God and man. You see how we have it in Verse 3:

... the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and designated Son of God ... according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, {Rom 1:3-4 RSV}

Thus he combined in himself these two things:

- a) He came in the line of David, which means he had a genealogy, an ancestry, that could be traced back to David. His ancestry is traced for us in Scripture; therefore, he had the right to the throne of David. It is interesting that not once in all the time that our Lord ministered in the flesh did any man challenge his right to sit on the throne of David, though he continually made claim to the fact that he was David's son. No one ever challenged it – it was too clear. He came according to David's line of the flesh – he was a human being.
- b) When he was raised from the dead, Paul says it demonstrated, as we have seen here,

that he was the Son of God. He was the Son of God with the Spirit of holiness. He tied together these two things. In fact, the word for “designated” is the {Greek} word *horizo*, from which we get our word “horizon.” He filled the whole horizon of these believers with the conviction in their hearts that he was the Son of God. This is what you find flaming throughout all of the New Testament – this deep conviction, because of the resurrection, that these first believers are dealing with the Lord of life himself!

Because Jesus Christ is both God and man, he spans the great gulf between God and man. This is the unsolved problem of all other religions. They are always an effort to bridge the gulf from the human side, reaching out toward God, but they never can span it, because man cannot live on God's level. But there is one who came from God's side and bridged the gulf across to man! In combining in himself both natures, Christ becomes the bridge across the chasm between God and man. That is why Christ is unique, and no other ‘manufacturer’ of religion can make this claim!

I find so many times that people completely miss this point. I received a letter from a college girl some time ago. It was a very earnest letter. I suspected when I read it that she had probably been influenced by the Jehovah's Witnesses, though I am not sure – at least her questions were along the line that they often take. She said this:

“I don't understand how you can say that Jesus Christ is God. Now, to whom was he praying? Was he praying to himself?”

She went on to list several other instances of the same type. It was obvious her problem was that she thought Christians were claiming that the man Jesus was nothing but God – that he was God appearing on earth, but that he was not man.

Now, this isn't the claim that Christians make: They claim that he is *both* man *and* God – that is the point. It is not that he is God, Holy God, praying thus to himself, but that he is man also. This claim of Christ to be both

man and God is absolutely unique, and it is what makes him the one bridge between God and man.

3. There is a third credential here that marks the supremacy of Jesus Christ, and that is the **method of working**, as seen in Verse 5:

... through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about obedience to the faith for the sake of his name among the nations, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ; {Rom 1:5-6 RSV}

In other words, how does Christ effect his work in the world? How does he do it? All other religious leaders come and begin an organization, found a movement, or create a party, which, working through the usual ways of human propaganda and activity, spreads its doctrine. People then become convinced of a creed and follow that particular teaching. Now, this is not what Christ has done! He began what we might call a secret society through which his life would touch man. It is not an organization. It is not a political party. It is not a mass movement. And wherever the church has become this, it is a false thing. No, as Paul points out, the Lord's designated way of working is to call men into a unique relationship with himself, that, through their very lives and personalities, he imparts his own nature and life to others and touches and changes them. It is sort of another incarnation, when 'the word becomes flesh' {cf, John 1:14} all over again. The strange thing about the church is that the world never sees Jesus Christ until it sees him incarnate in another Christian. But when he has become flesh in another person's life, then, suddenly, somebody becomes aware that here beside him is something of Christ, and they see Jesus Christ once again. That process is to go on until it touches the entire world, as Paul says, "for the sake of his name among all the nations." Thus, it is a worldwide process of touching others through the lives of those men who are saturated with God, the men who are captured by Christ.

These are the marks of the true messenger of God, and, in line with modern marketing, we might

add the slogan, "Accept no substitute." Christ was predicted long before he appeared, he combined in himself the natures of God and man, and his method of working in the world is to impart his nature and life through men.

In Verses 8-13, Paul writes about the **Roman saints**:

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you, that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. I want you to know, brethren, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. {Rom 1:8-13 RSV}

There is not much we know about the Roman Christians, but Paul starts out by listing the evidence that they were indeed Christians. Their faith had been talked about all over the world – something had happened to these people.

Now, I confess to you that I get suspicious about people who call themselves Christians and nobody knows that they are Christians. I remember hearing of a boy who had been away working in a logging camp all during the summer. When he got back home, somebody said, "How did you get along? Did the fact that you were a Christian make any difference?" He said, "Oh no. They never found out that I was a Christian." Well, there is something wrong in such a situation.

But here in Rome were Christians whose faith had been talked about around the world.

I remember Dr. Carl Armstrong telling us about a time when he was down in Cuba. He was in a city where he had never been before. He wanted to try to locate a Christian assembly if he could. He thought he would just start out from door to door to see if he could find any Christians. He knocked on a few doors, and asked, "Are there any Christians here?" "Well," somebody said, "there are some Presbyterians, and some Method-

ists, and a few Baptists, but I don't know of any Christians." Well, there is something wrong, you see. Christianity ought to be visible, and it was visible in the lives of these Roman Christians.

It is evident, from these words, that Paul wrote to what we call "babes in Christ" {cf, 1 Cor 3:1}. That is, they were *new* Christians. They had become Christians by an encounter with Jesus Christ, face to face, and that encounter has transformed their lives so that their faith was known throughout the world. Notice, they did not become Christians by understanding the plan of salvation (nobody ever becomes a Christian that way). Rather, now that they had become Christians, they need to have the plan of salvation explained to them so that they might grow to maturity.

Now, as newborn babes in Christ, they were like all other babies. I have discovered that babies have one great characteristic – they are almost continuously in need of something! I speak as an authority along this line: New Christians often don't act very Christ-like. I think this is why there are so many misunderstandings about Christians. We need to remember that Christians begin their lives as babies, and they need to grow.

I am always running into someone who says, "Well, I meet so many Christians who don't have the qualities that I expect a Christian to have." Well, I do too, but it is oftentimes because we fail to realize that these are new, baby Christians.

We have a new baby in our home, and I have been watching her, and observing quite a few interesting things:

- First of all, she is very lazy: She just lies around the house all day long, and never does a thing to help. Everything has to be done for her. She is the most lazy person I think I have ever seen.
- Second, she is very thoughtless: She wakes people up in the middle of the night, and has no regard for their sleep at all. She never hesitates to interrupt a conversation to express her own desires or needs.
- She is also very rude: She'll burp right in your face and be completely unabashed about it! She is very uncooperative in many ways too: As I have watched that little life, I have said to myself, "Well, if that is what a human being is,

then I don't want to be one – lazy, uncooperative, rude."

Now, of course, I really haven't said that. I recognize that she is a baby, that she is going to grow, and that all the qualities I admire in human life will take their place in her life, and be brought into her being and character, as she grows and develops properly.

This is what we need to remember about babes in Christ – they need to grow. Throughout this letter, in the background, are these men and women of great need, just like you and me – normal human beings who need to be transformed by grace into the likeness of Jesus Christ. That is why this letter was written, and why it is so wonderfully instructive to us today.

The last thing that Paul writes about in these seventeen introductory verses is **himself**, Verses 14-17:

I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and the foolish: so I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." {Rom 1:14-17 RSV}

This is the other side of the picture. The Roman Christians represent new Christians, and, at the moment, the most he can say of them is that they have faith – obvious, visible, manifest faith. But now, of himself, Paul says three things. These three are the marks of Christian maturity. He says "I am" three times:

- "I am under obligation," that is, "I am **concerned** about others."
- "I am eager," that is, "I am **committed**, ready to fling myself without reserve into the work."
- And, third, "I am not ashamed," that is, "I am **confident**, resting on unshakable experience in Christ."

Now, these are the three marks of the man that God uses: The mature Christian is **concerned**, **committed**, and **confident**. The minute the Spirit of God begins to really work in your life and mine, these marks begin to show themselves, in this order.

1. I have seen this so many times in talking to somebody just at the very threshold of Christian faith, a person who has been brought to the sense of his need for Christ. After a person has yielded his life to Christ, almost invariably the first thing he says is, "You know, I have a friend I would like to tell this to." Or, "I want you to meet my mother" (or my father, or my brother, or my sister). Or, "I want to bring somebody else to talk with you." The first mark of the Spirit's work in our lives is that he begins to create a **concern for someone else**.

I have learned to recognize this as the sign of a genuine transformation, a regeneration. Normally our lives are built around self, and the longer we live that way the more self-centered we get. But, at the moment of personal encounter with Jesus Christ, this vicious circle of self-involvement is broken into, and, for the first time, there comes a gleam of light that begins to manifest itself in a concern for somebody else.

As that Christian life develops, that concern deepens until, like Paul, it encompasses the whole of the world and every kind of person in it:

I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and the foolish: {Rom 1:14 RSV}

It makes no difference to Paul who it is, because his heart has been captured by the Spirit of God, who creates a concern for someone else.

2. The second mark is **commitment**, and I think that this is where the great struggle comes. Paul could say, "I am eager to fling myself into this thing." Most Christians are not ready to make that statement. The Christian life is very predictable. In a sense, you can trace its workings:

- It begins with the non-Christian, who says, in great, large, capital letters: "I." This is the trouble with men – "I" trouble.
- Then, as one becomes a Christian, another note is added. It becomes: "Christ and I." But that is still not right.
- As that Christian life grows and develops, the "I" becomes smaller and smaller until, at last, there is just "Christ" – "Not I, but Christ" {cf. Gal 2:20}. This describes the committed person, who is no longer thinking about what he is going to get out of it, or what blessings are going to be given to him, or what glory, admiration, or advancement he can get out to the Christian cause – but only "Christ."

This is an interesting thing: Commitment always means excitement. A lady came to me recently, and said, "I have been to you with problems before in which I needed an answer to a spirit of depression and despondency, but this time I have come to ask if it is wrong for me to be so excited about the Christian life." I wish more would come with that kind of problem – I love to have that kind. Of course, I told her, "No, it isn't wrong!" We need to temper our zeal with knowledge, and we can become overzealous very easily, but to feel and sense the excitement of Christian living is only the normal thing for a Christian. It means that here is a committed heart, a life that is wholly Christ's.

3. Finally, the third mark of Christian maturity is **confidence**:

... I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who has faith,... For in it the righteousness of God is revealed... {Rom 1:16a-17a RSV}

In other words, the gospel, as Paul says here, supplies the two things that men crave more than anything else in life – power and righteousness.

- a) Now, every heart longs for power – you know that. And, usually, we think that power is shown by the number of people we can control. If we can get so many people to jump at our command, this is a sign of power. We have so many people under us at the office. We love to order people around. We call in our orders to the store and get them delivered out to us. This is a sign of status or power. The whole human society is based on that concept of power.

But, in describing the Last Supper, John said that the Lord Jesus, knowing that all power was committed into his hands, rose and laid aside his garments, girded himself with a towel, and began to wash the disciples' feet {see John 13:3-5}. In other words, here is the manifestation of real power. Real power is the power to be humble, because then the power of God can work.

Dick Halverson was telling some of us a few weeks ago about speaking at a college conference where they were asking a lot of questions. One of the questions asked was, "How can I make the gospel relevant to this modern world?" Dick said that he was just about to answer it with some of the usual clichés, when the period came to a close and he had to leave the question until the morning. He had the whole evening and night to meditate on his answer. He said that as he began to think about that question, he was struck by the sheer ego that was that was revealed in it: "How can I make the gospel relevant to this modern world?" When he got up to answer the question the next morning, he said, "I would just like to say this: You can't make the gospel relevant. In fact, you don't need to make the gospel relevant, because Paul says that the gospel is 'the power of God.' Now, let's substitute that for the word 'gospel' – 'How can I make the power of God relevant to this modern age?' You see how egocentric that is? 'How can I make God important?'"

The gospel is the power of God. It is the secret by which the pride of man's heart is broken and the real power that is

manifest in God begins to manifest itself through a humble heart. That's where power is. That is the power of Jesus Christ that won hearts, and captured them, and carried them after him throughout his life.

- b) But the second facet of the gospel is **righteousness**,

... in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; {Rom 1:17a RSV}

And, again, righteousness is something that every heart longs for.

Let me show you what I mean. Suppose somebody starts to criticize you to your face. What do you do? Instinctively you start explaining why you did this, or you supply a good reason for it. You start justifying yourself. Now, that is the word used here – righteousness, being justified. And we all want to be justified. We are continually seeking to be justified in people's eyes, in our own heart, and in our own eyes, but the trouble is that self-justification never satisfies.

Have you noticed that? Once you have explained why you did something, and you go away, you are still not satisfied. You are never satisfied until the other person has agreed with it. We are continually seeking justification in another's eyes.

Now, it is this that the gospel supplies, because power and justification are found only in the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is no longer self-justification, but it is God who says to the believer in Jesus Christ: "You are justified in my sight! You are righteous in my sight by virtue of Christ's work for you!"

Now, that is why Paul could say, "I am not ashamed of the gospel." I am confident because I have seen it do what men are longing to discover. I have seen the gospel release the power in men's lives to be what they want to be. I have seen the gospel justify men so they no longer are straining continually to justify themselves. It has completely delivered them from all efforts at self-justification and self-centered

explanations of why they are doing things. The gospel delivers men from self-confidence, and brings them out into the fullness of the liberty of God. Such liberty is only found in believing that Jesus Christ can run a human life.

This is simple Christianity, isn't it?
This is why Paul was able to say, "I am confident! I am not ashamed!"

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