

The Theology of Ernst Käsemann – I

Commentary on Romans by Ernst Käsemann

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Ernst Käsemann was born in Westphalia in 1906. His graduate studies, in the leisurely and protracted German manner, were coming to a close in 1933, the year in which Hitler was voted into power and his dissertation on the concepts of the body and the body of Christ in St Paul was published. From the outset, as a young *pfarrer* in Westphalia, he belonged to the Confessing Church: the organized opposition to the influence of National Socialism among German Protestants. At the age of forty, in 1946, he returned to academic life as professor of New Testament studies, first at Mainz, then at Göttingen, and since 1959 until his retirement at Tübingen. On the third day of his first semester as a student at Bonn in 1925 he started going to the class on the Epistle to the Romans which was being given by Erik Peterson: "the course of my study and in some sense, as befits a theologian, my life was decided" (p vii). In 1973 he published the commentary on Romans which had occupied him for many years. A third revised edition was required a year later. This is the text, very carefully and literally translated (almost pedantically, although that is a laudable fault in the present current of wretchedly inadequate translations), by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, which is now under review.

The Epistle to the Romans, written at the latest by the year 57, is the first major theological work in the history of Christian doctrine. By that time Paul must have been about fifty years of age. He came from a strict Jewish family living in the Diaspora. There must have been some 4,500,000 Jews in the Roman empire at the time, constituting about 7% of the total population. The majority of them lived outside the Holy Land, chiefly in Egypt and Syria and above all in the great cities like Alexandria, Antioch, Damascus and so on. Tarsus itself, on the road from Asia Minor to Syria, was the capital city of the Roman province of Cilicia and a flourishing commercial centre as well as a centre of Greek culture (Strabo even mentions it in the same breath as Athens). Luke implies that Paul was brought up in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3); if that was really the case it is surprising that Paul does not add it to the catalogue of his claims to orthodoxy (Phil 3). By the time of the

execution of Jesus of Nazareth and the appearance in Jerusalem of his disciples – “teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead” (Acts 4:2) – Paul had evidently joined the Pharisees. For two years he took part in the struggle to prevent the development of what appeared to be a bizarre new Jewish sect. In the course of theological arguments with them, and apparently in the context of setting off to ferret out “any belonging to the Way, men or women”, in the Hellenistic synagogues at Damascus (Acts 9:2), Paul found himself “having the righteousness from God that depends on faith in Christ” (Phil 3:9). He must then have been in his middle twenties.

Twenty years later, in the year 51/52, Paul was brought before the governor L. Junius Gallio (Seneca’s brother), having been accused of making trouble among the Jews in Corinth (Acts 18:12).¹ Shortly before that he must have written what we know as his First Letter to the Thessalonians: the earliest Christian text which we have inherited and the oldest document in the New Testament literature (with the possible exception of the Letter of James).² This most ancient of Christian texts is a response by Paul to four questions about which the Thessalonian church had evidently consulted him. The questions concerned (a) sexual morality, that perennially vital Christian topic, and here Paul seems to be insisting on a total break with pagan practices, some of which particularly degrade women (I Thess 4: 1-8); then (b) eschatological enthusiasm, and here Paul seems to combat an excessively charismatic mentality which made people anarchic and indolent and disrupted the community (4: 9 - 12); then (c) the fate of Christians who died before the Parousia, and here he argues that they will be the first to rise to meet the Lord (4: 13 - 18); and finally (d) the date of the end of the world, and here he refuses to commit himself (5: 1 - 11). It is fascinating to read between the lines and try to reconstruct the outlook and the atmosphere in the church which raised such questions.

The next oldest texts, written in the years 54-57, are also polemical interventions in the history of two radically different churches. In the First Letter to the Corinthians we hear echoes of the repercussions of a life in the Holy Spirit which is marked by what Luther called *Schwärmerei*: “enthusiasm” in the proper theological sense. There is a blindness to *porneia* in the church (1 Cor 5) which goes with a certain contempt for the body (6: 13 – “the body is for the Lord, and the Lord for the body”) and theories about sexual asceticism that draw Paul’s criticism (chap 7). The experience of “separation from the world” seems to have led to a dualistic notion of reality, perhaps anticipating the gnostic fever that came later. Some of the Corinthian Christians seem

indeed to have been proto-gnostic (chap 8). They had misunderstood the implications of being members of the body of Christ (chaps 10 to 12). They needed to be reminded very strongly that charity is far more important than understanding mysteries and knowledge (chap 13). Their ecstatic life of prayer, with their speaking in tongues, required to be corrected somewhat (chap 14). They believed in the resurrection of Christ but apparently understood it in some way that excluded any future bodily resurrection (chap 15).

The Letter to the Galatians, on the other hand, addressed to the churches in what is now central Turkey, embodied a powerful attack on the theology of Jewish-Christian missionaries opposed to Paul who have almost won people over to the view that they could never be true Christians unless they accepted circumcision and Torah. Paul appeals in this situation to the validity of a Christian life based on the gift of the Spirit – precisely the “charismatic experience” which evidently led to excesses of enthusiasm in the Corinthian church – in order to recall the Galatian churches from adopting something rather like the religion of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

These letters to churches in Corinth and Galatia thus mirror some of the problems that afflicted the first generation of Christians as they struggled to come to terms with their Jewish inheritance without falling into some disembodied supernaturalism. The problem, basically, was to work out the relationships between the Law and the Spirit and the significance of Jesus Christ. The Epistle to the Romans is Paul’s solution to this problem. The first major theological work in the history of Christian doctrine is thus a comment upon the state of the churches a quarter of a century after the proclamation of Jesus as Christ and as Lord. “It is a necessary condition for the enterprise of Christian theology that there exist a community, or communities, whose action and speech are perceived, by their members, to give contingent expression to God’s historical accession” (Nicholas Lash, *Theology on Dover Beach*, p 21). Nothing could be more true of the Epistle to the Romans. After twenty five years of Christian life, the *course* of which we simply do not have the documents to enable us to trace with any accuracy, the *result* was the strain and tension reflected in Paul’s three great letters of the period 54-57. The earliest theological texts to have survived are these polemical interventions. Much is, of course, to be learned about the inaugural years of the Christian movement by a critical reading between the lines of many other New Testament texts. In particular, the history of the composition of the four gospels may be squeezed judiciously to yield clues. But it is Paul’s letters that take us into the problems with which they are contemporary, and to the solution of which they offer the dec-

isive contribution.

Some commentators, such as J. C. O'Neill,³ find that there is no way of making sense of the Epistle to the Romans except on the assumption that much of the text was not written by Paul. While Ernst Käsemann plainly has no prejudice against the possibility of having to disentangle non-Pauline verses or chapters from the text, he finds that he can offer a perfectly coherent interpretation of the Epistle as a whole without having to challenge or deny the Pauline authorship of anything but the final three verses of chapter 16. These verses are absent altogether from some very early forms of the text, and in other versions their position varies. But Käsemann argues that the notion of the "mystery enwrapped for ages in silence" (16: 25) must be post-Pauline, and that the allusion to "prophetic writings" (verse 26) suggests that this superb and rather gorgeous doxology was composed in a church which already had a collection of writings accepted as canonical (e.g. Paul's own letters).

It may be noted conveniently now, before we outline Käsemann's interpretation of the Epistle, that he regards chapter 16 as a separate letter which *may* have been written to the church in Ephesus but which certainly *cannot* have been written to the Roman church. The arguments are not new: the Epistle is written to introduce Paul to a church where he is not well known and it is odd that he should after all have so many friends there as chapter 16 lists; Aquila and Priscilla had surely not returned to Rome from Ephesus where Paul left them in the year 55 (Acts 18); there are "dissensions and difficulties, in opposition to the doctrine which you have been taught" (16: 17), which suggests that the church addressed is far more divided than the Roman church appears to be in the Epistle as a whole; there are preachers in the church addressed who arouse Paul's fury ("such people do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ but their own bellies ... by dazzling and attractive words they deceive the hearts of the simple") and nothing in the Epistle as a whole explains this; and whereas Paul counsels mutual toleration between the "parties" mentioned in chapters 14 and 15 he now speaks of them as virtually excommunicated and to be avoided ("Avoid them ... God will soon crush Satan under your feet"). The arguments are cumulative and seem persuasive.

Chapter 16 loses none of its interest if it is regarded as nothing more than a letter from Paul recommending "our sister Phoebe, a deacon(ess?) of the church at Cenchræ" to some church other than that of Rome. Karl Barth's splendid comment bears quoting at length: "The suggestion that it originally formed the major part of a letter addressed to the community in Ephesus, and that it had been tacked on to the Epistle to the Romans is unattractive, if

only because the Epistle would be altogether incomplete if it did not itself make clear that it was addressed to particular men possessed of human names and bearing a human countenance. In any case, to such men it was addressed.... It was addressed to men and women, to Greeks, Romans, and Jews, to masters and slaves. The possibility that Tryphaena and Tryphosa and the other 'laymen' - not to speak of the 'theologians' included in this long list! - would not have been able to understand the Epistle, does not seem to have been considered. In other words, there was once - and this would hold good even if the 'Ephesian' theory were right - a body of men and women to whom the Epistle to the Romans could be sent in the confident expectation that it provided an answer to their questions; that somehow or other it would be understood and valued. For this body of men and women it seems that theology - this theology! - was *the* living theme. Their problem, it seems, began where those of so many others - including those of many theologians! - are wont to end. It seems that these spirits were moving over a wide field. In fact, these men and women are more surprising than are the other historical problems raised by the Epistle to the Romans" (p 536).⁴

Chapter 16 also illuminates the role of women in the apostolic ministry of the early church. As Käsemann says (p 413): "This part played by the Christian women in the formation of the first churches has rarely been paid sufficient attention, although our chapter requires that". Phoebe herself seems to have "a permanent and recognized ministry", which one may see as "an early stage of what later became the ecclesiastical office" (p 411). Andronicus and Junias (verse 7) are held to have been "prominent among the apostles", and are thought, from their Jewish-Christian names, to have been missionaries in the same sense as Paul and Barnabas (p 414). Curiously enough, Käsemann does not discuss the probability that Junias was actually Junia, and therefore another woman, and this time an "apostle". (It is well known that chapter 3 of the Holy Office's Declaration on the admission of women to Holy Orders is unconvincing.)⁵

The Epistle as a whole, according to Käsemann, may be divided into five main sections. The theme is clear enough: "it (the gospel) is the power of God to salvation to every one who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written: He who is righteous by faith will live" (1: 16-17). It follows then, firstly that neither the Hellenistic religions nor the Judaism of Torah such as Paul saw them in the middle of the first century of our era offered any hope; there had to be a revelation of the righteousness of God that started from there being no distinction any longer between

Jews and Greeks – “*all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (3: 21-23). In the opening three chapters of the Epistle the spotlight falls first on the predicament of pagans who practise idolatry but the emphasis increasingly shifts towards criticism of religious people also, specifically represented by the Judaism with which Paul and his audience were familiar. The Epistle is clearly addressed to a community whose commitment to Christianity is not in doubt; the faith of the Roman Church is presupposed to be far more solid and mature than that of the churches of Corinth and Galatia. Paul is trying to bring out what difference it makes to people when they discover the power of God for salvation in the Gospel. The world apart from Christ of course still belongs to God, but the pagans “have changed the truth about God into a lie and offered worship and service to the creature instead of the Creator” (1: 25).

The general possibility of knowing God is taken for granted. One famous verse – “Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made” (1: 20) – has been ripped from its context and dragged into the game of proving, without recourse to prior acceptance of God’s existence, that the assertion that “God exists” is true. This verse plays some such role in the history of Catholic apologetics at least since the dogmatic constitution “*Dei Filius*” of 1870. Twenty years ago it was customary to bring the name of Karl Barth into the game and claim that his objections to “natural theology” extended to an exegesis of Paul’s text according to which Paul was saying that, independently of faith in Christ, there could be no knowledge of God. The Catholic apologist could then produce his “correct” exegesis, according to which Paul was saying that, in their idolatry, the pagans refused to acknowledge the God of whom they certainly had knowledge. This is, of course, precisely the exegesis offered by Barth in the commentary published in 1921: “Our lack of humility, our lack of recollection, our lack of fear in the presence of God, are not in our present condition inevitable, however natural they may seem to us. Plato in his wisdom recognized long ago that behind the visible there lies the invisible universe which is the Origin of all concrete things ... That God is not known as God is due, not merely to some error of thought or to some gap in experience, but to a fundamentally wrong attitude to life ... The more the unbroken man marches along his road secure of himself, the more surely does he make a fool of himself, the more certainly do that morality and that manner of life which are built up upon a forgetting of the abyss, upon a forgetting of men’s true home, turn out to be a lie” (pp 46-49). As Käsemann puts it, “how it goes with a person is set-

tled by what lord he has” (p 43). It is not a matter of proving that God exists; it is a matter of disengaging oneself from the power of the wrong god. Everybody already has a god in the sense of the ultimate principle around which his or her life more or less coheres. The function of the gospel, and for that matter of apologetics, is to question the ultimacy of the god with which (whom) we all start. That all men have gods is a matter of obvious fact, for Paul and indeed for Barth and Käsemann also. The question is whether the god, or gods, the ultimate or the ultimates, which we cannot live without accepting, may be connected with “the one who raised Christ Jesus from the dead” (Rom 8: 11).

After his gloomy picture of what life is like for pagans when they do not “see fit to acknowledge God” (1: 28 ff), Paul turns to the condition of Jews like himself who had been brought up with the advantages of Torah. Those who think that they have in the Law “the embodiment of knowledge and truth” (2: 20) are found to be as badly in need of a new revelation of the righteousness of God as anybody else: “all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin” (3: 9). The only difference is that “the righteousness of God now manifested apart from Torah ... through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe” had been *attested* by Torah: “the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it” (3: 21-22). In the re-statement of the central thesis of the Epistle (3: 21-26) Paul reaffirms that the religious distinction between paganism and Judaism (perhaps both far more complex entities than he allows) which defined his world has been undercut and overcome – but, as Käsemann says (p 104), “there are nevertheless Christians with a Jewish background and Christians with a pagan background” – and this brings us to the heart of the Epistle to the Romans: “The Jewish Christians need not despise the history from which they derive – that would be an intolerable demand to make of them: they simply have to re-apprehend their origin, beyond this history, in Christ”. As for Christians with Gentile origins, their very existence makes it evident that “salvation history does not proceed in a smooth and predictable continuity – for them faith is a door to salvation history which has not been pushed upon by them but wonderfully opened to them” (p 104). In the second section of the Epistle, as Käsemann reads it, Paul insists that the righteousness of God is the righteousness of *faith* (chapters 3: 21 to 4: 25). Far from being a great obstacle to believing anything like this, on the part of a Jew who might be considering the way of Jesus Christ, the history of Abraham – “our forefather according to the flesh” – actually shows him as a man of *faith* before he became the patriarch of the circumcision (chap 4). The God of Abraham may thus be re-identified as “him that raised the dead Jesus our

Lord” (4: 24), a suitable climax to this section. With this formula, so Käsemann says, “faith in the resurrection of Jesus does not mean hope of eternity but victory and lordship of the Crucified” (p 129). In other words, faith in the resurrection of Jesus is submission to the sovereignty of Jesus here and now, with all that that implies socially and materially.

The third of the five major sections into which Käsemann divides the Epistle runs from Chapter 5 to chapter 8 inclusive. These four chapters he places under the heading: “the righteousness of faith as a making real here and now of eschatological freedom”. Thus chapter 5 deals with the freedom of the Christian from the power of death; chapter 6 with his freedom from the power of sin; chapter 7 with his freedom from Torah (the Jewish Law); and chapter 8 with the freedom of his life in the Holy Spirit.

According to chapter 5, Christian life is having peace with God and standing in his grace. The fulness of salvation is therefore already real in our earthly space, so Käsemann says (p 131); but this “realized eschatology” must not be allowed to trivialise “the trial of faith”, *die Anfechtung des Glaubens*, in Käsemann’s Lutheran phrase (p 133). In particular, “God’s love poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit” must not be disengaged from the death of Christ for the ungodly (verses 5 to 10). What matters, for Käsemann, is always the eschatological Lordship of Christ, and that is revealed above all in the historical circumstances of his execution. The Lordship of Christ, disengaged from eschatology, collapses into moralism or sacramentalism, whether pietistic or mystical or both, and nearly always individualistic. It may at first sound odd to hear an attack on *idealism* in theology coming from a passionate concern with *eschatology*, but, for Käsemann, it is eschatology that binds us to *history*. But we shall return to this point.⁶

Christ is God’s irreversible “pro nobis” (p 139). The rest of chapter 5, in which Paul plays Christ off against Adam, shows us, so Käsemann says, that we have to belong to one or the other (p 156): “Christ shatters subjection to the Adamic world of sin and death by setting the world before its creator again and by setting us in the state of creatureliness. Since the Adamic world goes on and seems to prevail, this must be continually reaccepted in faith. The blessing received marks us, but it also sets us in contradiction and conflict (*Anfechtung*).... It gives real history free play by making it the site, not of fate and fallenness, but of the assaulted (*angefochten*) freedom of faith and of the grace which is to be seized again and again in renunciation of the old aeon”.

Chapter 6 brings us to the way in which we are marked as belonging to the new aeon by our being incorporated into the community of the baptised. Paul and his Roman audience are clearly

agreed about the practice of baptism, but he seems to feel obliged to remind them that baptism is into a *death* (verse 3), and to harp on this theme for some verses, as if he had reason to believe that the Roman church had problems with Christians for whom the brutal historical circumstances of Jesus's execution, as well as the serious social and material implications of their own professed discipleship and following of the Crucified, had no importance. They have to be admonished to "yield [their] members to God as instruments of righteousness" (verse 13) and, becoming "obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed" (verse 17), they are to "become slaves of righteousness" (verse 18), and so on. As Käsemann works carefully through the detail of the text a picture begins to emerge of a church in which Paul has reason to suspect a certain strain of *Schwärmerei*: enthusiastic Christians who need however to be reminded of the fact of the cross, of the way of the cross to which they are themselves committed, and of the necessity to allow their bodies to become "weapons of righteousness". The mirror thus seems to reflect people with a somewhat disembodied and supernatural version of Christianity.

In chapter 7 of the Epistle Paul turns to address "those familiar with the Law" among the "brethren" in the Roman church. The enthusiasm of the Christian community as described in the previous chapter needed some correction, but, for all that, their basic acceptance of the Lordship of Christ crucified involved a break with Torah. They now "belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead" (7: 4). God's will as made known in the Torah, which is "holy" (verse 12) and "spiritual" (verse 14), proved, according to Paul, incapable of delivering him from "this body of death" (verse 24). But a quarter of a century after the transformation of Judaism by Jesus's intervention it is plain that Paul had to tread very carefully in his comments on the Law. He seems in fact much more tactful in his approach to those for whom the question of allegiance to Torah matters a great deal than he is when he turns again to those who are confident in their experience of the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 8 reflects a community for whom there is now "no more condemnation". They are "set free from the law of sin and death"; they now "walk according to the Spirit"; they have "their minds on the things of the Spirit"; they therefore have "life and peace" they are "in the Spirit; in fact the Spirit of God 'dwells' in them; they are "led by the Spirit of God"; they "have the first fruits of the Spirit"; when they pray "the Spirit himself intercedes with sighs too deep for words"; and so on. That last phrase gives the clue. According to Käsemann (p 241) Paul must be referring to

the practice of glossolalia in the public prayer of the Roman church. The whole chapter, in fact, mirrors a radically eschatological community, full of ecstasies, charismatics and *pneumatikoi*: a congregation driven by the Holy Spirit (verse 14: *agoniai*), marvellously aware of “the glorious liberty of the children of God” (verse 21). But once again, as Käsemann takes us through the detail of the text, Paul turns out to be correcting some of the conclusions, and combatting some of the practical effects, of this life “in the Spirit”. It is a sign of *weakness*, not (by implication) of celestial mystagogy, that people go in for glossolalia (verse 26). God, by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, has condemned sin in the flesh (in effect, in this real world of history). All who are led by the Spirit of God are indeed sons of God, heirs of God, fellow heirs with Christ, *sugklerononoi Christou*, and all that (Paul almost seems to say) – “provided that we suffer with him, *sumpaschomen*” (8: 17). And then Paul’s emphasis on the *body*, on the *sufferings* of this present time, and particularly on *creation*, seems to bear out Käsemann’s picture of a church drawn to a certain “enthusiasm”.

Thus, in chapters 5 to 8 of the Epistle to the Romans, it is as if Paul reflected the problems endemic in a church made up of Christians with an uncritical attraction to an enthusiastic and *schwärmerisch* version of the gospel on the one hand, together with some who had perceptible nostalgia for the Torah. In the remaining chapters he seems to go over the same ground again but comes up with much more positive and practical conclusions. In chapters 9 to 11 Paul expounds his definitive understanding of the place of Judaism in the history of salvation. In chapters 12 to 15 he returns to systematic treatment of problems that arise in an extremely charismatic community. He concludes by urging the “strong” in the Roman church (obviously the enthusiasts) to make concessions to the “weak” (apparently converts from Judaism with some hankerings for their past asceticism and piety).

The Epistle has been treated since the Reformation as the epitome of Pauline theology – but, as Käsemann notes (p 253), chapters 9 to 11 have never been integrated into the Protestant message of justification by faith alone. The result is that this message is reduced to what happens to the individual and to his conscience or heart. But God’s word has to embody itself *irdisch*: “Even in the individual God’s grace wants the world”. The doctrine of justification is a matter primarily of God’s rule over the world (p 266), and therefore of his right to Israel as well, if his choice of, and promise of faithfulness to, that people are not to be trivialised. “The problem of Israel”, so Kasemann says (p 261), “cannot be set aside if one is not to end up with Marcion”. Marcion

was the wealthy ship-owner from what is now the Black Sea coast of Turkey, allegedly a bishop's son, excommunicated by his father for immorality, who settled in Rome about the year 140; he was formally excommunicated in 144 and devoted the remaining fifteen years of his life to extending the network of heretical congregations which spread all over the empire. His central thesis was that the God of the Old Testament was a God of Law who had been completely overthrown by the God of Love whom Jesus revealed. Marcion's main purpose was to expel the remnants of Judaism from Christianity. Whilst the Church reacted very firmly against Marcionite teachings it may well be wondered if official condemnation of the heresy did anything to stop the increasing alienation from the Jewish inheritance which has marked the history of Christianity until our own day, and which cannot be separated from the anti-Semitism so characteristic of the "orthodox" Christian countries, such as Germany, France, Poland and Russia. Perhaps this is another, and the worst, instance of Karl Rahner's law, according to which condemnations of heresy tend only to drive it underground in more ramified, virulent and irrepressible forms.

For Paul, at any rate, the Church is the eschatological event which he thought it was precisely because it brought together Jews and Gentiles (chapter 9). "For Paul", as Käsemann says (p 309), "there can be no church of Gentile-Christians alone". God cannot have rejected the people whom he chose; at the present time (A D 57!) there is only a remnant in the Church while the rest of the people of Israel remain unable to hear the gospel. But Paul is absolutely certain that this "hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved" (11: 25-26). Paul understands his own mission, and even the existence of the Church in the first place, as an incitement to the reconciliation (as he thinks) of the people of Israel with the God whose gifts and call are irrevocable. Käsemann concludes that these three chapters are an essential part of the Epistle – "a prophetic text which requires testing and in this case criticism" (p 317), but not to be conveniently overlooked or written off as embarrassing speculation. It would certainly be a very different church if we really thought that we existed mainly, or even only, "to make the Jews jealous" (11: 14).

In the final four chapters of the Epistle Paul returns to the question of enthusiasm in the Roman church. In chapter 12, according to Käsemann, Paul first urges them to offer their bodies – their capacities for communication and communion in physical earthly ways – as the worship of their lives as a whole which God requires (verse 1). They are to be renewed in *mind*, and to exercise their

critical reason (verse 2). This, by implication, suggests that, for Paul, some of them are somewhat disembodied and supernatural as well as perceptibly irrational and anti-intellectual in their faith. As regards their *charismata* (12: 6), some evidently think that they are very special people (verse 3), which leads Paul to integrate "prophecy" into the whole spectrum of community-bonding activities and functions (12: 4-8), and thus to relativize the more extraordinary phenomena. He insists that they should get down off the fence and take sides in the struggle against evil (verse 9) – which suggests that Paul regards some of them as being somewhat airy-fairy and other-worldly in their faith. There seems to be a stress on *hope*, and on patience in *tribulation*, and perhaps on perseverance in prayer (verse 12). There are verses that sound like a recalling of the Beatitudes, but they are integrated into a quite lengthy appeal to people not to take their own back on those who persecute them. This is followed by an equally long appeal to the Roman community to behave with normal respect towards the local authorities, to pay their taxes and the like (13: 1-7) – the famous verses which have been employed to legitimize Christian submission to tyrants, but which Käsemann wants to see as no more than a one-sided battle against Christian enthusiasts who have become socially irresponsible.

Paul then seems to remind his audience of the Ten Commandments (13: 9-10) before rounding off the chapter with what sounds like the eschatological slogans of the enthusiasts ("it is full time ... salvation is now" etc), accepting the language but insisting that they must conduct themselves *becomingly* (verse 13), which clearly does not mean like a pack of revelling and licentious anarchic fanatics. As Käsemann concludes (p 363): "Paul demands a consistently anti-enthusiastic attitude from the charismatic community. Baptism means fighting for Christ in the bodily domain and in our day-to-day world. It has not introduced separation from the secular. God's reign over the world wants to manifest itself almost trivially in the everyday world".

That seems to sum up that whole movement in Paul's argument. In chapter 14 he plainly turns to deal with the special problem of the "weak in faith" in the Roman church. They seem to be somewhat scrupulous converts from Judaism who will not eat meat (14: 2), presumably for fear that it might not be kosher; they have worries about purity regulations (verse 14); and they are attached to special liturgical days (verse 5). The Letter to the Galatians shows that Paul could be extremely intolerant of *some* Jewish practices in the church but whatever it is exactly that is happening in Rome does not arouse such passionate opposition. A certain diversity of liturgical and ascetical practice is commended, and the

more "liberal" members of the community are urged to accommodate themselves to the more "scrupulous". The main point, as Käsemann says (p 369), is that "theological condemnation of others, which breaks off fellowship in either judgment or contempt, is impermissible". Paul invokes the example of Christ (15: 3-6), and concludes that "Christ became a servant to the circumcision ... in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy" (verses 8-9). With a litany of Old Testament quotations, in effect celebrating the existence of the Roman church as a community of Jews and Gentiles who welcome one another in faith, Paul closes this section of the Epistle with a splendid prayer, asking that they may "super-abound – in hope – in the power of the Holy Spirit" – which just about sums up Paul's picture of a community strong with a charismatic abundance that needs to be reminded of the "not yet" of Christian hope.

That leaves the beginning and the end of the Epistle and the question of why Paul composed it in the first place. In the opening verses he is clearly introducing himself to the church in Rome, taking his stand on the primitive creed which he presumes that they hold in common (1: 3-4). He then goes on for eight substantial verses in our reckoning, leaving Käsemann with the impression of a man struggling for recognition, whose authority as an apostle is far from unquestioned (p 20). In the lengthy conclusion to the Epistle (15: 14-33), Paul first woos the Romans: they are filled with all knowledge and well able to instruct one another; he has perhaps written "boldly" but he was only reminding them of what they already knew, and after all he *is* an authorized minister (verse 16). He goes on about this at some length, in highly impressive language. He has preached the gospel in the eastern half of the Roman empire: "from Jerusalem and as far round as Illyricum" (verse 19). He now seeks the help of the Roman church (missionaries and money) to spread the gospel in the western half of the empire, as far as Spain (verse 24). His one last task in the east is to take the collection which he has raised from his Gentile churches in Greece and Asia Minor and deliver it to the church in Jerusalem (verses 25 ff). His final request to the Roman church is for prayers that he may not fall foul of non-Christian Jews in Judea (which is what of course in fact happened), and, more surprisingly, that his service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the church there (verse 31). Taking all these indications seriously, Käsemann argues that Paul sent his most important theological statement to the Roman church precisely because he wanted their recognition: he wanted their help as a base for his mission in the west (so he was telling them in advance what he taught), but he was also hoping that their prayers, and probably the approval of their Jewish-Christian min-

ority, would help him in relation to the archetypal Jewish-Christian mother church in Jerusalem. For Paul, as Käsemann says (p 405), the Roman church had “the function of mediator”, *die Mittlerfunktion* – “This expression”, he adds drily, “is chosen deliberately”!

It is an ingenious and plausible construal of the text. There is no conventional introduction to this commentary; there are no indices of any kind; what anybody else would put in footnotes Käsemann has included in parenthetical interruptions of almost every sentence. He thinks of his interpretation as a demonstration of how central the doctrine of justification by faith alone is to Pauline theology. We have been able to give an account of his interpretation which hardly mentions the doctrine. But that raises only one of the several interesting theological questions which the work of Ernst Käsemann sets any one concerned with theology today.

To be continued

- 1 I have followed the commonly accepted dating but in the first volume of his *Paulus der Heidenapostel* (1980), sticking to the internal evidence of Paul's own letters alone, Gerd Ludemann comes up, excitingly and persuasively, with a much earlier dating for I Thessalonians – about the year 41, which explains why they were so taken aback when some of them died before the Parousia. The Epistle to the Romans would be not later than 55 AD.
- 2 Thus E. M. Sidebottom in the *Century Bible commentary* (1967) – which makes the Letter of James a fascinating witness to a form of Christianity interested in the teaching of Jesus but apparently not in the cross or resurrection.
- 3 See Paul's Letter to the Romans (1975), reviewed in *New Blackfriars* April 1976 by Lewis Smith.
- 4 See Karl Barth: *The Epistle to the Romans* (1933). Perhaps I should declare an interest in the Epistle to the Romans: it was reading Barth's commentary in the Easter vacation of 1952, when I was twenty, that converted me to the Christian faith and thus to belief in God. I had written off the Church of Scotland when I was about thirteen, and the “English Kirk” was out of the question – which left nothing else but Rome, and “O the mind, mind has mountains” from the Hopkins sonnet settled me in that direction. I had not talked to any Catholics; I was finally received into the Catholic Church in York on the vigil of the Assumption 1954.
- 5 At this point I would thank the Dominican nuns at Carisbrooke on the Isle of Wight with whom I recently worked through the Epistle to the Romans in the light of Käsemann's commentary.
- 6 In the next instalment, reviewing Pierre Gisel's book on Käsemann.